In Alio Loco

by Sensoo

Summary

It never occurred to you that you would inevitably fall for him. Just like it never occurred to you that maybe it could end well.

In which the reader is grieving, slow on the uptake, and not taking the shortcut to recovery. Because there is no shortcut.
The title translates: In Another Place (German and Latin). I just wanted to write smut. I ended up with an entire headcanon and a massive fic touching on grieving issues. This is my first Overwatch fic and first full story in second person. It got to the point where it wrote itself. Also really self-indulgent. I'm calling it my therapy fic.

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

Chapter Summary

The beginning and it's all original characters.

In your defense, you never meant to join Blackwatch. You didn't know what the hell that was and if you had at the time, you probably would have run in the other direction and thrown yourself in front of the nearest speeding train.

You didn't survive the worst of the Omnic Crisis by being a hero. You got by doing a little of this and little of that and a whole lot of ducking and running. But you survived, which was more than anyone else in your hometown could say. Smuggling, couriering, and occasionally a good old-fashioned heist: your work wasn't exactly legal, but there wasn't enough government around to care.

You could have gone on like that, scraping by, except you couldn't mind your own business. Midway through a courier job, you found a couple of guys in blue versus a scrapton of rogue humanoid omnics on an abandoned stretch of highway. Luckily, you came up behind the omnics. That gave you the perfect opportunity to turn around and go back the way you came.

You hesitated. You remembered what was left of your hometown.

"Hold formation! Can't let'em pass here. Too late to evacuate the town!" The squad leader had a voice like a hammer striking iron. She stood at the head of the group, she fired a fancy-looking assault rifle, all shine and circuits. There were others behind her. But she was the one that left the impression. She fired and bullets arced across the battlefield, dropping her target where it stood. She kept up the barrage, the firefight drowning out her actual words.

Her soldiers worked in tight formation. Two shooting prone, two shooting upright, and one manning the barriers.

She wasn't tall, her skin was very brown, and her head was shaved. She turned and half her face was puckered with burn scars. When she looked across the battlefield, you didn't see a lick of fear on her face, just cold determination. Even sustaining heavy fire, she made you believe they had a chance.

You counted at least a dozen robots left. Then you shouldered your 30-06 bolt-action rifle and began shooting. The CZ 557 was old, not a great firing rate, but those big old bullets were meant for elephants and tore through armor-plating like a dream. You had to move fast, because once those robots got a bead on you, they shot back with shinier more explosive firepower. One hit and the concrete highway barriers were powder on your shoulders. You slid across the ground, trying to aim on your back. You had limited ammo and a long-range weapon. A couple times, the smarter ones aimed above you, almost pancaking you with bits of overpass.

But that gave the people in blue a chance to regroup. They had discipline and more importantly shielding. They could do this all night. You wouldn't last much longer.
Already you were soaked in sweat and covered in dirt. Only a few minutes had passed, but they felt like an eternity. You knew what you were carrying. And you also knew what would happen if you got hit carrying it.

"Fire in the hole!"

You threw the frag grenades, illegal mods and all, into the mix. Then you backed up a bit, but not quite far enough. The resulting explosion left you with no cargo, no eyebrows, and a bad case of tinnitus. But the omnics were scrapped. Little fires licked at the metal and you idly wondered how much you get for the salvage.

It took you a moment to realize what you'd done. You hadn't gotten all the omnics by yourself, but you'd thrown yourself into the middle of a firefight you had no business being near. You sat down and lit a cigarette. You didn't normally smoke - cigarettes were better currency than luxury - but blowing up a dozen omnics on a whim called for some kind of celebration.

The squad leader stalked up to you. Up close, you realized she was even smaller than you thought, and easily over fifty. But she stood like she had a bar of steel in her spine, and she walked like she was just in time for the execution. Somewhere in the back of your head, you felt the urge to stand and salute. But you quashed it and settled for a casual nod of acknowledgement.

"Are you insane?" Her voice was rough with dust. She didn't actually sound angry. She seemed genuinely curious.

You shrugged. You had had a lot of smart ass retorts. None of them seemed appropriate.

She stared hard at your rifle. The flames and smoke gave her scars a hellish cast.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I was delivering a package." You wave a hand at the smoking remnants of robot pieces. "But it got damaged in transit."

She studied you, dark eyes sharp in the dusk light. "Thank you for the assist."

"You're welcome." Her uniform, with its Overwatch insignia, told you everything you needed to know. Professional. Hardass. Big damn hero.

Her gaze went back to your gun. After your cigarette was gone, she finally sighed. "That belongs in a museum."

You shrugged. She wasn't wrong, but it was the best gun you had.

"Lieutenant Sato," she snapped. A tall slim man appeared beside her. His skin glowed golden in the twilight. He had sharp cheekbones and a playful mouth, and he moved like a shadow through the smoke. His black hair was slicked back. But it was the excitement in his eyes that really caught you off guard.

"Yes, Captain Patel?" His voice was lightly accented, and smooth.

"Gather the others. Looks like we're heading back out tonight." Captain Patel turned to look at the smoldering wreckage. "Do I want to ask where you got those?"

"Probably not," you said, wondering what you were going to tell your employers. "They weren't mine. I was holding them for...people I don't actually know."
Lieutenant Sato's mouth curved in a grin. You liked the line of his jaw, the brightness in his eyes. He really was pretty, especially in uniform.

"What exactly do you do, Ms-?" Captain Patel did not look nearly as amused.

"I'm an import-export specialist."

Captain Patel looked you over once more. "That is the fanciest term for "smuggler" that I've heard in this country. Look, I'll be blunt. You're an idiot, but a lucky one. I don't know how else you'd survive on your own. But you obviously have some combat experience and more balls than brains. Join up: I can offer you better money, better guns, and health insurance."

You blinked. Maybe a few times. Overwatch? You? Was this some kind of joke? Or were things really that desperate? You looked around the desolate landscape that used to be a thriving city. Well, things did look kind of desperate.

"What she's saying is she's impressed, Lucky Strike. You have potential." Lieutenant Sato regarded your gun with laughing eyes. You squinted at him. It wasn't mockery, you realized, but genuine delight.

If you want to be honest with yourself, it's Sato that cinched the deal. Health insurance and salaries were pipe dreams, things you weren't sure really existed. But fancier weapons and sexy men? You weren't a big damn hero, but you knew a good deal when you saw one.

"Guess I'll have to learn to salute."

Captain Patel rolled her eyes and walked off to check on her squad, muttering about how the gods favored idiots.

Lieutenant Sato lingered.

"I'm Shin," he said.

You gave him your name.

"Nah, you're Lucky Strike," he said, smirking. You saw a very unprofessional hunger in his eyes and you shivered. That look stayed with you for weeks; the nickname has lasted much longer.

You got in their transport, filled out the forms, and got shipped off to basic.

That was a trip in itself: a haircut, some new clothes, and a crash course in how to be a soldier. To be honest, you weren't a great soldier, too underhanded and disrespectful of the command structure. But desperate times called for lower standards.

Captain Patel requisitioned you, as it was her recommendation that got you in this mess. Then her unit was seconded to Blackwatch. Ten weeks later, you were transferred to a miserable little listening post in the Yukon as a "probationary" Blackwatch agent. No one seemed sure what "probationary" status meant for a Blackwatch agent. Captain Patel joked that it meant if you washed out, they'd have to take you out back with a shovel. At least you were pretty sure she was
Captain Patel wasn't just a tough little old lady. She was faster, stronger, and had better endurance than you. In fact, you'd seen her arm wrestle Agent Valdez and win. You heard rumors of "SEP," and you believed them. But you'd believe it if they told you she was an omnic wearing old-lady skin. That kind of toughness didn't happen organically.

Sergeant Nwazue was from Numbani and specialized in demolitions. Almost monk-like in her focus, it was hard to tell if she was working or asleep. She wasn't too impressed that you had no idea what kind of modded grenades you were carrying around. Middle-aged and rail thin, she had most of her fingers and all of her limbs, a testament to her skill.

Dr. Razafindrandriatsimaniry, thankfully, just went by Simon. He wasn't out of his twenties yet, but drank a lot of tea and complained about the weather. It didn't matter where you were, the weather was never good enough. He was the medic, and you were careful not to step on his toes, because he was fussy and you were accident-prone.

Agent Valdez didn't talk. You weren't sure if it was because he wouldn't or he couldn't. But there were rope scars on his throat, and his fists were the size of your head. So you didn't push it. Probably in his mid-thirties, he kept his black hair close-cropped. It looked a little silly, because he was so massive. You reached the hip of his power armor, while wearing shoes. He was smart though, spending most his time on the upkeep his armor. He had some basic hacking skills too. It was always fascinating to see him at a keyboard.

Agent Lao didn't shut up. The youngest in the unit and not yet out of her teens, she liked to blast dubstep during combat. She rigged the energy barriers to resonate certain tones when hit. Under automatic fire, you could have a dance party. It was ingenious, if amazingly annoying. Lao was also a hacker; she moved at twice the speed of everyone else and that was before the coffee.

And of course, there was Lieutenant Shin Sato, Captain Patel's second-in-command. He was the stealthy one, a little too good at turning up in the shadows. He was as deadly with a sniper rifle as he was in hand to hand combat. The air rippled when he moved. You had to remind yourself not to stare, because half the time, he would pop up directly behind you.

He had everyone but the captain calling you "Lucky Strike" by the time you'd come to Canada.

Besides the fact you were in the middle of nowhere, it wasn't so bad. Three meals a day, a roof over your head, and all the beatings you could take. Captain Patel's unit was one of two stationed here for guard duty and patrol. There was plenty of time for other activities. You started a nice side business in "acquisitions" for base personnel. Nothing illegal, because you still weren't sure about the shovel, but hard to get stuff: organic macadamia nuts, real ouzo, Moldovan porn mags, etc. If Captain Patel wasn't making you study strategy, Agent Lao harangued you about cyber security and stole your beer. Sergeant Nwazue mostly gave you safety lectures on how to properly handle incendiary devices, and it was obvious she thought you were an idiot. Agent Valdez showed you how to mod energy weapons after you smuggled him some nice scotch. And Shin liked to throw you around the practice mat.

You could kick Agent Lao's ass and that was about it. She was fast, but you fought dirty. Captain Patel threw you across the room more than once and looked disgusted if you couldn't get back up. You tapped out any time Agent Valdez got you on the ground. Even Simon knew some archaic martial art with nerve pinches, and one time it took you a day to regain feeling in your arms. Shin just played with you. Whether he was throwing you onto the mat or pinning you under his hips, he made a game out of it. He didn't let you win, but he took the time to show you what
you'd done wrong. And if he held you against the mat for half a second longer than was decent, you didn't complain.

"Where do you get this stuff?" Shin laughed, sipping the whiskey. Everyone was in his room for the weekly poker game, sans Captain Patel. Dance music you didn't recognize drifted through the speakers.

"I traded an entire carton of cigarettes for that, so don't drink it all." You stole the bottle back, but couldn't muster enough anger to glare. Blush streaked his cheeks and his eyes were bright. His hair black held up without gel. It was much longer than regulation and you wanted to run your fingers through it. It was worth a bottle of good booze to see him like this.

"Where are you getting cartons of cigarettes?" Shin shook his head. "Someone check the armory to make sure she isn't selling the base out from under us."

"I would never," you said, indignant. "I traded fresh rabbit for the cigarettes. One of the techs really likes rabbit, but he's no good at hunting and he..."

"Oi, pay attention to the game," Lao smacked her cards against the table. She was losing. Nwazue had the most chips. She eyed the whiskey and you handed it to her. She poured herself a few fingers. "Damn. It looks like you are good for something, Lucky Strike, cuz it sure as hell ain't cards." She passed the bottle to Valdez who passed it to Simon. Simon was losing too and he took a swig straight from the bottle.

"Fuck!" Simon glared at his hand. "This is ridiculous." He took another drink. "Good liquor though."

"Give!" Lao tried to grab the bottle out of Simon's hand but he passed it back to you. You poured yourself another drink, watching Shin out of the corner of your eye. He nibbled on his lower lip and concentrated on his cards. He looked so serious that you struggled not to laugh.

Unsurprisingly, Nwazue won the next three rounds. You were pretty sure she cheated, but you could never figure out how. It didn't matter. She collected her winnings and sauntered off to the rec room for more booze. Valdez nodded at you and helped Lao up. You slipped them both chocolate bars - her to go away, and him to take her away. You weren't sure if they were sleeping together, but that wasn't any of your business. Simon staggered to his feet, looking warily between you and Shin.

"Don't do anything to end up in the infirmary, because I'm not going to be there," he said. "And I doubt you want to explain anything to Georgie." Georgie, the base doctor, wasn't know for his sympathetic bedside manner.

"Don't know what you're talking about," you said.

"Not a clue," Shin chimed in.

You sipped your whiskey, very aware of Shin's warmth beside you. His room was bigger than yours with its own bathroom.

"Should I-" You looked up to see Shin studying your face. The tipsy ease was gone from his stance. He focused on you, an almost predatory light in his eyes.

"If you want to go, Lucky Strike, now's the time," his voice was rough. "Otherwise you're spending the night here."

"Oh," was all you managed to say. You stared at Shin. He was really too pretty to be a soldier. His face was angular and elegant with sculpted cheekbones and striking cat eyes. Give him some hair gel and tight pants and he could have passed for a Japanese pop star. Somewhere in the back of your mind, you remembered there were rules about fraternization. But if you didn't get caught...

You carefully got out of your chair and pushed it in. Shin stiffened and backed away, averting his eyes. The tension in his shoulders made your neck ache. You licked your lips, went to the door, and locked it. No sooner than it clicked, and you were pushed against the cold wall. Groaning, Shin turned you around, fingers tangled in your hair. His mouth pressed against yours and a muscled thigh spread your legs.

He tasted like whiskey and smelled like leather. You moaned softly as he broke the kiss and went for your neck. You squirmed against him as he sucked.

"Goddamnit, Lucky Strike, you really had me worried there."

"Just wondering if you were ever gonna make a move, or just sit there and eyefuck me for the rest of the year."

He exhaled slowly. "I'm higher ranked than you. Gotta make sure you really wanted it and I'm not...abusing my power."

The thought warmed you. This kind of decency was not something you took for granted. You weren't just attracted to him, you genuinely liked him. "You don't scare me, Shin."

"Good," he murmured, and nipped your shoulder. "Because that means you don't know what you're getting into." He peeled your shirt off, kissing a trail down your breasts. You felt the lightest touch on your back and suddenly your bra was on the floor.

Shin smirked up at you flicking a nipple with his tongue.

You groaned and tugged at his shirt. "Off."

"You've seen me shirtless."

"Yeah, every time we were on the mat, showoff. Even Lao was starting to notice."

"I can't help that you're dense." Shin kissed your jaw. "Soft," he murmured, rolling your breasts in his hands. "I planned to take my time, but now I just want to be inside you."

He pulled his shirt off, exposing a lean muscled torso. A long faded scar trailed up his side, the skin rough under your fingers. Already barefoot, you worked your pants off.

"Damnit, do you normally go commando?" He groaned.
"Guess you'll have to find out," you said, smirking at him.

His fingers rubbed your slit. You sighed as one dipped inside. He paused and grit his teeth.

"You're already so wet," he dropped to his knees and his tongue flicked across your clit. You whined then, as he began to finger fuck you, his tongue still working you over.

'Shin," you moaned.

"I love how you say my name, so needy. And you taste so good. Fuck, I'm going to eat you later, Lucky. I want you now."

"What's stopping you?"

Shin unfastened his pants. You licked your lips at the sight of his cock. It was pretty to look at, long, well-formed, and uncircumcised. He stroked himself a few times preening under your admiration. Then he reached into his pocket and opened a foil packet. Deftly he rolled the condom down his length. You were slightly disappointed, but even if you had a birth control implant, you wouldn't complain about him being responsible.

He pressed you against the wall, lifting one of your legs against his hip. You wrapped it around his waist instinctively. He sighed and you cried out as he slid the head inside. "Damn you're tight." He rocked his hips, easing in inch by inch. It wasn't fast enough.

You rested your head in the crook his neck. "You don't have to go slow."

"Don't want to be too rough with you, baby. Not yet."

You bit him.

He growled and slammed his hips into yours. Whining, you felt his length bottom out. He stretched you nicely, hitting that sensitive spot inside you. Pinned against the wall you squirmed on his cock.

"I was trying to be nice, Lucky Strike," Shin hissed.

"Don't call me that in bed."

He growled your name. "We're not in bed, baby. I've got you against the wall, and you're making it real clear that you want me to go rough."

"Put up or shut up, Shin."

"You say that, but next time I'll tie you up and fuck you senseless." The threat had you clenching. He narrowed his eyes and pulled out leaving you empty and needy. Then he snapped his hips upward and filled you to the brim.

"Fuck!" You snarled.

Shin leaned in. "Safe word?"

"Rabbit," you said, belatedly realizing that goading Shin into rough sex without a clue as to what he considered rough was unwise.

He lifted your other leg and suddenly you were bent in half, pinned against the wall, with no leverage. His hard thrusts went deep and you clung to him, panting. "Look at that tight little
"pussy taking me." He sped up, pounding you as you began to wail. "Love those cute little noises you're making. Bet you want the whole base to hear me fucking you."

"Shin," you whined.

He kissed you hard.

"What do you want, baby? You want it harder? You feel that?" He purred, driving deeper into you, his cockhead bumping your cervix. "Not enough for your slutty little pussy? Don't worry, Lucky. I'm not one of those punks you used to run with. I'll have you begging long before I'm tired."

It had been while. You couldn't remember the last time someone got you this hot. You were right on the edge and you clawed his back, trying to get him to push you over.

"What do you want, Lucky?" he chuckled. "You want to me to make you cum?"

"Fucking hell, you talk too much Shin," you gritted your teeth.

"Mmm, but I feel you clench every time I say something filthy." He reached down, fingers circling your clit. He captured your mouth as he rubbed, his thrusts getting faster, but still controlled. Shin wasn't sloppy.

You whined, then, legs tensing as he drove into you, giving you precisely what you wanted, his fingers stroking your clit with just the right amount of friction. The pressure built. Caught between Shin and the wall, you writhed as he fucked you over the edge, your eyes rolling back. He just kept thrusting through your orgasm.

"I can feel you milking my cock," he groaned. "How the hell are you still so tight?" You moaned into the crook of his neck and sunk your teeth into his shoulder. He grunted but held you.

Shin waited for the tremors to stop before lowering you to the ground. You sat there, trying to catch your breath, eyes widening at Shin's still-erect cock, now shiny from your juices.

"Come on," he helped you up on shaky legs and pushed you onto the bed. You landed on your stomach. Shin came up behind you and pushed your ass up in the air and spread your legs. One hand fisted your hair and pushed your head down into the mattress. He didn't warn you, he just grabbed your hips hard enough to bruise and thrust back inside. You moaned, eyes rolling back in your head at the sensation of being filled again. Your walls were still sensitive, and Shin started at a hard pace, his hips slapping against your ass with each stroke.

"Not so mouthy now, are you?" He smacked your ass and you squeaked in protest.

"Fuck," you panted, your whimpers muffled by his mattress. You gripped the sheets, trying to push your hips back onto him. His breathing was rough and the bed squeaked, but what really got you was the wet sound of flesh on flesh. Your thighs were soaked with your own juices and you could hear his cock sliding in and out of you.

The hand in your hair released and suddenly he was stroking your overly sensitive clit. You raised you head and looked back over your shoulder. Shin's jaw tensed in concentration, his eyes met yours and he grinned wryly, the fingers on your clit speeding up.

"I didn't say you could get up." He leaned forward and nipped your shoulder. His teeth worried the side of your neck and you clenched around him in response. He laughed roughly and pinched your clit. "You look hot like this and you feel so good around me, Lucky. Love watching
those cute tits bounce while I'm pushing against this tight ass." He paused, running his fingers down your spine. "You're practically gushing around my cock. Enjoying yourself?"

"You're stretching me out," your voice came out hoarser than you expected. He began to thrust again. "I'm going to be so sore tomorrow."

"Mmm," he said. "That's too bad. Not going to stop now. I like watching you cum."

"Don't want you to stop." You gripped the sheets and pressed back against him, taking him to the hilt. "I want to feel your cock twitching inside me when you cum. I want to hear you come undone."

At that he groaned your name, his hips jerking. He rubbed your clit faster. A second wave of pleasure hit you, sharper than before and almost painful to your inflamed nerves. Bucking your hips, you rode it out, high-pitched whines coming from the back of your throat.

"Shin," you panted his name as your second orgasm subsided. "Come on baby."

He snarled and his strokes grew frantic. Swearing, he ground against you, fingers digging into your hips.

You flipped your hair out of your face and grinned over your shoulder at him. He finally pushed in deep and you could feel his thighs trembling against you as he came. Taut and dripping with sweat, he was beautiful. His eyes were half-closed and he slowed his strokes before pulling out. He leaned over and kissed you hungrily.

"Tsk, you made such a mess," he sighed.

"Sorry?" There was wet spot toward the foot of the bed. He kissed you again. "I'm not." He got up and took care of the condom before tucking himself back in his pants. He stretched, and you blatantly ogled him, his golden skin gleaming with the sheen of sweat. When your brain finally caught up to your hormones, you realized he was doing this on purpose.

There was a comfortable silence as he climbed into the bed beside you. One arm tentatively draped around your shoulders.

You weren't sure what to do next. "Do you want me to go?"

"You can stay," he said. "I'm not that much of a bastard." He kissed your forehead.

"Yes, you are," you said, nuzzling his neck. "Seriously, I can go."

"Stay."

You nestled against him. He was warm and still managed to smell nice, a pleasant musk mingled with leather and whiskey.

"Been wanting to do that since I saw you playing chicken with those omnis."

"I was that impressive, huh?"

He laughed. "Nwazue was sure you wouldn't last a minute. Lao was screaming incoherently. The captain was speaking directly to her gods, and you almost got flattened by falling asphalt. It was stupid as hell. Ballsy though."
"So is it stupid or ballsy that turns you on?"

"Same thing in the end," he said. "The best part was how you got all shy around the captain. It was adorable."

You punched him in the arm. He let you.

"You're such a cocky bastard. Thought you were going to have me begging," you taunted.

Shin pulled you against him. You felt him twitch against your thigh and you blinked at him. "I still have the rest of the night," he said smugly.

The next day, Captain Patel gave you both the eye, but said nothing. She'd nail you both if you fucked up, but Shin was on good behavior outside his bedroom. You'd made it a month alongside him before falling into his bed, and you were pretty sure everyone knew what had happened. You were bruised, sore, and had no complaints about it. Shin had his share of bite marks, scratches, and hickies, but seemed ridiculously proud of them.

Everything fell into place with Shin. You didn't talk about the future. You didn't know how, you'd never had one before. But you ate together, fought side-by-side, and fucked like rabbits. You were now certain Lao and Valdez were sleeping together, but you weren't sure if it was an exclusive thing. You didn't ask. You and Shin were the unit's worst kept secret, but it didn't interfere with work, so no one said anything.

It was the happiest you'd been in a long time.

You knew you were the rookie, the lowest on the totem pole. And while Blackwatch was very different from being a freelance import-export specialist, you made the extra effort to be useful. Maybe it wasn't necessary, but you went out of your way to get to know the other three dozen people stuck in the Yukon wilderness with you. Black Base Delta was the official name. Everyone else called it the 9th Circle, a name the would prove to be painfully apt. The only person you really avoided was Major Gleeson; he was in charge of your little slice of heaven. You didn't like to attract the attention of authority figures, and Captain Patel never looked happy after her meetings with him. She was annoyed about practically everything that man did.

When not on patrol or in training, you visited various techs and comm specialists at their unrestricted stations. There were plenty of places you couldn't access and you weren't about to push that boundary just yet. Rivka and Lavalle were some of the friendlier techs - IT specialists that handled the databases. You still weren't sure what exactly the point of the 9th Circle was, but it was a listening post, collecting shit tons of signals intelligence then storing and deciphering select portions.

You dropped in on the server room, trying to figure out exactly how some of the terminals worked. The holoscreens graphed all sorts of data, but you didn't know what anything meant. "Rivka? Lavalle?"

"That you, Lucky Strike?" Rivka asked, she popped up from the center of a hexagonal
terminal. The blue light gave her skin an eerie cast, bluing her white curls. The lights reflected off her square rimmed glasses. She was old enough to be everyone's grandmother and had the voice of a chainsmoker.

Fucking Shin. Everyone called you "Lucky Strike" now. You shook your head. "I have a real name."

"Nonsense, everyone wants to be Lucky," she said. "What do you have for me?"

You roll your eyes and tossed her a package.

"This is the organic stuff, yes? Not that plastic shit they serve in the cafeteria?"

"It's tahini. The jar said organic. It's the best I could get in under a week."

Rivka opened the package. "Overwatch had better food."

"I wouldn't know."

She popped the jar open, stuck her finger in, then licked it. "Adequate. You have good instincts."

You smiled modestly.

"Quit pretending to be humble. You are like my rotten grandchildren. But smarter. And more useful. I would introduce you to my grandson, but that foxy Lieutenant Sato might object."

You rolled your eyes upward. "Is that all, Rivka?"

She snorted again and hesitated. "You have good instincts, Lucky. I have recently come across some...troubling data. It could be nothing. It could be dangerous. Our servers have a...vulnerability. It would be easy and convenient to lose things..."

You furrowed your brow. You understood technology, but you weren't a hacker. "I thought we had a remote backup server."

"...We did. It's down. I...I might have a fix for that. But it's not by the book."

You laugh. "Nothing we do is. I'm not your boss, Rivka. But I'd say better safe than sorry. All that shit is above my pay grade."

Rivka paused, made up her mind, then scrawled something on a real piece of paper and handed it to you. "Bring me these things," she said.

You raised a brow. You weren't entirely sure what some of the items were. But you could probably get them.

You gave Captain Patel your old rifle. It didn't have any value outside sentiment and age. The quartermaster stocked much better equipment, but the captain had been so irritated by your gun, that you had to gift her with it. It was the right thing to do.
"Really?" She asked, when she opened the box. But she didn't look displeased.

"It kicks like a mule," you admitted.

"Of course it does. It's a goddamn elephant gun, Agent. It's bolt action. I don't even know where to start."

"I'm better with knives," you confessed. "But omnis don't have the decency to be squishy." You grinned at her.

She rolled her eyes, but Captain Patel kept the gun.

"Finally!" You stood over Shin pumping your fists. He sat on the ground, holding his throat. "Two hundred thirty-six bouts later, I finally win!"

He smiled up at you, eyes shining with pride. And then he kicked, sweeping you off your feet and flat onto your back.

The wind knocked out of you, you laid there for a moment, dazedly contemplating the pride before the fall. Shin straddled you, still massaging his neck. "Good job, Lucky," he said, voice coming out strangled. "But you can't let your guard down just because you think you've won." He ground his hips against yours, and you glared at him.

He reached for your throat and you smacked away his hand, your fingers shooting for his neck. You almost had him, but he rolled backward, laughing. You picked yourself off the mat.

"Let's get cleaned up," he said softly. "I want to celebrate your victory."

You showered in his bathroom and when you came out, there was a prettily wrapped box on his table.

"What's this?"

Shin sat on the bed. "Open it."

You took a second to admire the wrapping - Shin seemed to take pride in presentation. Then you tore it off, because that was the point of wrapping paper. The box was about a foot long. You pulled the lid off and inside was a *tanto*, a Japanese-style dagger. The blade was ten inches and the hilt another four. It was a monochrome matte black - no glare or shine to catch the light. The sheath hooked snuggly to your belt. You slid the blade along the wrapping paper, watching it slice through evenly. The weight of the dagger felt right in your hand.

"This is impressive," you said. "Thank you."

"You deserved a reward. Thought I'd be able to give it to you sooner, but...you're just so slow." Shin favored you with a shit-eating grin.

You sheathed the dagger and gently placed it on the table. It was one of the nicest gifts you'd received. Shin's words didn't even sting.

"Thank you," you breathed, leaning in to kiss him. Shin met you halfway and pulled you
Captain Patel swore no one was in trouble, but you could sense her unease. Commander Reyes was making a surprise stop at the 9th Circle. It was already nine months into your tenure as a probationary agent. That hadn't changed yet - bureaucratic snafu- and you got the feeling Captain Patel was getting annoyed. The fact no one knew the reason why Blackwatch Commander, and former acting commander of Overwatch, was visiting bumfuck nowhere, had everyone nervous. Valdez and Lao were holed up in armory modifying shotguns. Nwazue hadn't spoken to anyone in days. And Simon had taken to muttering passive-aggressive comments to the snow. While indoors. Shin didn't seem bothered, but neither of you had slept alone for the past week.

Patrol done, you delivered Rivka some parts, and she'd disappeared back into the server rooms muttering something guttural. You lingered in the doorway, but Rivka didn't surface. You weren't too worried, Rivka was good for it. It wasn't like there were a lot of people coming and going out of the 9th Circle.

"I don't like it Aishani. Who the hell is this guy? I didn't put him in charge and I certainly didn't order this place constructed." You froze, not recognizing the voice.

"I told you my thoughts, Gabriel. I did this as a favor to you. We are not staying. I do not wish for my unit to be part of this Blackwatch. I do not do black ops any more. I care not for espionage. And if you remember, playing politics really made me lose face." That was Captain Patel.

The man, Gabriel, gave a bark of laughter. It wasn't happy. "Goddamnit Aishani, I'm building this from the ground up. I need good people."

"You have and always will have Jack."

There was an awkward silence.

You recognized Captain Patel's distinct exasperated sigh. You'd been on the receiving end of that enough times to know she was very irritated. "I'm not stupid, Gabriel."

"Didn't realize it was that obvious, Aishani."

Their voices faded and you peeked out, in time to see the back of the man. Black beanie, massive muscled frame, "Gabriel" was Commander Reyes. And apparently Captain Patel knew him. Which made sense if she was SEP. Well, there went your theories about grandma-wearing omnics. You sighed.

"Still there, Lucky?" Rivka popped out from behind a terminal nearly making you shit yourself. You revived the theory about grandma-wearing omnics as you stared at your reflection in Rivka's glasses.

"Yeah, does the stuff work? If you can give it another week, my contact can get some of the other stuff."

"It will hold for now," Rivka said.
"What?"

She looked at you sharply. "It is above your pay grade, Lucky."

"I'm just asking if you want me to get the other stuff on your list."

She hesitated. "Yes. I think that would be wise." She ran her fingers through her white hair. "I don't like this Lucky. We don't have rules about this yet, but when I approached Gleeson, he didn't seem to care that our backups weren't running properly. I get that a lot of our data is noise. But from the base commander?"

You thought about what you'd just overheard Commander Reyes tell Captain Patel. "Commander Reyes was just saying he didn't authorize any of this. I'm guessing he meant the 9th Circle."

Rivka huffed. "Well maybe he'll shut it down and I can see my ungrateful grandchildren this year." She fiddled with a stray wire. "Listening at keyholes, Lucky?"

You shrugged.

"Hmm. Well, if we're shutting down, then this is all moot." She clucked her tongue. "Well, if we have to wipe everything, make sure we have someone in Greenland redo their backups."

"I heard nothing," you sighed, wondering how Rivka pulled that off. You could ask Lao later.

"Come by tomorrow, Lucky. I will bring you some hummus. I made it myself."

"Sure thing, Rivka."

"So, Captain Patel knows Commander Reyes," you dropped casually into dinner conversation.

Valdez sat up straighter. Lao fell silent, only for a moment. Then the questions began. "How do you know? Like everyone knows who the commander is! But-"

Simon just sipped his tea. But as a doctor, he would have been aware of Captain's Patel's SEP status. Nwazue didn't blink either, but she might not have cared.

Shin nudged you with his elbow. "Don't go spilling the captain's secrets," he said softly.

Lao groaned.

"It's more like something is wrong and both of them are upset about it." You didn't mention Rivka's remote backup issues. "I guess I was wondering how everyone felt about getting seconded to "Blackwatch." I mean, I thought I joined "Overwatch" because it was cushier than civilian life. That's probably not a very high bar."

Valdez shook his head. You took that to mean he wasn't crazy about the idea but it could have meant "no comment." He caught your confusion and made a thumbs down sign.
"Theoretically, it's exciting," Lao said. "But we're stuck in here most of the time. Blast an omnic or two and see if any of them are from Siberia... But I wanted adventure."

"It's work," Nwazue said unenthusiastically. To be fair, that's how she always sounded.

"Doesn't matter much to me," Simon said. "I just wish they'd post us somewhere more hospitable."

"I don't mind," Shin murmured.

"Yeah, but you're the shadow ninja assassin type," Lao blurted out.

Shin inclined his head back. "If I remember correctly, you were recruited wearing an ankle bracelet because you couldn't stay out of big corporate data networks."

"That's different," Lao pouted. "They were doing suspicious things."

"And you were breaking the law," Shin laughed. "Sometimes you have to break the rules to get things done, and I trust you to do it right, Lao. Blackwatch is a good place for you."

Lao perked up at that. "Aww, thanks Shin."

You ate your food, wondering if Blackwatch was a good place for you.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Think I took liberties with timeline. Because this was just supposed to be porn.

Rumor filtered down that Commander Reyes wasn't too happy with being placed in Blackwatch. In front of the cameras, everyone seemed pretty happy that Jack Morrison was made Strike Commander. Behind closed doors, you were hearing differently. Reyes had been acting commander and being seconded to the black ops world seemed almost like burying him. The reasons for this didn't seem clear. You weren't well versed on Overwatch's internal politics, so you kept your mouth shut and your ears open.

Commander Reyes was staying an extra night, no explanation given. Or maybe there was one, but you didn't rate highly enough to get it. It kept everyone in a state of low level anticipation. Rivka made you hummus; it was delicious. Lao talked too much. Nwazue got snappish. Simon had sharp whispered argument with Georgie - no one wanted to attract Reyes' attention. Valdez didn't seem any different. Shin couldn't keep his hands off you.

Sparring was almost foreplay to him. Sometimes it made you feel inadequate, because Shin wiped the mat with you. But then, the only person in the unit who could take him down was Captain Patel.

You were face down eating mat, locked in an armbar between Shin's thighs, when he stiffened beside you. You looked up, in time to see Commander Reyes, dressed in sweats, enter the gym. He surveyed the equipment but his gaze stopped at the mat.

"You should probably tap out," he told you.

"Oh no, I have him right where I want him," you said brightly. "He just doesn't know it yet."

Shin laughed and to your surprise, Reyes' lips quirked up, his shoulders relaxing a little. He was a big man, all muscle and attitude wrapped in a compression gear. You scanned his features since it was the first time you'd seen a celebrity up close. Neat trimmed beard, iconic black beanie, and big neck-snapping hands. His dark skin bore lots of scars and you forced your eyes to his eyebrows to keep from staring anywhere too long.

"Well go on," he said. "Don't let me stop you."

Shin laughed as you rolled into the pin, trying to get a favorable angle to work yourself out. If Reyes weren't here, you would've bitten Shin by now, that usually worked. Of course, it also got you stripped and fucked in the showers, so definitely not a good tactic in front of the boss. You settled for pinching a nerve in his thigh. Shin winced and his grip loosened just enough for you to wiggle out.

You rolled backward before Shin could trap you again and thought about your options.
Shin was going to get you for that pinch.

You jumped off the mat. "Retreating now."

Shin rolled to his feet. "Did I finally scare you off, Lucky Strike?"

"Well, obviously the winner has to fight Commander Reyes. And I like living. Also, you win 98% of the time. I'm making the tactically-sound decision."

Commander Reyes gave you the side eye. "I'm just observing. Get back on the mat, agent."

You sighed. So much for that. "Yes, sir."

Shin smiled at you. It was very amused, but not very nice. "Don't worry, Lucky. I won't hurt you too bad." There was a feral pleasure in his eyes and you really hoped Reyes didn't notice.

Shin lunged, full speed, and you didn't have time to move. He took you down to the mat, knocking the wind out of you. You forced your legs apart, locking them around his hips, trying to keep his arms away from your face. But he was taller with better reach. You batted away his hands and tried to elbow him in the face, but you couldn't get good momentum on your back. Almost leisurely, Shin placed his hand on your throat. You bucked, trying to swing up and headbutt him, but he pulled back. You ended up smacking your nose on his chin, hard. Almost immediately, your nose began to gush.

Shin hurriedly climbed off you and grabbed one of his towels. He held it up to your face.

"No, don't smother me, I can recover from this, honest," you said, voice unpleasantly nasal.

Shin snorted and you tilted your head back, holding your nose.

"That is not how you headbutt someone, Lucky Strike." He sounded amused. "That is the actual opposite of what you're supposed to do."

You held your face and sighed. "Yeah, I got that."

Commander Reyes crouched down in front of you. He was blocking out the light. "You want to hit them with this part." He flicked the crown of your head. "Neck straight, chin tucked, opponent preferably locked in with your arms. Go for the nose. That little bit of cartilage doesn't stand a chance against bone. Don't get it reversed."

"Yes sir," you said.

He grabbed you by the collar, fists nearly pulling your shirt up. "Show me."

You were still bleeding, but you grabbed around the back of his neck and lined the crown of your head up with his nose and jerked forward, stopping before contact.

"Better form. But if you need to be headbutting people, you're already doing things wrong." He let go of your shirt.

You exhaled, releasing him. "I'm working on it, sir."

"Very good. Go ice that nose, Agent." He looked at Shin. "Are you up for a round?"

Shin's eyes gleamed. "Yes, sir."
You really wanted to linger, if only to see how Shin did. But Reyes gave you a look that clearly said "go away now, small annoying unworthy one" and you had no choice but to retreat to the infirmary.

Shin came back to his room with a black eye and a wide smile.

"Did you win?" You asked, stepping out of his bathroom, drying your hair with a blood-free towel.

"Oh hell no. He's tougher than Captain Patel. I'm lucky to be upright." Shin leaned in and kissed you. He tasted like blood.

"But you impressed him." Of course, he did. Shin was that good.

"He did mention Switzerland." There was a pause. Shin looked at you, suddenly uncertain. "He wants our entire unit there."

You cocked your head to the side. Interesting thing to let slip. Reyes must have already made up his mind, Captain Patel's protests aside.

This idea of a "future" loomed ahead of you. You could see it in Shin's eyes too, and he didn't seem apprehensive at all. Your heart skipped a beat. It wasn't scary like it used to be. Still you didn't know how to voice it. But all in all, it seemed nice. "Anything's better than the 9th Circle," you said, instead.

"I hadn't noticed," Shin murmured, pushing you against the wall.

You had to shower again. Shin wasn't badly hurt. In fact, he was more energetic than usual. You kept a few things here in his room now, a toothbrush, some clothes, toiletries. It wasn't just sex. It wasn't just friendship. You rubbed your nose then combed your fingers through your hair. Maybe it was time to talk about things. Problem was, you didn't know how. Shin hadn't come out and said anything, but the way he looked at you when he mentioned Switzerland...

"Hey." You stepped out of the bathroom, pulling on one of his t-shirts. They were a little big on you, but he didn't complain about you borrowing his clothes.

Shin sat at his desk sharpening your knife. "Have you been cutting wood with this?"

"Umm..." You'd cut a lot of things. Plastic, wood, meat... "Maybe."

Shaking his head, he went back to running the blade against a whetstone. "You need to keep this sharp, Lucky."

"Sorry." You rubbed the back of your head sheepishly. "I do sharpen it, honest. It's my favorite knife. I use it all the time."
"I noticed." Shin glanced back at you, a small smile on his lips. "I thought it was a bit much at the dinner table..."

"It was only that once, and I got the captain to laugh."

Shin wiped your tanto down and set it back in the sheath. "You-"

Something crashed into the hall, the impact shaking the doorframe. Someone screamed, the patter of gunfire echoing through the vents.

Shin was on his feet instantly. He grabbed his submachine guns. "Call it in, Lucky."

You pulled on your sweat pants and picked up Shin's comm unit. He was already out the door.

"Captain? We have a disturbance-"

Static. You tried another channel. All the same. Comms were down. Growling, you clipped the sheath to the back of your pants and grabbed your pistol. Slamming into your boots, you opened Shin's door, peering around hostiles.

There was blood on the floor. Swallowing your curses, you followed the trail toward the sound of gunfire. You found the source of the crash, and promptly slapped your hand over your mouth.

Valdez lay on ground, the back of his head pulped, half his skull smashed. Blood splattered the hallway. You raised your gun, now running toward the rec room. There were half a dozen more bodies on the way, people you knew, people you worked with. You could name them all, even if their faces were ruined. These were headshots. Executions.

Why the fuck hadn't any of the alarms sounded? The realization chilled you. You could think of one very good reason and it was very bad. There was a manual fire alarm in the hallway, something not tied into the computer system. This base had been far from state of the art. Smashing the glass, you pulled the handle. Lights and sirens began to flash.

Normal people ran away from gunfire, but you tracked it to the rec room. Shin was going to be OK. He was a kickass. He'd be fine without you there to hold him back.

"Where's Reyes?" It was a man's voice, Australian-accented.

"Go fuck yourself," Shin spat.

You peeked around the corner and clenched your teeth.

There were dead bodies everywhere. Some yours, some wearing unfamiliar masks and thick combat armor. The Aussie had his back to you. He was huge, bigger than Commander Reyes, and he was holding Shin by his throat. Worse, he had metal arms and cooling tubes protruding from his back. You raised your gun, sure of your shot.

The cyborg was faster. His fingers closed around Shin's throat.

You fired, even as you heard the crack.

The cyborg dropped Shin, his body too limp as he fell. The cyborg turned to face you, his mouth working open to speak. You fired again, and a pretty little hole appeared in his forehead.
He took another step toward you and fell, no words coming from his bloody mouth. You kicked him, as you rushed forward, to check on Shin.

He couldn't be. He couldn't be. He couldn't be. You dropped to your knees. You went to feel his pulse and stopped mid-air. He hadn't been strangled; his throat had been crushed, bones and all. There was blood on his mouth and his eyes were open and unseeing. Covering your mouth you rested your forehead against his. You might have kissed him. You might have said his name. You might have begged him to wake up, please. You weren't sure what you said and what you managed to keep inside.

Your nascent future, the one you'd just begun to acknowledge, turned to ash.

It was the cyborg that roused you. Something crackled and you jumped.

"Status Gamma Team?"

You found an earpiece on the cyborg, just like you found he wasn't quite dead, his breaths coming shallow as he lay there. He had some sturdy backup systems integrated in his spine. You drew your knife, the one Shin had just sharpened for you, and began to cut. You cut his throat. You cut through bone. You cut through circuit. You made damn sure he wasn't coming back. You found his gun and put on the earpiece. Then you wiped your knife off, sheathed it, and listened to your enemies.

"Eastern wing clear. Southern wing clear. Delta and Bravo units respond." You winced. You had a good idea what "clear" meant. You were in the northern wing.

"Need back up in the north. Got some stringy old bitch that won't go down."

Captain Patel. You stood a little straighter. You gave yourself one last look at Shin, his eyes now closed. You wished desperately for something clever to say. Something to absolve your failure. Something to ease the ache in your chest. But you had nothing, so you turned on your heel, checking the big assault rifle the cyborg bastard had been using. It would kick like a mule, but you knew how to handle that.

Your ears ached as you got closer. The air stunk of blood, guts, and cordite. There was something else too, something electric. It would be safe to assume more cyborgs were on their way. They were after Commander Reyes. The rest of you were collateral damage.

Cursing sounded over the stolen comm unit. It brought a tight smile to your lips. You were running now, charging toward a bloody death. This time, you wouldn't be too slow. This time, you'd get there in time. You could hear her now. She was in the northern hangar. Right now it was just storage, all the transport units were in the southern hangar, and that was enemy territory.

"What's the matter, assholes? Can't take one little old lady?" She laughed, a terrible rumble in her throat.

You slid inside, coming up behind more men in black. They were in cover behind crates. Captain Patel was on the far side. You clutched the assault rifle, holding it firm to your shoulder.

It kicked worse than a mule. It kicked like Captain Patel and you couldn't keep this up indefinitely. But you grit your teeth, and bright bursts of light shot across the room instead of bullets. You tore through them, wondering what the fuck you were shooting.

The body armor slowed your kills, but they went down.
"Captain!" You shouted, nearly slipping in the blood as you charged forward. You checked five different bodies, all of them shredded and burned by the gun in your hands.

"You've upgraded," she said. Captain Patel sat against the back wall, behind another stack of crates. "That's a pulse rifle. Thought they were still in development." Paler than usual, she gave you a pained grimace. She held her stomach, and you winced, because she was literally holding everything inside.

"Shit, what can I get for you?" You stared at her gut wound, wishing Simon was here.

"...Time. I could use superglue. You got any cigarettes?"

You heart dropped. You'd never seen Captain Patel smoke.

"No, Captain, sorry."

She waved away the apology. "Casualties?"

"A lot of techs." You didn't want to name them all, though you could. "Valdez for sure. Someone smashed his head in." You swallowed roughly. "A cyborg got Shin," you choked out. "I was too slow."

"Cyborgs are faster than Shin, let alone you, Lucky Strike." Her voice was hard. But her eyes shined suspiciously and you looked away. "You killed the cyborg?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Good girl." She sighed. "How?"

"I shot him in the head, then I cut his head off. Had to...disconnect some circuitry."

Captain Patel gave you a vicious smile. "Good." Her breath hitched. "Nwazue's dead too. She blew the southern lab with them in it."

You lowered your eyes. You'd never been close to the demolitionist, but you respected her.

"I haven't heard from anyone else."

The stolen comm crackled to life in your ear. "Delta unit, respond. Sending Alpha and Bravo to your location."

"They're coming then." Captain Patel stood shakily.

"Let's go." You stooped low to help her up.

"I'm done for, Lucky Strike." That was the second time she'd called you that. It meant something, but your brain didn't want to process it.

"Suck it up, Captain! You're an SEP super soldier!" You snapped at her. You ran back to one of the dead men and tore off his armor. They wore body suits underneath and you cut one off, getting enough fabric to hold her together.

Captain Patel gave you a bemused look as you wrapped her and tied it. "That's not going to save me, child. But I will go with you as far as I can."

She leaned on her rifle.
Footsteps rounded the corner. You raised the gun.

Commander Reyes leveled his shotgun at you.

"Gabriel, you need to get a move on it," Captain Patel said without turning around.

"Goddamnit Aishani, I still don't know how you do that."

She rasped out a laugh at that. "They're heading this way."

"Status, agent?"

"Captain Patel is critically injured. I'm uninjured. And I picked up this supposedly-prototype pulse rifle from a fucking cyborg."

"Shit." Commander Reyes stared at the gun.

"You want it?" You asked. "Because the recoil is going to break my arm."

He swapped you guns and offered an arm to Captain Patel. Past the airlock, there was a hall up ahead, and then a foyer before the exit. You'd be out in the snow, but that beat getting ripped apart by cyborgs.

"They're close," Captain Patel said, wrenching away from Commander Reyes. She took a knee in front of the door. "This is as good a place as any, a natural chokepoint."

"No, Aishani," Commander Reyes said, a desperate note in his voice.

"It's you they want. So we're going to deny them. I'll just slow you down and we all know my chances out there are too slim. Take care of Lucky Strike. She's a fool, but she walks with Durga."

"Captain, no." You shook your head.

"Give me the shotgun," she said. "They'll get close very quickly and I'm low on ammo."

Against your will, you held the gun out.

"Thank you," Captain Patel said. She patted your cheek. "There is no guilt. There is only the mission. And your mission is to keep that jackass alive."

Commander Reyes gave a sharp laugh. "Goddamnit, Aishani."

"Give my regards to Jack," she said, clasping his hand. "Don't leave it like this, Gabriel. There aren't that many of us left, and you have something special."

Commander swallowed roughly. "The grave cannot hold you."

"Go Gabriel. I must say the Durga Shatru-Shanti." She took a deep breath, and her eyes cleared. "Ripavah sankshayam yaanti kalyaanam chop padyate-"

"Orders?" You asked opening the door and refusing to look back. Because if you saw Captain Patel kneeling there chanting her prayer, while you left her to die, you would lose your shit.

"Let's just get it done."
You shut the door.

The gunshots began behind you. You still had your pistol. Commander Reyes took point. You were almost out of the base. You just had to clear the check-in point. Reyes walked through that second to last door and right into the trap.

Of course, they stationed guards at the exits. The man-metal thing was bigger than the one you killed. It seized the commander by the throat and smashed a metal fist into his head. You charged forward, pistol drawn, but another man tackled you and you went down. You watched your gun skitter away and swore, even as you were dragged backward. You could hear the sound of metal hitting flesh, but all you could see was the mostly-human man on top of you, head shaved, eyes wild, his lower jaw reinforced with a metal plate. He straddled you, one hand on your neck, the other on your hips.

"Aren't you a cute morsel," he murmured, his voice high and scratchy. A hand closing around your throat. "Are you Reyes' little bit on the side? Probably why he's got you with him. Must be a good lay. Wish I had time to fuck you while I squeeze the air out of your lungs. Bet it'd be real hot." Your periphery was starting to go black.

In the distance you heard the shooting stop; Captain Patel was gone then. You heard the blunt sound of whatever beating Reyes was receiving. You heard someone reporting Reyes was in custody. You remembered Shin, even as your heart fluttered, and you felt his gift against your back. There was still the mission. Your focus narrowed, you had only one choice. You reached down with one hand, the other clutching your assailant's collar. You nicked yourself drawing the blade, but you slid it out from under your body and straight up through his throat.

The grip on your neck relaxed, and you twisted the blade, your field of vision expanding. Sweet air rushed into your lungs and you climbed to your feet.

None of your enemies took you seriously, and that was their undoing. The cyborg on Reyes crouched over him, his back to you. You stepped forward, bloody knife in hand. Gripping his hair you simultaneously shoved the tanto through his neck. You had to saw. You had to cut some odd wires coming out his back. You didn't quite behead him, but only a stickler for perfection would call you on it. Then you rolled his body off Commander Reyes and checked to see if he was alive.

He was. Bruised and bloody, but breathing. You let out a breath you didn't realize you were holding.

"Come on, Commander. We're almost out."

Your stolen comm crackled to life. "Northern wing is clear. Charges set. Get out or get blown, fellas."

"Who has Reyes?"

"Doesn't matter. Timer is live." The voices were tinny.

"Sir, you have to get up. They're going to blow the base up."

"Nngh." Commander Reyes laid there. He was far too heavy for you to carry. You opened the door, pistol retrieved. It was dark, but you saw no signs of humans or cyborgs. It didn't matter, you couldn't stay here.

You grabbed him under the arms, and began to pull. He was heavy. But you could get him out. If only you had a sled or a dolly. Instead it was one painstaking step after another. Your neck
hurt and your insides felt scraped out. But you kept moving.

"Agent Lucky Strike," he mumbled.

"Not my actual name, sir." You clenched your teeth and pulled him out the door, and down the stairs, his metal boots clanking on the floor.

"Leave me. That's an order, agent. Aishani wouldn't want both of us to die here."

You kept pulling, your body aching. Dragging him wasn't hard, but you weren't moving fast and damnit, you were trying to be gentle. He flopped on the ground.

"I said leave me. That's an order! Can't you follow simple orders?" He sounded like a wounded bear and you tuned him out. Captain Aishani told you to keep him alive. That's what you were going to do.

You were three yards outside the building when the rumbling began. You staggered, dragging Commander Reyes through the snow. It was the sticky kind, harder to move in, but smoother than grass. Four yards. Five yards. The rumble became a roar and you threw yourself over Commander Reyes' body, because they wanted him dead and everything be damned, you were going to deny them that victory. You didn't care what it cost you. Pain lanced through your side, your fingers stinging, your leg burning. You clung to the commander, eyes squeezed shut, praying to Captain Patel's gods that you could do this one last thing.

Fire roared behind, and then the shockwave claimed you.

"Agent. Agent. Lucky Strike." The world zoomed into focus, and at its center was Commander Reyes. Blood smeared his face, and his nose looked wrong, but you definitely recognized him. It was still night, but the moon was full, giving the snowscape a soft glow. You shivered. You were in the snow. And you were freezing. But you didn't want to move.

"Yeah, that's me," you said, cleverness used up.

"Can you get up?"

"Nah, I'm good here," you said. Your leg ached. "My leg was on fire, but the snow is nice."

"You took some shrapnel. Can you try to walk?"

You sat up, your head spinning. Commander Reyes had on a jacket, but no shirt. You looked down and found a black bandage along your calf. You chanced a look at your left hand and found it similarly bound up. He used his shirt, you realized. You struggled to stand, but you just fell back on your ass.

"I tried," you said. "Partial credit, OK?"

Commander Reyes swore.
"You're feeling better," you said, brain fuzzy. You shouldn't be this woozy, but you'd never been blown up before so...well, you weren't really blown up, but you were actually caught in the shockwave this time. You felt for your eyebrows, and they were thankfully still there.

"I heal fast," he said.

You shuddered as you tried to move your left hand. It didn't feel right. You were scared to look at your leg. So you kept your eyes on Commander Reyes' face.

"You're in shock," he said.

"Probably," you agreed. "And I'm really fucking cold. I'd like to think of a clever simile, but I'm totally concussed."

Commander Reyes frowned. And like that, he scooped you up, holding you against his shockingly warm body. It jolted you into a stronger sense of awareness. You were concussed, but you knew the area. So you wracked your brain for helpful information.

"Supplies run through a waypoint in the valley," you said, waving you hand in the general direction.

"I know the spot. We have an extraction point there. It's only twenty miles or so."

You weren't walking twenty miles or even a quarter of that.

"You can leave me here, Commander," you said. "I know you'll come back." You didn't know, but you didn't care. You were tired now. You were cold. You just wanted to sleep. Commander Reyes was badass. He could make it on his own. You'd done your part.

"Stay awake, Lucky Strike."

"Sorry, Commander."

He hesitated. "You can call me Reyes, given the circumstances."

"Sure. My name isn't Lucky Strike, but...you can call me that. Everyone else did. Everyone else-" Your gut clenched. You didn't want to think about everyone else. "Fuck. Fuck fuck fuckity fuck fuck." You ground your teeth together.

Reyes began to walk, holding you against his body. "Sugar will help. I have a candy bar in my pocket. Do you want it?" He asked.

"Is that a euphemism?" You wondered. Did you say that out loud? Well when a grown man tells you to reach into his pocket for a sweet treat, what are you supposed to think?

"No, agent. It's a chocolate bar. What the hell is wrong with you?"


"Left side pocket, in my jacket," he emphasized the last word. You reached down, finding the foil wrapped bar. You unwrapped it with your right hand and your teeth. You weren't hungry, but when you bit into it, it was the best thing you could remember tasting.

"This is going to be a long walk," Reyes said. "Talk to me. Try to keep me entertained."

"Or you'll drop me?" You wondered and held up half the candy bar to Reyes' mouth.
"I'm considering it," he said. "Take another bite. Then I'll eat it."

You obeyed and then offered the rest to him. He took it in one bite and you were left with the wrapper. You pocketed it, because littering was bad. You were too fucked up to reason, but you knew it in your heart. Shin told you so many times.

Shin. Your heart stuttered.

"Agent?"

"I'm thinking. It's hard. It was hard before the potential brain damage, and it's worse since my skull is all swimmy." You went for light, carefree, but the words came out tight and clipped.

"You definitely need to stay awake," Reyes said, trudging through the snow. Great black plumes of smoke churned upward in the night. The fire lit up the sky and it was oddly beautiful. A funeral pyre for...

"You got people out in the wide world?" You asked, trying to distract yourself.

"I have family in Los Angeles," he said. "You?"

"No. No people in Los Angeles, or anywhere else." You shook your head and immediately regretted it. That and you nearly got a literal eyeful of Reyes' nipple. "Are you going to be OK with just a jacket? Shouldn't you zip it up?" He had it partially draped over you.

"Trying to keep you warm, Lucky Strike. I'll be fine as long as I don't run out of energy."

He had insane body heat, and for that you were immensely grateful. It was fucking cold, but you curled against him.

He marched down the hill, keeping a solid pace as he entered the forest.

"There are bears out here," you said. "You can put me down and wrestle one if it comes to that."

Reyes coughed. "I'd prefer to leave it alone. But if it attacks, I'll shoot it."

"Not going to feed me to it?"

"That would just make it angrier," he said, but there was no sharpness in his words. You rested your cheek against his chest. You could hear his heartbeat, steady and loud. It was strangely soothing.

"Do you have more food?"

Reyes snorted. "Are you actually hungry?"

"No, just wanted to make sure you'd have the energy to carry me and make it to the extraction point."

"I know what I'm doing, Lucky Strike. Just follow orders and I'll get you out of here alive."

You took a deep breath. That was precisely what you wanted, no, needed to hear. And orders meant keeping Reyes entertained. You struggled to think of good stories, but the best ones involved your unit, and you were too raw inside to talk about them.

"So I used to be an import-export specialist," you told him.
He made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a snort.

"Very respectable living where I'm from," you said sagely. "A meal at least once a day, only one firefight a month if you're good, and a real interesting customer base." You looked over his shoulder, but it didn't seem like you were being followed.

"Weirdest thing you've transported?"

You laughed. "OK, I don't know if this was authentic, but the seller swore it was: a pair of Jack Morrison's combat pants. Lightly worn, unwashed, and yeah...I didn't look. The buyer was extremely fanboyish."

Reyes made a choking sound. "What? How much did they cost?"

"A cool ten thousand credits. I got a transport fee. I didn't set up the transaction."

Reyes began to laugh, then abruptly stopped. "Ugh. Ribs. Real laughter hurts."

"Sorry," you said.

"No. I'll have to tell him that. We could start a business..." Reyes paused. "You remember the people involved?" There was an odd intensity in his voice.

"I think the seller worked at a hotel. Like, got them from the laundry, not stole them from his dresser. But I can't be sure." You shrugged.

"Huh." Reyes walked at a solid pace, not jostling you too much. "How much do you think my pants would sell for?"

"No clue. As I said, I just arranged transport." You looked down. "But those look kind of beaten. I guess there might be a market for it, but I'm not an expert."

Reyes did one of those laugh-grimaces. "Why are you called Lucky Strike?"

You fell silent. You didn't feel lucky, even though others would say you were. You survived this far. You had Commander Reyes helping you stay alive. That was pretty lucky. You should be grateful. You just felt numb. "Shin called me that," you said quietly. "It stuck." You blinked rapidly, hoping your tone was neutral.

Reyes was silent for a moment. "You and Lieutenant Sato were lovers?" There was no judgment in his tone, and maybe Reyes was sharper than you expected. You shouldn't be telling the fucking head of Blackwatch your secrets, but you were afraid of sinking into silence. You didn't want to die with these things unknown.

"Yes. Cyborg got him. Moved too fast for me and crushed his neck. They wanted to know where you were. Shin wasn't...cooperative." You forced yourself to look off into the night and not at Reyes. "I killed that bastard. I shot him through the skull and cut his head off. But that doesn't make me feel any better."

Reyes was quiet for a long time. "I'm sorry."

You shrugged, because words weren't an adequate medium of expression and screaming wasn't an option. "New subject, please."
Commander Gabriel Reyes kept rewinding the past few days, trying to pinpoint how things got so fucked. Black Base Delta had been wiped off the map. He had already considered closing it down, especially after that bastard Gleeson had droned on about its importance. But even before he'd nearly been assassinated, something about the whole setup rubbed him wrong.

And then someone had sent very expensive, very talented mercenaries to salt the earth.

Aishani was dead and most of her unit too. The thought made his blood thunder. She'd gone down fighting, like she'd wanted, but it didn't absolve him. He was the one who'd asked her back. He was the one who put her in this position.

Instead of answers, he had you in his arms. A weirdly amusing, probationary agent, one who had aided and abetted the sale of Jack's pants. Admittedly, it was fucking hilarious, though undeniably creepy. Jack would most definitely freak out. It made him smile to think of the blonde man. Things hadn't been good lately, but Aishani was right. Jack was special. Reyes nearly died today. It put things into a clearer perspective. Rank changed like fortune. People? People were what mattered.

"Why'd you join up?" He asked you. He was comfortable with the silence, but you were obviously getting too tangled up in your thoughts.


Reyes grunted. "What kind of bears are out here?" He asked after a few minutes.

"Grizzly, I think." You gnawed on your lower lip. "They should be hibernating, but we've had issues with them not staying down all winter. Climate change, you know. And if you're wondering about grizzly bears versus omnics, omnics win. As long as they have lasers or big guns. The humanoid ones don't do so well, but it's a close thing."

"Do you take bets on bear-baiting omnics?" Reyes was a little disturbed.

"I don't torture animals. I've just seen it a few fights now. It's weird. Kind of sad, because you know the bear doesn't stand a chance. And even if it disables the omnic, you're going to have to put it down because it can't survive the damage."

"Huh." Talking to you was more informative than Reyes expected.

"Yeah, I know, I learned a lot of things I never knew I never wanted to know since joining Overwatch." Like how it felt to lose your whole unit. You clenched your fists, and your left hand felt wrong. You tried to wiggle your fingers and fire shot across your nerves. You winced.

"How's the pain?" Reyes asked.

"Grizzly Bear-able," you said.

"I will drop you," he scowled.

"Plain bearable?" You said, because even if it wasn't, you didn't really have a choice.
"I have another chocolate bar," he said.

"Save it," you said. "I'm on a diet."

Reyes looked down at you incredulously.

"It was a joke," you said.

"Jokes are supposed to be funny."

You huffed. "I'm doing the best I can in the middle of the night, in the Yukon, concussed."

Reyes face softened. "Yeah, OK. But don't quit your day job."

You didn't ask if you still had a job. You didn't know if you wanted it. But he was being snarky, not literal. Your mind didn't normally wander like this. "Do you need to rest?"

"No, I'm good. I'll stop halfway." He paused, looking out into the woods. You couldn't see, but it seemed he had good night vision. It made you wonder just what all was enhanced by SEP. He started to move again, double quick. You hung on tight, tucking your head down.

You lapsed back into silence, the pain in your limbs getting worse. But your mind was coming out of the fog. You were going to have to face some harsh truths soon. "Thank you," you said, after a moment, realizing that you'd lost your basic manners somewhere in the explosion.

"De nada," Reyes said. "You dragged me out the base. Expressly against orders," he added sharply.

"Yeah, well, they were stupid orders."

Reyes stopped. "What?"

"You were obviously concussed and in no position to make that call. So yeah, I ignored you." You grimaced as your left leg bumped against his hip.

"Don't ever emphasize to your commanding officer that you thought his orders were stupid and that you deliberately disobeyed him," Reyes said tautly.

"Or you'll drop me?" You looked up at his surly face. He was rigid in the moonlight, jaw clenched. "Captain Aishani was my commanding officer," you said quietly. "She told me to get you out alive. That's what she died for. That's what mattered. I didn't repeat my cyborg decapitation trick just to let you get blown to meat confetti."

Reyes' fingers dug into you right thigh. You winced and he hastily loosened his grip. "That was- shit. That was you." It was more shocked acknowledgement than question.

"Who else was left?" You laughed, though it wasn't the least bit funny. "You actually forgot."

"I've seen you fight hand-to-hand," Reyes said dryly. "But now that you mention it, I do remember a knife popping out of that bastard's throat. I guess I'd been focusing on...everything else."

You felt your back, the familiar weight gone. Your heart dropped. Everything you'd owned was gone. If you'd lost Shin's tanto...
"Relax. It's on my belt. I picked it up when I was treating your injuries."

You reached down, fingers circumnavigating his belt.

"What the hell, puta? You don't just go groping a man!"

You ignored him, till he swatted your hand away. He fiddled with his belt and then handed you the familiar blade. You clutched it against your chest.

"Thank you," you said. "It's important to me."

Reyes resumed his quick pace. "I can see that."

"I'm not the kind of person who gets into a fair fight," you said. "That's for people with super enhancements and pride to spare."

Reyes chuckled at that. "Fair point." He looked at the knife, a peculiar light in his eyes. "Maybe we should reconstruct what happened, while the memory is fresh."

You felt calmer with the tanto in hand. So you told Reyes everything, glossing over the aftermath of Shin's death. You told him about Valdez and Nwazue. You didn't go into detail about your kills, but you informed him of them. You'd killed eight men tonight. It wasn't a fair trade for all your friends.

"It's good you grabbed the pulse rifle," he said. "These aren't supposed to be out of development yet. It gives us somewhere to start." Then Reyes told you that he'd been inspecting some of the shipments the base had received. Manifests sent to HQ didn't match the inventory on hand. He'd been doing that when the attack began. They'd gone after his guest quarters first, then spread through the whole base. Reyes fought his way through, finding no survivors along the way. He too picked up comm chatter on Captain Patel's location.

"In conclusion," he said wryly. "It was a fucking waste."

"We were betrayed," you said.

Reyes went silent at that.

"No alarms sounded. The only reason Shin and I knew something was wrong was because Valdez made an enormous racket before they killed him. I pulled the fire alarm, and it only worked because it was manual. All our comm channels were down. The blast doors were unlocked and they knew where to find you." You thought about the equipment you'd procured for Rivka. No, if Rivka betrayed you, she wouldn't have needed extra equipment. She could open the doors, sabotage the system, and be out with no problem. No help needed.

You were still uneasy.


You had no idea what he was talking about. But the epiphany reinvigorated him. He kept moving, fast enough the cold wind began to sting. You clung to him, shivering. Reyes was sweating when he stopped. He reached in his pocket, tore open the chocolate bar, and ate half in one bite.
"Eat the rest," he ordered.

"Are you going to need it?" You asked, taking a moment to rub your numb legs.

"Depends on how long it takes Overwatch to find us."

You put back in his pocket. "I'm good."

"You're a fucking trip, Lucky Strike."

"You're welcome," you told him, patting his rather solid chest.

Reyes glowered down at you, his dark eyes smoldering. "It's my chocolate bar."

"Definitely. Which is why I put it back in your pocket. You're getting grumpy. You're probably going to need it sooner rather than later." You tried to wiggle your leg. "Just so you know, I can't feel my toes. Or my left hand."

Reyes swore an impressive stream of Spanish. He set you down against a tree and pulled your boots off.

"No frostbite yet," he said, rubbing circulation back into your feet. "The good thing about the cold is it slowed the bleeding." He touched your left calf and you winced. He continued vigorously working your extremities between his large palms. But he didn't try to jostle your left hand. Instead he tucked it in his very warm armpit. You flinched, partially because that was gross, but mostly because you were regaining feeling in it and it hurt.

"Thank you," you said after a moment. Because while it was weird and embarrassing, Reyes was trying to keep you from losing digits. That was thoughtful. He even put your shoes back on for you, because you weren't tying any laces one-handed.

"...You're welcome," he said gruffly. "And thank you, for saving me twice."

"I think this more than makes up for it. Stabbing people is easy. Putting other people's cold hands in your pits; that's real friendship."

Reyes laughed at that, then winced. "Don't make me laugh, chica."

"I'm concussed. Can't be held responsible for what I'm saying."

"I'm concussed too," he said.

"Yeah, but you're a super soldier. You heal fast. Totally different situation. Also, do you need to worry about frostbite?"

"I run at a higher temp than you, and no, I'm good right now." Rolling his shoulders, Reyes lifted you back up, tucking you tightly against his chest. It would have been intimidating if your brain was working properly. As it was, it was just kind of comforting.

"Keep your hands tucked and protected. I won't drop you."

"Even if I say something really stupid?" You tucked clipped your dagger to your hip.

"Eh...no promises." He took off his hat, and it surprised you to see he had a tangle of curls hidden underneath. He tucked it over your head. It was too big and slid down over your eyes, but it kept your ears warm.
"Thank you, Reyes," you said.

"Call me Gabriel. If I'm giving you my clothes, you might as well call me by my first name."

"You do this with all your subordinates?"

"Just the ones stupid enough to defy orders and try to rescue me."

"Well, look how that worked out for me." You pulled the hat up so you could see him. "Master has given Dobby a hat! Dobby is freeeee!"

"...You're an idiot, agent."

"I have a name."

He said it then, the entire string. He knew your actual name. That surprised you a little. "I make a point to know my people. That and Aishani personally requested you." He scratched his head. You knew he was wondering about the nickname.

"Shin dubbed me "Lucky Strike" after I crashed an omnic firefight. I had an old CZ 557 and played blitzkrieg without any shields. Captain Patel's company wasn't advancing fast enough to rescue me, so I threw the grenades I'd been transporting into the fray. They were uh...modded. I lost my eyebrows, but took out the omnics. Apparently, my antics made Captain Patel pray a lot, and freaked out the rest of the unit. She told me to join up, because I was too stupid to survive on my own. Shin thought it was all hilarious."

"Aishani was right," Gabriel said wryly. "She told me that story. Showed me the gun too, because I'll admit, I thought she was joking."

You didn't like thinking about Captain Patel or Shin right now.

"Do you have someone to go home to?" You asked.

"Yes," he said with certainty. "I do."

"That's good," you said, but you didn't ask more. Your mind turned over a new problem. There was no doubt in your mind that those cyborgs could have killed Gabriel, and it wasn't just your skills that saved him. Why risk hand-to-hand with him? Were they that unstable?

"You alive?"

"Thinking," you murmured. You nestled there in Gabriel's arms and let yourself drift.

"Stay awake, Lucky," he said, going the path of everyone and shortening your nickname.

You tried, you really did. But at some point, the world dropped off and you went with it.
"Wake up, agent." Groggily, you opened your eyes. It was cold. But something hot rested against your back. You looked over your shoulder to find a bare-chested Gabriel Reyes holding you against him. He was ripped, his chest moderately hairy. He had even more scars and you turned your head back to keep from staring. You were wrapped in his jacket, hat tucked over your ears, and he was rubbing your right hand.

"Sorry," you said. "How long was I out?"

"An hour, give or take."

"Sorry," you mumbled again.

He didn't seem angry. "We're at the extraction point. I've set up a beacon. Now we just have to wait." There was a tension in his voice that hadn't been there before.

"You think we're going to get ambushed?"

"It crossed my mind." He held you a little too tightly, like a stress ball. "It's that or die of exposure."

"I remember when we both went down, someone reported that you'd been caught. Maybe they think you're dead." You rubbed your nose, it was icy. "But I've been thinking. If they wanted you dead, they would have shot you right away. You're too dangerous to punch to death. I think they wanted to take you alive."

"I don't remember this." His brow furrowed. "Pendejos. Makes sense."

"We were kind of busy not getting killed. But yeah, someone called in that you were in custody. It was right after I noticed Captain Patel had stopped shooting, but before I went on my throat-slashing spree."

If you were in your right mind, you might have been concerned about all the touching. But Gabriel wasn't doing anything untoward. He just kept rubbing your stiff limbs. Your mind seemed to flow with your pulse. The cold sapped your strength, everything felt very heavy.

Gabriel unwrapped the leftover chocolate.

"Open," he ordered.

"You keep it. I'm not going to be able to run away. Don't waste it on m-"
He calmly forced the candy into your mouth. You nearly choked.

"Eat it," he said. "That's an order." He touched your forehead and swore. "You're getting kind of warm, chica."

You chewed up the chocolate and swallowed. This was ridiculous. You were sitting in Commander Gabriel Reyes' lap, wearing his clothes, while he fed you chocolate. You decided that you had actually been knocked unconscious back at the 9th Circle and were having bizarre hallucinations.

"Is this one of your weirder survival situations?" You asked.

Gabriel held your left hand. He wouldn't let you peel back the bandages. He hadn't said a word about it, but you realized he'd made a point not to let you see how it looked. Your stomach sunk, but there was a good chance all of this was a bad dream. You willed it to be so.

"Yes, but not the weirdest. It was an urban zone. We had to wear niqabs and skirts underneath, just in case. Jack in a niqab is ridiculous."

You pictured Commander Morrison crossdressing in full body-covering veils and dresses. Yeah, you were definitely hallucinating now.

"You know a lot about frostbite."

"Jack almost lost some digits to it. And I have had other idiots under my command. Ana's the only one with any sense."

Even you'd heard of Captain Amari. She was a legend. "She's pretty," you told him, accepting the fact that none of this was real.

Gabriel snorted and began to laugh. "Is Jack pretty too?"

"Yes. But Captain Amari is prettier. And oh my god, don't tell her I said that. She'll probably kill me."

Gabriel snorted. "Am I pretty?"

"Yes," you said. "You're the prettiest."

"Now I'm worried," Gabriel said, but he sounded like he was laughing.

You shrugged. "None of this is real, so what does it matter? I'll wake up in the 9th Circle and be like "why the hell did I eat nachos right before bed?" It's very apparent that I have a lot of unresolved emotional issues and they're manifesting in strange ways."

"This is real, idiota."

"This is surreal, Gabriel."

He couldn't really disagree.
The orca dropping into view was a great relief. And Jack, bags under his eyes, stubble clinging to his jaw, clad in his bright blue overcoat, Jack was one of the most beautiful things Gabriel had ever seen.

"Gabe!" Jack hit the ground running.

Jesse and Ana brought up the rear.

Gabriel set you on the ground and caught Jack in a hug. He winced as Jack squeezed his ribs.

"I'm sorry," Jack murmured. "I shouldn't have let you go without...saying something." Hair mussed, eyes wild, Jack took in Gabriel's injuries, his hands flitting between bruises.

"Mi cielito," Gabriel gripped the back of Jack's head and kissed him, the frustration and exhaustion draining away.

"Very pretty," you said, blinking up at them.

Jack looked between you and Gabriel, his confusion obvious. "You don't seem to be dressed for the weather, Gabe."

"She needed it more than me," Gabriel said. "But the idiota is borderline delirious. Ignore her."

"Captain Amari is pretty," you declared.

Gabriel snorted and lifted you up. "Yes, everyone is pretty, chica. You should probably shut up before you embarrass yourself."

Ana and Jesse caught up and Ana gave you a skeptical look.

You sighed and lowered your head. "Too late."

Jack ignored you, staring off at the smoke still rising in the distance. "Gabe...we saw the satellite footage. What the hell happened?"

Gabriel's expression darkened. "We need to talk, Jack."

You woke up in a small white bed, the air smelling of astringents. Immediately you lifted the sheet. Your left leg was bandaged, but it was there. You checked your toes. All accounted for. But your left hand was wrapped, and it didn't feel right. You began to pry at the white bandages.

"Easy, Lucky. You've been out for 48 hours. I can give you the damage report." Gabriel sat next to your bed, more relaxed than you'd ever seen him. He looked better than you remembered, no bruises, no blood stains. He was back in his signature beanie, wearing his casual Blackwatch outfit: hoodie, jeans, and those insane metal boots. There was a chair and a curtain surrounding your bed.

"How bad?" You asked.
"You're missing half your index, middle, and ring fingers on your left hand. They were pretty shredded from the explosion. Angela saved what she could."

"Now I'll never be concert pianist," you said, trying for levity. It fell flat in your ears.

"We can get you prostheses," Gabriel said, his deep voice soft. "Maybe with extra attachments, if you have any ideas."

"Multitool, pressure injector, and vibrator," spilled out of your mouth and then you clapped your uninjured hand over your mouth. "Or knives. I can be Agent Stabby Fingers." You held your mutilated hand up. "Wow, that sounded better in my head, less B movie. Is this how it starts? Because I saw some of those cybernetic mods on those mercs and am I going to look like that?"

Gabriel rubbed his forehead. "I'm hoping that's the anesthetic talking."

"It's the panic," you agreed. "You OK? Because you look OK."

"Fine." He folded his hands together. "Except for all paperwork. You should eat."

A blonde woman appeared from behind the curtain, with a tray. "Good, you are awake. Eat first, then take these." She set a cup of pills beside your pudding cup.

It was bland stuff, creamed corn, steamed carrots, and something you thought was turnips. You ate, too hungry to taste anything or be self-conscious that Gabriel was watching you. The pudding cup was best part, even if it was tapioca and not chocolate. You took your pills, and put the tray aside, feeling more human than you could remember.

"Where am I? What is happening? Did anyone else get out?"

"You are the sole survivor of the terrible accident that befell Black Base Delta," Gabriel said formally.

"What?" You screeched.

"I'm sorry. You will be debriefed soon." Gabriel studied your face and you realized your mouth was hanging open. His eyes darkened and he leaned closer. "Do you trust me?"

You stared at him, trying to work your jaw. He'd saved your life, carried you through the snow, and made sure your wounds were treated. He'd been here when you woke up, the only familiar face left. You didn't think he was going to throw you under the bus, make it out to somehow be your fault. You didn't think he'd do that. You took a deep breath. "Yes, Gabriel."

His frowned slightly, like he didn't believe you. "Then here are your orders. You are not authorized to talk about the events leading up to the destruction of Black Base Delta with anyone lacking the proper clearances. I am your commanding officer. You will not pick and choose how to follow these orders, am I making myself clear?"

You sat back in the bed, staring at Gabriel. There was a hard cast to his face, mouth set in a grim line. He meant it. "Yes, sir."

"There are procedures before you can be promoted to full agent. You are ordered to write an account of the events leading up to the base's destruction, as well as your activities that evening. You will also undergo a polygraph. If you fail to complete these in a satisfactory manner you will be dismissed."
"Understood," you said. "Sir."

Clenching your fists you stared down at your lap. Eating had been a mistake. You felt queasy now. How were you supposed to take this? You didn't expect him to hug you and tell you everything was going to be OK. However this reception put real fear into you. The rug had been pulled out from under you again and you were falling.

Gabriel, no Commander Reyes got up and left.

Hahaha. How were you supposed type while drugged and down a hand? You sat in the bed and stared hard at the tablet Captain Amari had brought you. Oh, voice recognition, right. The painkillers helped, but you really wanted to take the bandages off and see the damage for yourself. Dr. Ziegler had actually smacked your hand when she caught you trying to remove it, then lectured you and threatened to get restraints.

"Focus, Agent," Captain Amari said.

"I'm not...entirely here," you told Captain Amari.

"I can tell," she said politely. "But you need to give your account, while your memory is fresh."

"My entire brain is floaty weird," you said. "And I'm sorry I said you were pretty, not because you aren't, but because it was not a socially appropriate occasion to make that observation and I wouldn't want to detract from your value as a big goddamn hero, which certain types will do if they view a woman as "pretty." I only have platonic admiration for you, Captain, so please don't be weirded out. Also, I was hallucinating, only that...kiss wasn't a hallucination. Shit. Oh my god, why am I talking so much? What the hell is wrong with me?"

Captain Amari only raised a brow, and to her credit, she didn't look the least bit surprised.

An epiphany slapped you in the face and you gawped. They'd drugged you on purpose. Your inner voice grew steadily more paranoid, especially after Commander Reyes called everything an "accident." You stared at your hands. They didn't have reliable truth serum, that you knew of. That you knew of, you pleb. "Shit spiders," you muttered.


"Go on," Captain Amari said.

OK, they wanted to read your mission report? They wanted to drug you first? Fuck'em. You were going to give them their damn post-mission report. It would be the best post-mission report ever.

The screen reflected your thoughts. Apparently you'd said all that out loud.

Captain Amari was laughing at you.

You began at racket Valdez made. You ended at the rescue. You tried to gloss over anything that made you feel. You admitted you and Shin were sleeping together, but you didn't have to tell them how his death turned your insides to broken glass. You admitted you might have a little bit of hero worship where Captain Patel was concerned, you didn't have to tell them it was
like burying your family all over again. You admitted you did everything you could to save Commander Reyes, you didn't have to tell them you were ready to give up after that. So you didn't tell them what you didn't have to. Just the facts with an unhealthy dose of truth serum induced stream-of-consciousness. Because fuck'em.

By the time you were done, Captain Amari wasn't laughing any more.

They let you rest after the mission report. You'd had no visitors, and every time Angela pulled back the curtain, you'd hoped, prayed, Gabriel had been wrong and someone else from your unit would appear. That was a pipedream. Two days later, you were released from the infirmary. Your tanto was missing, as were your clothes. Well, Shin's shirt. You suspected it wouldn't smell like him any more, even if you did get it back. They gave you generic sweats to wear.

Your leg was functional, Angela having done some bizarre pseudo-skin graft to prevent infection. You could walk, but you wouldn't be running any time soon. Your left hand remained bandaged. It felt whole, and your fingers itched, alleged missing parts included, but you couldn't get to them. The sensation was driving you mad.

Captain Amari escorted you through the base. You were in Switzerland of course, and it was huge. You took it in quietly, knowing Shin would have liked it here. Most people ignored you, though one or two stopped to whisper to a companion. You wondered what story was being told. Gas leak? Omnics? Rocks fell and almost everyone died?

"What you have endured is unfair," Captain Amari, said out of the blue. She hadn't come out admitted you were drugged, but you both knew it.

"It's about to get worse, isn't it?" You crossed your arms. Shin would have liked Switzerland. You were starting to hate it.

"That depends on you," she said. "You left some things out of that mission report."

"I spat out every flickering thought I had, for you guys to dissect." You paused. "But then, the newbie is always suspicious. Especially if they're the "sole survivor." Fuck." Imagine what would have happened if you hadn't saved Commander Reyes. Your life wouldn't be worth shit. You turned your head. "I told you what happened, Captain."

"Everything?" She asked.

"Everything that happened, as I remember. Some parts are fuzzy." Like Shin's death. Half your trip with Gabriel, scratch that Commander Reyes. You weren't in a position to be that informal with him now. You understood that clearly.

"You didn't tell us everything," Captain Amari said gently. "But you will." She opened a door and ushered you in, shutting it firmly behind you. You almost turned right around and tried to walk back out.

You were developing so many fucking trust issues.

"Sit down, agent." The man behind the table was polished. French accent, neat pointed mustache, and even in combat blacks he looked debonair. You distrusted him immediately, but
"Have you taken a lie detector test before?" He asked.

"Nope," you said.

"It is quite simple, and the technology has caught up a great deal." He regarded you a piercing stare. "Anything you've heard about "beating" the test, I would recommend forgetting. It won't help you, and we know what to look for."

He placed sensors on your wrist, chest, face, spine, and legs. A screen lit up on his tablet monitoring pulse, heart rate, and other metrics you weren't so sure of.

"I am Gérard Lacroix," he said. "You may have heard of me."


To your surprise, he smiled slightly at that. "All right. I want to get some baseline readings. State something true."

"This sucks," you said. "I'd never heard of you before."

"Truth," he agreed. "Now lie."

"I love surprise tests," you said.

"Lie," he agreed. "Now give me something complex."

"I like Overwatch. It's great."

He actually laughed at you. "Interesting choice. Now what does this make you feel?" He held your *tanto* in hand. Your felt your heart speed up.

"That's mine," you said, measuring your words. "I want it back."

"And if I told you I had to hold onto for evidence?"

"I want it back," you practically snarled.

"Good," he said, placing it on the table. "We will talk about that later."

You glared at him. He was the bad cop and the insufferable Sherlock Holmes rolled into one smarmy French pastry. And if he was against you, well, you were already fucked.

He started easy, asking questions about your childhood. They were mostly "yes" or "no." You tried not to let your gaze stray to the mirrored window on the side. Captain Amari was there and you knew Commander Reyes was as well. Who else? It didn't matter.

"Have you heard of Talon?" He asked.

"No. Yes," you amended. "Commander Reyes mentioned them when we were escaping."

"Was that the first time you'd heard of them?"

"Yes," you said.

Lacroix gave you a skeptical look. Or maybe that's how rich people looked at reformed
criminals. You couldn't tell.

"Are you sure that's the first time you've heard of them?"

"Yes," you repeated, annoyed.

"And you've never encountered them before?"

"Not that I know of," you said.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his tone implying something you didn't like.

"I'm sure," you ground out.

He gave you half a minute of silence, leisurely inspecting his screen.

"I know nothing except the name," you said.

Lacroix tapped something on his screen, ignoring you. You wanted to cross your arms, but you held still, glaring at your interrogator.

"You were a smuggler," he said, switching gears. "And it's known that you procured things for fellow agents." His tone grew snide. "Commander Reyes mentioned there were issues with manifests. Were you stealing and selling Overwatch property?"

"No!" You threw your hands up. "I was a probationary agent! Captain Patel said if I washed out she'd take me out back with a shovel. So no, I wasn't about to fuck that up."

"But you were doing a side business," he said.

"Yes. Tahini, silk flowers," your brain stuttered as you remembered Rivka. You had concerns about what she was doing, but you weren't about to voice them to this guy. He was looking for something to nail you with. "Lots of booze and cigarettes," you added.

"Illegal narcotics?" He came around the table, leaning over you.

"Nothing harder than booze and cigarettes," you repeated.

"What else?" Lacroix asked, scrutinizing the readings on his screen.

"Vintage porn mags, rabbit meat, calligraphy brushes..."

"Were you selling anything stolen?"

"No," you said firmly.

"Did you ever smuggle unauthorized weapons onto the base?"

"No."

"Where did this knife come from?"

"Shin gave it to me." You stared at it. You would be getting it back.

"And you were sleeping with Lieutenant Sato?"

"Yes. And we were fucking." You held your head up, daring him to judge. He was
unfazed.

"You are aware fraternization with a direct superior is against regulations?"

"I took my orders from Captain Patel," you said. It was your one flimsy defense. But it was also true. "If Shin gave me orders, they were from her."

"Semantics," he said. "Did Lieutenant Sato use his position of authority to convince you to have sexual relations with him?"

"No, we were consenting adults," you said, your eyes narrowed.

"Are you aware of anyone in your unit, Shin Sato included, contributing to the sabotage of Black Base Delta?"

"No!" You might have shouted. "I watched my friends die," you said grimly. "You be careful what you say about them."

"Are you threatening me, mademoiselle?" He asked, sounding vaguely amused.

"Friendly warning," you said with a feral smile.

"Lie," he replied with an easy smile.

You sat there, breathing deep, willing yourself to calm down.

"Did you lie or otherwise try to beat the truth serum when you gave your post-mission support?"

"I tried to reign in what I was spewing," you said. "Obviously, it didn't work."

"Yes, "shit spiders" indeed." A trace of amusement in his voice. But his eyes were hard. "You left things out."

"No, I told you what happened."

"You started in Lieutenant Sato's quarters?"

"I spent a lot of time there," you said. "But yes, we had sex."

"You got separated and followed a trail of bodies?"

"Yes."

"Did you shirk? Were you hiding? Was that what got Lieutenant Sato killed?"

You clenched your fists. "Fuck you."

"Answer the question, agent." He said your title like an insult.

"No. I didn't hide." You were in that hall again, taking in the bodies of the dead. You knew them all. You also knew they were dead. You also knew they were gone. You just had to reach Shin... "I was trying to find him and I was too fucking slow. OK? I know it. I took the shot, but-" You wiped your eyes defiantly. "Yeah, I was too slow. It was a mistake to depend on me. But I didn't run away from the fight and I didn't betray anyone." Your breathing was ragged and you hated that you were shedding tears in front of this jackass. It felt like he was winning and you just wanted to punch him
in his stupid rich smug face.

"So you admit you didn't do a good job?"

You held up your hand. "I've got skin grafts and a maimed hand. I've paid for my stupidity."

"Minor cosmetic injuries," Lacroix said, gesturing with his two good hands and you wished your left hand wasn't bandaged so you could throttle him.

"Anything requiring surgery isn't minor," you growled.

He hmmed, and scrolled through his tablet screen, but you could see his shrewd eyes on you. You held eye contact, unwilling to show him fear.

"You killed, hmm, eight people? Any way of confirming that? You only have so-so combat scores."

"I can count. Eight people, at least half of them with cybernetic upgrades." You paused. "You know what, it doesn't matter. I don't need credit for that."

"Do you know where the pulse rifle came from?"

"I got it off the cyborg that murdered Shin."

You were getting a feel for his pattern. Lull, sharp question, lull, gut punch. Repeat. This wasn't just a lie detector test, this was an interrogation. On a rational level, you understood why it was necessary. But it was a shit thing to do. You were vulnerable and Lacroix was exploiting that.

"Were you ordered to get close to Commander Reyes?"

"I was ordered to "keep that jackass alive." End quote."

Lacroix chuckled. "And those were your only orders regarding him?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell us what you left out of your mission report?"

"You keep saying that, but I didn't. Well actually, I have no clue, because I don't have the clearance to read it. To my knowledge, I didn't leave anything out, but I was drugged, so who knows?"

Lacroix snapped his tablet on the table.

"You think you are clever, but you aren't fooling me. You think this a joke? Thirty six people are dead. And you want to make witty bon mots?"

You stubbornly glared at him.

"What do you know about Talon?"

"That I want them dead," you spat. "If it was them, I want them dead."

Lacroix watched you impassively. "Have you ever collaborated or worked for an outside
agency to the detriment of Overwatch and or Blackwatch?"

"No."

"Have you had sexual relations with Commander Reyes?"

"No!" Shin had just died. "What kind of questions are these?"

"The ones I am asking you," Lacroix said sharply. "What else do you know about Talon?"

Lacroix hit the important points multiple times and from different angles. Talon, your smuggling, and whatever he thought you were leaving out. You didn't know how long you were in there, but by the end, you were drained.

"Are we done?" You scowled. There'd been a few moments when you'd nearly gotten out of your chair and slugged him, but you forced yourself to stay sitting.

"Allow me to be blunt. You have already broken several rules, and demonstrated you don't really care about regulations. You have blatantly defied orders on more than one occasion. Do you understand how bad this looks?"

"I don't care," you said. "I completed my mission. Commander Reyes is alive. I'm missing finger parts. I don't care. Give me my tanto and I will fucking walk home."

You weren't sure where home was now, but it didn't matter. It wasn't here.

Lacroix stood and showed you the door. Stone-faced, you found Captain Amari waiting for you. She silently escorted you to another room and gestured for you to go inside. It was a cell. You considered running.

"Do you trust me?" Commander Reyes had asked while you lay in that hospital bed. You'd said "yes," but maybe not so much. You forced yourself to relax and step into the cage.

Captain Amari shut you in.

You sat down on the bunk and waited.

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"You want to what?" Gabriel asked sharply.

"We need to interrogate her," Gérard Lacroix said, his voice soft. "While I trust your judgment, it is also possible she is a Talon plant. Wouldn't it be convenient? After saving your life, you would trust her implicitly."

Gabriel, Jack, Gérard, and Ana sat around the conference room table. Each of them held a copy of your dossier.

"Her background is impossible to verify," Ana said examining the file. "Half that region was wiped out a decade ago."

"She has some dubious connections," Gérard continued. "I believe you Gabriel, but we have to do our due diligence."
"Aishani picked her out, Jack. That counts for something."

Jack nodded. "It does. And you like her. That counts for even more." Warmth flared in Gabriel's chest. Jack was trying. "But given what happened, we need to question her thoroughly. If she's as good an agent as you think, she'll be fine. This needs to be done if you want her working on the operation."

Gabriel growled under his breath. They were right of course. And he was biased. This was all routine. "It will get her clearances out of the way too," he said.

"Blackwatch efficiency," Jack said, shaking his head. "Gabriel you're our best interrogator, but..."

"I will do it, Gabriel. She trusts you and that is well and good. No sense breaking that. I do not mind being the bad cop." Gérard picked up the mission report. "Shit spiders?"

You might have laid down and cried a little before you passed out. It wasn't the worst day of your life, but it was the day when everything hit you at once. Captain Patel was dead. Shin was dead. Overwatch thought you were a traitor.

When you woke up, Captain Amari was sitting in the room. You were too drained to make a fuss. You just sat up, rubbed your face, and waited for her to speak.

"Is there anything you wish to say?" She asked.

"I don't think there's anything left to say." You hesitated. "No wait, shit spiders."

She didn't look amused. "Shit spiders are not a good defense."

"Do I need a lawyer?" You asked, because you didn't know any.

"Blackwatch trouble doesn't go to court," she said, a little too ominous for your taste.

You leaned against the wall. "Is it trial by gladiator? Because if so, I'm fucked."

"Do you have anything you can give me so I can help you?"

"Uhh..."

"Information," she clarified, looking annoyed.

"I answered all Lacroix's questions to the best of my ability. I gave you my awesome post-mission report. I mean, I can tell you the price of tulips in Peru, as of a week ago, but I've got nothing else, ma'am."

She stood. "Good luck, agent." She exited, and two men stepped into the room.

The cowboy looked familiar. But it was the cyborg that had you tensing. You didn't realize Blackwatch had them too. Goddamnit.

"You're to come along with us," the cowboy said. He was grinning and touching the
revolver on his belt. The cyborg waited silently.

You followed, watching the cyborg from the side. His overall design looked nothing like the ones you fought in the 9th Circle. He was more metal than they were. Part of his chest and one arm were flesh, but you weren't sure how much was left under all the metal. You flexed your left hand unconsciously.

"It's rude to stare," the cowboy said.

"Sorry," you muttered, and regretted it.

The cyborg met your gaze, his eyes the only human part visible on his face. "I understand it is horrifying to see." His accent was Japanese, heavier than Shin's. Thankfully, they sounded nothing alike.

You shrugged. Yeah, cyborgs were fucking terrifying. You were going to have nightmares for the rest of your life. But it seemed rude to say that to him. "You just look really different from the last batch I met."

"Huh," the cowboy said, exchanging looks with the cyborg. "How so?"

"Hush," the cyborg said. "We are not supposed to be conversing."

"Their whole design was much clunkier. And they were wearing shirts," you said.

The cowboy snickered.

"Hush," the cyborg repeated, but he wasn't looking at you.

You walked down the hall, past other cells and what you were sure were interrogation chambers. You didn't really want to find out. You followed them till they stopped outside a room, the placard by the door said "Commander Gabriel Reyes."

You sucked in a breath.

Did you trust him?

It didn't matter. You'd done what he asked.

The cowboy knocked.

"Enter."

The officer was large, two desks, a large terminal, and Commander Reyes sitting on what you assumed was his desk. Strike Commander Morrison, Captain Amari, and Agent Lacroix were there as well.

"Lucky Strike," Commander Reyes said, inclining his head at you.

Tight-lipped, you nodded back.

The cowboy elbowed you lightly. "He wants you to salute, say "sir," the whole shebang. Gets kind of salty if you don't."

"Shut it, Jesse," Commander Reyes said. "I bet you three are wondering why you're here."
"How come you don't have to salute?" Jesse murmured.

"Because I'm pretty sure I don't work here," you growled back.

"Shut it," Commander Reyes snapped. Then he said your name. "You've been promoted to full agent."

You looked at him, then Lacroix, then back at Commander Reyes. You couldn't quite get the incredulity off your face. "Who said I wanted to work for you after...all that?" You waved your injured hand trying to come up with a gesture that encompassed your feelings. But your middle finger wasn't available.

Jesse began to laugh. Strike Commander Morrison turned around so you couldn't see his face. Captain Amari covered her mouth. Agent Lacroix just smiled pleasantly.

Commander Reyes fixed his burning glare on you. You stared back unwilling to be cowed.

"I thought you wanted to avenge your friends." There was no heat in his voice. But he didn't look happy.

"I thought you suspected me of being a traitor!" You threw your hands up. "Why the hell would you think that?"

"I think we should clarify. You passed your...tests," Lacroix said. "I am sorry for the deception, but that was standard tradecraft. Interrogate everyone. Capitalize on a weak spot and torque till you say something interesting. We had to be sure."

"Meaning you're a gullible idiot," Commander Reyes said. "You're in, and everyone in here is cleared to know about Operation Shit Spiders."

"Seriously?" Jesse asked.

"It was randomly generated," Commander Reyes said without batting an eye.

You rubbed your face. There were too many feelings inside you and you didn't know which one was going to surface first. You wanted to hate Lacroix, and you certainly weren't going to any of his dinner parties, but it all made sense now and you _were_ an idiot.

"Are you in, Lucky Strike?" Commander Reyes asked.

"Yes, sir," you said, face buried in your hands.

"Are you all right?" Captain Amari asked.

"I'm...processing." You were trying not to hate everybody right now, because they didn't actually deserve it. OK, maybe a little. Maybe you were overreacting. You couldn't tell. Your judgment was severely impaired.

"Is there cake?" You asked when you had your face under control. It seemed the safest thing to say.

"No," Commander Reyes said. He sounded annoyed. Why was he annoyed? He hadn't been stuck in the infirmary for days. He hadn't been under interrogation. Was a little cake such an unreasonable request?
"I told you we should have brought a cake," the Strike Commander whispered to Captain Amari. "New Overwatch agents get cake."

"You can get cake in the mess hall, after we've briefed Genji and Jesse," Commander Reyes said.

"Is he lying to me?" You asked Genji.

"There is usually cake in the mess hall," the cyborg told you.

Jesse elbowed you again.

It almost looked like there was smoke pouring from Commander Reyes' ears. You shut up.

"Was that...necessary?" Gabriel asked. Jack, Ana, and him had all sat in on the interrogation. He'd winced at some of the implications, but Gérard had not been out of line.

Gérard looked between him and Jack. "The interrogation was pretty light. These things are always delicate. But her responses were consistent and the fact she hasn't heard of me tipped the scales in her favor. I am satisfied that she is not a double agent."

"I meant the question about sex with me. Seriously? That was on your mind?" He looked at Jack, wondering for a moment, if he'd put Gérard up to it.

"That was for her protection," Gérard said lightly.

"What do you mean?" Gabriel narrowed his eyes.

"There's a rumor going around that she's your...lover," Ana said. "Since we're officially calling it an "accident" and she is the only one who survived at night, coincidentally alongside you, well, you know how it goes." She wrinkled her nose.

"Jack-"

"I'm not worried Gabriel," he said. "I'm fully briefed on the situation." He rested his hand on Gabriel's shoulder. It'd been like that since he got back. Jack couldn't stop touching him, reassuring himself that Gabriel was here and alive.

"Should there be any kind of inquiry, it will be on-record that your relationship was...above-board." Gérard folded his hands in his lap. "I have no lingering concerns. It would be wise to get her a therapist for the grief."

"Already set up. Her quarters have been allocated and I'll drop off her things in a minute. Any other issues?"

"You're soft on her. With you, she gets away with things most people wouldn't dream of," Ana said mildly.

Gabriel shrugged. "She saved my life in a dramatic and touching fashion. I'm a sucker for grand gestures." He tilted his head back. "Aishani told me to take care of her. So yeah, she's not
just another grunt now. She's one of Aishani's strays and she's mourning her unit." He paused. "That's why you're in charge of her. You aren't a big softie like me."

Ana sat back in her chair. "All right. No objections. Jack?"

"No objections. Now will there be cake?" Jack asked.

"This is Blackwatch," Gabriel said. "We don't need no stinking cake."

There was white cake in the mess hall, but you found yourself unable to eat it. You packed it up in a napkin and Jesse walked you back to your new room.

"Welcome aboard," he told you with a charming smile. "Some time I'll tell you about my initiation; it was a barrel of tarantulas and there was no cake."

"That sounds awful," you said.

"It was," he agreed.

The door was keyed to your biometrics. When you opened it, Commander Reyes was inside, sitting in your chair. It was a small suite - bed, desk, dresser, your own bathroom. It reminded you a little of Shin's bedroom and you had to take a deep breath.

"People are going to talk," you said walking in and shutting the door. You set the cake down on the dresser.

He grunted. "People are already talking. The best thing to do is ignore them."

"Since you're warning me, I'm guessing it's nothing nice." You crossed your arms and leaned against the wall. "Hit me."

"You only survived because we were out having sex." He said it bluntly and you winced. "I know."

You blew out a frustrated breath. "My tanto?"

"Here." He handed it to you with both hands. "It's a good blade. I'm sorry things are starting out so rough."

"I've seen spy movies. I get it." You tucked the blade in your waistband. "Do you want me to confirm, deny, or be coy?"

"Up to you."

"Don't want to make things difficult for you and the Strike Commander."

There was a long pause. "He's aware of the rumors. He's also knows they're false."

You pushed your hair back. "I'll wait and see how people are acting before I react."

"I've scheduled you a meeting with Angela and Torby tomorrow at 0900 hours. Your
bandages are good to come off and they will get you set up with prostheses."

"Thanks," you said, not looking at your hand.

"Your clothes were pretty shredded, but what's left is in the drawer. There are some extra sets of sweats. You can go by the quartermaster tomorrow and put in an order for uniforms. You're getting a pay raise by the way. Officially, you're my assistant. Unofficially, you're part of the team that's investigating just how this happened and how far it goes."

"Talon," you said.

"Probably," he rubbed his nose. "Are we good?"

"Yes, commander."

"Gabriel," he said. "Gabriel in private is fine."

"OK," you said, squashing your urge to be petty and add "commander" to the end of that sentence. It was a near thing.

"As for chain of command, you're Ana's subordinate."

"Why?"

"I'm...difficult on assistants. It's a high turnover job." He rubbed the back of his neck. "If I'm asking too much of you, say something to Ana. She'll be an impartial judge."

"It'll also fuel the rumor that we're sleeping together," you said, not entirely convinced.

"It's not meant to be common knowledge," he said. "Expect shit tons of paperwork, some commendations that will be top secret, and more training." He stood. "You're getting grief counseling too. That's not negotiable."

You cocked your head to the side. "That's awfully presumptuous of you."

"I've buried a lot of friends, *chica*. It doesn't stop hurting. You're going to need help, and if you don't like this one, we've got a few on staff. My door is open and so is Ana's."

You averted your eyes, because the pain etched on Gabriel's face was very real. It struck a hard chord and you rubbed your temples. "OK. Thanks. For getting me set up."

"Do you need anything else?"

"A map. Street clothes and gear. New friends." There was more bite in your words than you anticipated.

Gabriel brow furrowed. "You're still angry." You didn't recognize the expression he wore. "I'm not going to apologize for doing my job."

"Not asking for one." You picked up the paper plate of cake and the plastic fork. "I'm...not myself. I've killed people before. I've seen people die. But it wasn't like this." You took a bite of cake. It was OK. Valdez's were better. You got an involuntary flash of his battered body, brains leaking out. You forced yourself to swallow your cake and put the plate down. "I am still sore about the whole promotion process. I get it and I'll get over it. But don't act like I don't have a right to be upset."
"Most people don't push me, Lucky Strike." He didn't sound aggravated any more.

"Most people don't push Commander Reyes. And I won't. But I'll push Gabriel, if that's how it's going to be." You tentatively signaled that you understood his boundaries, hoping you hadn't misread the situation.

Gabriel leaned back in your chair. He was too big for it. Hell, he was too big for your room. Your leg was starting to ache and you just wanted to take some of the nice pills Angela gave you and lay down. "Not in front of subordinates," he said. "Ana, Gérard, and Jack are fine."

"Understood."

Gabriel stood. Up close, you had forgotten how much larger he was than you. He towered over most people. "Get some rest," he said. "It'll get better." He patted you on the shoulder.

He left and you took your pills, before dropping onto the unfamiliar bed, and drifting into a troubled sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I like comments. They feed the beast.
You awoke to pounding on your door. The clock said 0800 hours.

"Time to get up, buttercup." Jesse's voice was muffled, but not by very much. "Got some stuff for you."

"I'm awake," you said, rolling out of bed. You'd gone to sleep in your clothes and was it time to change your dressings? You didn't remember, but you were seeing Angela today anyway.

You opened the door to find Jesse fully dressed, with a large box in hand. Now that you were paying attention, he was younger than you initially thought, the facial hair giving him the illusion of age. He moved carefully, like he'd recently filled out, hardened up, and hadn't quite gotten used to the changes in his body. You recognized those circumstances, because that was you four months after Captain Patel recruited you.

"Captain Amari and the commander got you stuff since you're starting all over. Clothes, pretty much all black," he held up a t-shirt, waved it in front of you, then tossed it over his shoulder. "Tablet - there's a map preloaded and everything." He handed you the device. "And my personal favorite, amber-scented lotion. Captain Amari uses the stuff. It's not cheap and it smells like heaven." He popped the lid and inhaled deeply.

You were reasonably sure everything had been neatly packed before Jesse rifled through it. "Thanks," you said. "Did you...uh...want the lotion?"

Jesse's eyes widened at your implication. "Now you're mistaking me for one of those unsavory types."

"Everyone needs lotion. For dry skin." You kept your tone flat. Jesse could read into it what he wanted.

"Naw, don't feel right just taking it from you." He paused. "But I'll give you a bottle of whiskey for it."

"Sure," you said. "That sounds fine. I can't drink lotion."

"There are kinds."

"It's too early to think about that," you said.

Jesse stepped in and set the box down. He left the door open. "I'll be right back."

You opened your drawers, finding clean sweats in one and your tattered clothes in another. Your sidearm was there as well. You got it out and tucked it in your waistband. You'd pick up a
holster from the quartermaster later.

Jesse was back, holding up a bottle of Maker's Mark. It wasn't impressive, but as you said, you weren't going to drink lotion. You opened the bottle, sniffed, and took a swig. It was decent. You tossed Jesse the lotion.

"Kinda early for drinking."

"Inspecting the merchandise." You set the bottle down.

"You're supposed to meet Angela at the infirmary. I'm free and clear this morning. Want me to walk you there?"

The you from before would have enjoyed Jesse's fussing, maybe even flirted back. But the you now... You closed your eyes. "Thanks for the offer, but I have to get showered and changed."

"I'll wait," he said brightly.

"Not necessary."

"Got nothing better to do, sweetpea."

"I don't need a babysitter," you snapped.

"No, you don't. But in Blackwatch, we have a buddy system for greenhorns. Guess you don't know about it. And maybe you don't need it. But I'm here to help you get oriented, like it or not. Commander's orders."

You exhaled slowly. Orders, you understood. "All right."

You didn't cry in the shower, but it was a near thing. The last shower you'd had was days ago and Shin was still alive. The sheer relief of personally washing off some of the filth was cathartic. Sure they cleaned you up in the infirmary, but that was different. The hot water soothed your nerves and while you had to do some interesting acrobatics to keep your bandaged parts dry, you did not need Jesse's help.

You pulled on the black sweats. They fit well enough, but that didn't surprise you. Gabriel had an eye for detail. You rummaged through the gift box and found a bag of hair ties. Your hair had gotten longer than you remembered.

"Feelin' better?" Jesse asked, standing in the hallway.

"Need breakfast," you said.

"After," Jesse said. "In case Angela and Torby need to do some workups."

You re-equipped your tanto and sidearm, then grabbed the tablet. The two of you walked in easy silence. You pondered the lotion. Overwatch provided basic moisturizers. You could requisition that kind of stuff at the 9th Circle. And it wasn't the worst lube ever. So that left the quality and the scent. Was Jesse the pampered type? Didn't fit his image, but that cowboy persona seemed pretty cultivated. Did Jesse like scented lotions? Or did he like how Captain Amari smelled personally?

"Here we are," Jesse opened the infirmary door and held it for you, but did not come in.

You recognized Angela. The short, bearded man who stood beside her must be "Torby."
"Hello, sorry I'm early. Jesse is...escorting me everywhere."

"Blackwatch policy," Torby snorted. "So many people get pressganged in that they have to kept on a short leash. What'd you do?"

You blinked. "I...survived?"

"Her unit was transferred," Angela said. "She is not one of Gabriel's hard cases."

Torby relaxed a little. "Makes more sense then," he muttered.

"We were just talking about your hand. " Angela smiled. "Sit. Torby took measurements while you were under anesthesia. I think you'll like the finished product."

"Friends call me Torby. You can call me Torbjörn or Mr. Lindholm." He gave you a hard look but you didn't take the bait. It was too early in the morning to pick a fight with a dwarf.

"Be nice, Torby. Lucky Strike saved Gabriel's life. She is a good egg."

"Why do you think I'm sore at her? We had the perfect chance to be rid of that egotistical, jumped-up sociopath."

You stiffened. Someone was trying to kill Gabriel. Rationally, you knew it was probably a joke. It just rubbed you wrong.

"Now he's back, shouting at everyone and requisitioning all sorts of things. Do you understand what that does to my workload?"

Angela noticed your expression. "Torby is much like Gabriel. Very...fussy."

"You take that back!"

You sat there, a little dazed. Torby was joking, so you needed to relax. Angela took your left hand and peeled off the wrapping. Your fingers were almost a uniform length. The pinky was now the longest. You were missing index, middle, ring fingers down to the second knuckle. The skin was shiny and new with almost no scarring. It was borderline obscene. You couldn't take your eyes off your maimed hand.

"Did you amputate or-"

"A little bit of bone. It would have given you difficulties. There wasn't much left by the time you got here," Angela said.

"Oh." You wiggled your stubs. "OK."

"Hold still," Torby said. He got out a box and took your hand. "If you can't move them, that's Angela's fault. I don't do the nerve-augments. These are omnium, fully articulated so you can type, punch, eat a sandwich. You can also stick your fingers in the oven or underwater. But remember, metal conducts heat and electricity. So you can burn yourself or short your fingers out. I have also included the requested extensions." He sounded business-like, but there was a gleam in his eye.

"The nerve augments double as the socket," Angela said. "These are the basic models, for typing and every day activities."

Something pricked at your stubs, and you swore, clenching your left hand. Dull metal
digits dug into your palm. You released immediately, watching the metal fingers move on will. There were neat nailbeds shaped on the metal fingertips. Nothing mimicking prints though.

You fanned your fingers, rolling them up and down. There was a slight stutter in the middle finger and Torby frowned. You forced it again, and it rolled properly.

"That's you Angela."

"Mmm," Angela said, studying your hand. "Common acclimatization issue. It will resolve itself over time."

Torby set a metal case in front of you. Inside were other finger tips.

"Multi-tool. Includes a light. Very useful for missions." He pressed on the nailbed and the finger split open, revealing a tiny Swiss army knife configuration. He placed it back in the case. "Pressure injector. I assume you're looking to drug or poison people. Blackwatch," He grumbled. "The trigger is pressure on the fingertip. So don't poke yourself." He demonstrated and a needle shot out from under the fake fingernail. Then he opened the finger and showed the little double-sealed bag that would hold the liquid. "Spring-loaded blades. Two inches and not good for sawing through bones," he said, pointing to another row of metal fingertips. "You have to flex your whole hand. It'll take some practice."

Angela showed you how to deactivate the prostheses, and swap them out. You tried the blade-fingers. It took a few tries, but they popped out smoothly.

"This is really cool," you told Torby. "I'm going to eat cheese with these." You awaited the outrage but he shrugged.

"Better than I was expecting," he told Angela. "Oh yes. Vibrator." He poked the nailbed and the finger whisked to life.

You stared in horror at both Torby and Angela. "I was high as fuck! I'd been drugged multiple times that day. He actually asked for that?"

Torby snorted. "Reyes is a right bastard," he said, smirking at you.

"I may kill him," you marveled. "All that work...and I may have to kill him."

Torby's smile was downright evil. "So this might take some practice, But you can flex your finger to increase speed and power."

You buried you face in your right hand. "I'm going to go throw myself off out a window now."

"You are making a chicken out of a feather."

"I really have no clue what that means."

"You are making a big deal out of nothing, girl."

"Sorry, I've never had a coworker make me a prosthetic finger vibrator. I don't know what to say."

"A "thank you" is appropriate," Torby said.

You weren't feeling thankful. Mortified, would be the right word.
"So you don't want it?" he asked innocently. "Because I can scrap it. No skin off my nose." He looked entirely too smug.

"Uh..." You thought about it. That was actually terribly handy. Oh. Terribly punny too. Good thing you didn't say any of those things aloud.

"You're like a cat walking around hot porridge." What the hell did that even mean?

"You made it. I might as well take it. For science," you said.

"Yes, about that. These aren't free, you know," Torby said.

You made a mental note to check your bank account. "What do I owe you?"

"We would like you to come back weekly. Any feedback and data you can provide would be very helpful. And of course, if you're having problems, come find either of us," Angela said, completely unfazed by the sex toy. "Was this helpful on a mission? What kinds of additions could you use?"

You could do that. "What kind of energy use are we looking at?"

"Augments need to be charged monthly if you're doing heavy things, like using your extensions. The basic models can go a year."

You stared. "OK. I can do that."

Torby closed the case up. "Well then, we have a deal."

You looked at your metal fingers, attached to little metal disks that occasionally glowed. It was jarring.

"Our flesh sleeves are still cumbersome. They look like skin, but impair movement. If you don't like the aesthetics, I suggest wearing gloves," Angela said.

"Thank you," you said.

"Clean them regularly," Torby said. "Especially if you're killing people. Or eating cheese." He set a bottle of solution on the table. "Soak them overnight if they get really dirty. You can wipe down the augments. Don't soak those."

Feeling slightly overwhelmed, you nodded mechanically.

"We will send you instructions," Angela said. "And while you're here, I want to look at that leg."

Jesse was still waiting when you got out. He took one look at your hand and whistled. "Fancy."

You shrugged, holding the case. You'd swapped out the basics for the tool and two knives. It was a little tricky to switch fingers on your own, but you'd adapt.
"Torby says Blackwatch pressgangs a lot of people," you began. "Captain Patel didn't really want to be in Blackwatch, but she said she agreed to it because Commander Reyes asked. Is that what Torby meant?"

Jesse tilted his head back. "Nope."

"Didn't think so," you said.

"Not so long I ago, I ran with the Deadlock gang. Course, Blackwatch brought'em down and Commander Reyes gave me a choice, join Blackwatch or join the chain gang. Ain't got no regrets, but it was rough starting out." He paused. "Genji's story is rougher. Don't ask him about it."

"Noted." Wasn't your business anyway.

Jesse took you to the Quartermaster, getting you uniforms, basic necessities, and gloves. Gloves and sweats looked a little strange, but your metal fingers looked stranger.

"Gloves gonna be your thing, Lucky?"

"Maybe," you said. "I don't like looking at them just yet. The loss is still fresh." Also, you weren't sure you had good control over the tools. You were careful not to flex your hand.

"Now I know it ain't none of my business, Lucky, " Jesse began as the two of you carried your stuff back to your room. You suppressed the urge to shut him down. Jesse nice, and likeable, and trying to settle you in. "But you gotta be real careful with the commander."

"Are you talking about the saluting or the rumors?" You asked.

"Both," he said. "Reckon you and him have an understanding, what with you wearing half his clothes in the middle of a blizzard."

"...It was to save my life. We weren't doing anything...unsavory."

"I know that," Jesse said. "But people saw you carted off to the infirmary in the Commander's hat and jacket."

You rubbed your forehead. "The commander doesn't mind the rumors. Thinks it will distract from my actual investigation."

"Commander forgets what it's like to be the rookie, and the commander's good looking but he ain't a pretty young lady. People are going to be shit to you because they're thinking you're trying to sleep your way up the ranks. Blackwatch ain't exactly popular. Not like we can advertise when we get a win." Jesse sat down in your chair. It wasn't your chair, it was the guest chair. You were going to have to go get another chair that would be your own.

"In public, it'll be all "yes, sir, no sir, how high do you want me to try to jump, sir." He and I went over the rules."

Jesse nodded firmly. "Good." He paused. "You know about him and Strike Commander, right?"

"That they're together?"

"For now," Jesse said. "There's been trouble brewing for awhile. You best keep your head
You had to admit, your impressions of Jack Morrison had been vague. He seemed nice. Which was wrong, because if he's the fucking Strike Commander of Overwatch, the guy that replaced Gabriel Reyes, he better be a badass. Either he was unqualified, or scary good at switching roles. You suspected the latter.

"I'm not a homewrecker," you said. "My lover was just murdered. I'm not looking to replace him."

"I heard. Sorry about your loss," he said automatically. "It's going to be rough riding, Lucky." He paused. "I read your Shit Spiders report. Randomly generated, my ass. But nice work: I laughed, I cried, I want to kill some black ops guns-for-hire. You saved Commander Reyes and you took some pain doing it. Me and the Commander have your back. Genji probably does too, if you're worried."

"I'm not a great fighter," you told him.

"That'll change," Jesse said cheerfully. "You'll be back in training as soon as Angela clears you." He paused. "I wouldn't blame you if you lagged for an extra week. Because the Commander had a lot to say about your hand-to-hand."

"It's shit, I know." You scowled.

Jesse patted your arm. "There's always room for improvement."

You sat at your desk in Gabriel's office, scrolling through compartmentalized intelligence. There was a lot of fascinating stuff, and you were struggling not to drown under the workload.

Your official duties included flagging especially interesting reports, liaising with VIPs to schedule meetings, and miscellaneous tasks that Gabriel decided needed to be done: figure out who stole the broom, find him coffee that didn't suck, summon minions so Gabriel could yell at them.

Unofficially, you were collating the mission data as it came in. Winston, the gorilla in the lab, no joke, had recognized the design and pursued some techie angle, to reveal the manufacturer. You and Winston were also sifting through the assorted detritus that forensic teams were bringing back from the Yukon. Not human remains, thankfully, but gear, cybernetics, and papers. Office work was all you did for two weeks and you were drowning in it.

Gabriel was rarely in his office lately, and you were fine with that. It was sad to admit, but while you liked Gabriel, Commander Reyes was a real bastard. He was like that with everyone, sharp, hypercritical, and fussy. He had no patience for fuckups, sky-high standards, and woe to those who underperformed. When he was stressed, which was most of the time, the best anyone could hope for was a begrudging "good job, agent."

"There you are." Captain Amari stepped into the office. "How goes it?"

"Steep learning curve, ma'am," you grumbled.

"Come have a cup of tea with me," she said. "I've been meaning to check in with you, but it's been busy."

You eagerly put down the tablet and stood up.
"How are the prostheses working out?"

"Better. Angela had to fine tune some of the settings for the extensions. The equipping process got trickier. Can't use the same nerve augments for weapons as I can basics. But she's confident they'll have it back down to one set in a month." You had accidentally stabbed through a keyboard or two. The vibrator remained unused, but you were working up to it.

Captain Amari walked you to her office. The HQ was huge, but you were catching on to the layout. She already had a tea set out, and her electric kettle was going off. She poured, though there was no cream or sugar. You didn't mind. She drank teas that didn't require them.

"How are things?" She asked.

"The Commander is...tense. He's making everyone else tenser."

"Mmm, Gabe can be difficult," Captain Amari agreed. "While I don't normally encourage insubordination, you and Gabriel have a more...unorthodox relationship. I think you could tell him that and survive the experience."

"He's barely around. Two missions this week and a meeting with the UN," you said.

Captain Amari rolled her eyes. "He is overcompensating. He does that when he feels things are out of control. Jack would be wise to rein him in, but-" She stopped abruptly, as if she was remembering you were a lowly newbie agent.

"Is that a hint that I can try to convince him to do something to unwind?"

"It's not in your job description," Captain Amari said blandly. "But he might listen to you."

"I'll try. I guess...I'm not trying to push it, Captain. There's enough talk as it is."

Captain Amari narrowed her eyes and sipped her tea. "Have you had any problems with the...overzealous?"

Some people had felt the need to tell you off because you'd "slept your way into a promotion." You'd just laughed and asked them what they actually knew. It was hard, maintaining that devil-may-care expression, when all you wanted to do was feed them their teeth. But you endured, because drama would only blow up in your face. Acting blasé would not validate their accusations.

"Some snide comments. Most people mind their own business." You paused. "And it was mostly from Overwatch people. Not Blackwatch."

"Two reasons: Blackwatch knows that's not how it works. People don't sleep their way up. Maybe assassins, but that's different."

You blinked.

Captain Amari laughed. "Secondly," she didn't say she was joking. "If you actually were sleeping with Gabriel, they wouldn't want to piss him off."

"So trust no one. Got it." You sighed, sipping the fragrant jasmine tea. "I'm having a little trouble balancing the workload. And Angela is about to clear me for active duty. I don't know how I'm going to train, do the Commander's paperwork, and continue a proper investigation without delegating some. Winston's great by the way. He's got Torby looking at his connections"
"I'll talk to Gabriel," Captain Amari said. "It is a legitimate concern. You're working a little slower on the administrative tasks than we'd like, but that's to be expected, since you're handling the research on Operation Shit Spiders. And I know Gabriel hasn't been around to show you how to get things done. Is there anything else?"

You never chatted like this with Captain Patel. She was all business, up till the end. You even saluted when you gave her your rifle. You really wish you had been able to just sit and talk with her.

"Genji found a note about some compartmentalized intelligence regarding Black Base Delta. I wanted to request access to it. I can get you the reference file."

"I know what file it is," Captain Amari said. "I'll release it to you now. But I should warn you, it is...upsetting."

You downed the rest of your tea. "Guess I better get to it then."

You sat in front of your work terminal. There was a file. It was time-stamped about half an hour before the explosion. It was a video file. You opened it.

The screen was mostly static. "Mayday. Mayday. Mayday." You recognized that voice. "This is Agent Rivka Cohn of Black Base Delta. Can you read me?" You could almost see the glare of the computer screens in the background.

"This is Overwatch HQ, emergency channel, this is not a secure channel. We cannot get a visual on you."

"That is because they are jamming us. Lao, boost the signal."

You heart thumped as Rivka's stern lined face appeared on the screen. "Overwatch HQ, this is Agent Rivka Cohn. We are under attack. They are well-trained, cybernetically-enhanced, and slaughtering us. They are after Commander Reyes. We will hold them as long as we can. Requesting backup." The screen flickered, and you could hear gunfire in the background.

"This is not a secure channel. We cannot confirm your location. We cannot confirm you are sending from a secure recognized location."

"We are Blackwatch at Black Base Delta. Lao, give it more juice!"

"Why do you even have this stuff?" Lao complained in the background.

"Above your pay grade!" Rivka barked and you had to smile a little. "I repeat, we are requesting assistance. They are attempting to assassinate Commander Reyes."

"What is your clearance-?"

"This is Strike Commander Morrison." Jack Morrison's voice was an extension of authority. The operator's voice cut out immediately. He didn't sound like that when you met him. "We are listening Agent Cohn."
"Move that terminal Lao. It'll hold them for a few more minutes." Rivka looked at the screen. "Commander. They're coming. We're almost out of time. It was an ambush and it's likely we were betrayed. I do not know Commander Reyes' status. But I'm listening in on their comms. They haven't gotten him yet."

"Thank you, Agent Cohn. Try to get yourself to safety," he said.

"It's too late for that," she said with a harsh laugh. "Fire that operator for me."

"It's done, Agent Cohn," Morrison said. "We're heading in your location. Please seek cover.

The gunfire grew louder.

"We're out of time, Commander." Rivka saluted. "Agent Cohn and Agent Lao out."

There was a shower of sparks and then the screen went black.

When Gabriel returned to his office, you were wiping your eyes on your sleeve. You didn't look at him. You weren't sure how many times you'd watched it. Once was enough, but due diligence called for more.

"Ah. Ana told me she'd released that to you."

"Rivka made me hummus," you said. "She complained about her grandchildren all the time. And Lao was the unit...baby. She stole my beer."

"Jack demoted the operator," Gabriel said.

"Good."

"That call lit a fire under Jack's ass. If they hadn't gotten that distress signal out, you would probably would have lost more than a few fingers." Gabriel uncrossed his arms. "You should have read the transcript beforehand."

"I-yeah." You hung your head. "I didn't think about it. I just...I kind of knew that if anyone got through, it was Rivka."

"Agent Cohn was a very ruthless Mossad operative before she came out of retirement to work for us," Gabriel said. "You OK?"

"I...no. But I will be." You shut down the video. "I uh...meant to tell you this earlier, but, you've been busy and I've been swimming in paperwork." You folded your hands. "About a week before you arrived, Rivka came to me for some computer parts. I didn't know what they did, but she was worried about the remote backup server being down. Said Gleeson wasn't in any hurry to fix it."

Gabriel swore. "So those bastards knew about that problem?"

"Rivka was...very concerned. I got her some parts. Not everything she needed, but some. She did something, I don't know what." You paused. "I might have heard you talking about
shutting down the base. Rivka let slip that if that happened, Greenland would have to redo their backups. When I asked, she said it was above my pay grade.” You choked out the last sentence.

Gabriel's brow furrowed. "We don't have an operational base in Greenland." He looked at you. "Wait, you smuggled unknown tech into the base?" He swore, giving you the hard stare.

"Nah, I got it online," you said. "It was all retail stuff, but I couldn't tell you what it did. Still have the receipts in my email." You forwarded him the information. Then you set your head down on the desk.

"We've finished salvaging the remnants of Black Base Delta," Gabriel said after a moment. "Not a lot of remains were recovered. But there are some more items."

"I'll look at them tomorrow," you said, not lifting your head.

"Tomorrow you're starting training."

"I'll look at them tonight," you said, still not lifting your head off the desk.

"They can wait," he said. "Are you hungry?"

"No," you said. And it was true. Grief did weird things to your appetite. Sometimes you just wanted sweets. Sometimes food just made you ill. Sometimes you actually were hungry and then found everything tasted disappointing.

"I am. Mess is closed. Want to raid the staff kitchen?"

"Can you cook?" You asked.

"Of course," he said, sounding very annoyed that you even asked.

"Me too." When you looked up, Gabriel was watching you, somewhere between worried and aggravated. "Let's get Jesse or Genji."

Gabriel looked like he wanted to object.

"Reputation," you said, pointing at yourself.

Gabriel's expression darkened, but the two of you grabbed Genji. You suspected it was because he talked less. There was a full kitchen off the side of the mess. Staff could prepare their own meals. You rummaged around, not quite willing to steal anyone's labeled lunch.

"We can just eat Jack's food," Gabriel said.

"You can eat Jack's food. We'll be drawn and quartered," you said.

"I don't actually want to eat Jack's food. It's all casseroles and potato salad. He thinks salt is a spice," Gabriel groused. You hoped he was joking.

You found some basic ingredients and heated up the skillet. Leftover rice, onions, chicken, soy sauce, ketchup, eggs. You had the stuff for omurice. Short for "omelette rice," Shin would make it for you every now and then. Said it was a "kids" meal. You didn't care. It was delicious. You fried the rice, chicken, and onions, seasoned the eggs, and added the sauces to the rice. It was...nostalgic. Gabriel took over flipping the omelettes.

"These are flat omelettes."
"Supposed to be," you said. "I'll whip the whites if I want fluffy ones."

"Ketchup and eggs are blasphemy," he said casually.

"This is the exception. Pope gave it an indulgence and everything," you said, stirring the rice. "Genji, do you have any nori?"

He looked over your shoulder. "Is that omurice?"

"What?" Gabriel asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Yes," you said.

"I'll get some nori," Genji said.

You spooned the rice onto plates in a dome shape. Then you wrapped each rice bundle in the omelette crepe, and drizzled ketchup and mayo on top. Genji handed you a package of nori and you cut it up into sprinkles.

"You put ketchup and mayonnaise on my eggs, idiota."

"Just try it," you said grabbing a fork. It was good comfort food: flavorful rice offset by the gentle creaminess of the egg. The sauces added tart and tangy layers to the richness of the dish.

Genji removed his lower face plate and began to eat. His face was scarred and his lower jaw wasn't flesh. You forced yourself not to stare and continued eating.

"I used to eat this as a kid," Genji said softly. "You need to add dashi and mirin to the eggs."

"I know. Didn't have any though." You took another bite. "Next time."

Gabriel took a bite. "...Acceptable." He glanced over at Genji.

"You can make a mentaiko sauce to go on it," Genji said. "Spicy fish eggs," he said for Gabriel's benefit.

Gabriel wrinkled his nose. "Next time we're doing carne asada," he said, but he ate three plates anyway.

Chapter End Notes

I keep accidentally writing fluff scenes.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

There be some gore and torture ahead. Also feelings. Because feelings are scary.

Two weeks later, the bandages came off your leg and while the grafts took care of the worst of the damage, you weren't going to be modeling swimsuits any time soon. The color was almost right, but there were starbursts of scars and a jagged edges to the seams. Your left leg looked very patchwork, but you were functional and cleared for active duty.

Captain Amari was pleasantly surprised by your competency with a rifle. You weren't a sniper, but your form and aim were good. You handled pistols, shotguns, and other light armaments with no difficulty.

You also sat in on a refresher medic course, because you knew someone would need it. Probably you.

And of course, Commander Reyes had his own hand-to-hand combat training class. You ended up sore, angry, and eating mat on a regular basis. Jesse and Genji thought it was hilarious. You might have lost your temper, except there were half a dozen less friendly Blackwatch agents present.

Though you might have come to an uneasy accord with Genji, it didn't mean he went easy on you in hand-to-hand combat. He liked to throw you, and you were learning very quickly how to land properly.

"You'll make a better projectile than fighter, agent," Commander Reyes told you after you picked yourself off the mat.

"If they're close enough to throw me, I've fucked up," you said, panting.

"You've fucked up. Now less fucking up, agent."

If looks could kill, you would have set Commander Reyes on fire with your eyes. As it was, you trudged back over to Genji, well-aware that the rest of the class was watching you.

"Hajime," Genji murmured. He came at you, modified speed. You made sure only to wear the basic finger tips when you sparred. But you could use them at full power on Genji. With your right hand, you batted away his strikes. You flattened your left hand into a blade and slammed it into Genji's faceplate, metal fingers your point of contact.

Genji's head snapped back and you lunged forward, driving your elbow into his neck. Genji staggered, and faster than your eyes could track, he struck back. The air in your lungs suddenly gone and you were dropping.

Oh good, it was his flesh fist that he'd gut-punched you with. You'd probably survive that. You laid there, gurgling unpleasantly.

"Are you all right?" Genji asked.
You glared up at him. Air didn't seem to be passing through you properly.

"Well, that wasn't as pathetic as before," Commander Reyes said, bending over you. He might have been concerned, but he might have been laughing at you too. "Do we need to get Angela in here?"

"I'm fine. Just really loving these mats," you wheezed, your voice not quite right.

"Sorry," Genji said, offering you his hand. "You caught me by surprise. Good job." Of course, the more predictable moves only got you thrown which was arguably better than gut-punched. There really was no winning.

Your room was too quiet. Shin hadn't been loud, he provided just enough noise to lull you to sleep. The 9th Circle had shitty ventilation and the fans were always running. The HQ was too quiet. You put on an extra hoodie, wrapped yourself in a blanket, and headed out to the rec room.

It was the early AM. After nodding at the few people who were up, you sat down on the couch, with the TV on, and promptly fell asleep. Even with people talking and a siren going off in the background, it was the best rest you'd had in awhile.

You made it to Commander Reyes' office early and found a flagged message from Winston. Torby had gotten a hit. The trigger assembly was pretty unique, and Neostratum Industries, a startup, held the patent.

The morning revolved around researching Neostratum Industries. Small, Belgian, and otherwise inconsequential, you were finding it very hard to figure out who exactly owned it. Genji was the better forensic accountant, for some reason, he knew all sorts of tricks that unsavory types used to hide their money. You decided you didn't need to know the reason.

Rubbing your forehead, you realized Genji would be the better person for this and switched over to Commander Reyes' workload. Mission authorizations, requisitions, transfer orders. Most had been approved, and filed those. You skimmed them, some of them sounding unfamiliar. Commander Reyes didn't tell you everything, but you'd begun to form a good picture of what kind of ops he was running. Stings, busts, honeytraps, blackmail, the occasional termination with extreme prejudice, but some of these... You frowned. There was the abduction of a hostile UN ambassador's infant daughter. That didn't sit right.

"Problems, agent?" Commander Reyes shut the door behind him.

You looked around. "I...Did you authorize this mission, Gabriel?"

Gabriel raised a brow at you and read the file. "Do you see my signature?"

"I didn't get that far," you admitted. "Sorry."

He flipped it so you could see the blank line. "It's a proposal. Ops has laid out the plan. But I haven't given the go ahead."

"Are you going to?" You asked.
"If necessary," he said, giving you a hard look. "But the situation hasn't gotten that far and I am curious how this ended up on my desk."

"It was there with the ones that had already been approved." You showed him the stack of unsigned forms. "Sorry, I'm trying to keep up with your workload, I just-"

Gabriel crossed his arms. "This isn't the first time this has happened, Lucky."

"I'm sorry, I-"

"No. Not you," he growled. "There have been requisitions and missions I haven't authorized or even talked about getting pushed through or showing up in interesting places. I had to recall Jesse from Paris a month ago, because someone tacked on additional mission parameters and he wasn't happy."

It wasn't just the 9th Circle. Someone was actively sabotaging Blackwatch. "So someone is trying to make you look bad or-"

"Or has their own agenda, yeah." Gabriel took his cap off and roughly combed his curls. "It's not happening frequently, but I know I'm not imagining it. Can't seem to trace these back to anyone. I need you to keep a closer eye on things, then. I'll talk to Jack."

"How am I supposed to know which ones are wrong?"

Gabriel laughed sharply. "How'd you pick that one out?"

"It was...overkill," you said.

"They all have been," he said darkly. "With the potential to blow up in our faces."

Overwatch HQ had a few nondenominational chapels and multiple quiet rooms for "meditation." You weren't comfortable with any of them. Captain Patel had her own way of worship that centered around battle and Durga. Shin had half-jokingly explained to you that all Japanese people are born Shinto and die Buddhist. Valdez had been Catholic. Lao was an athiest. Rivka was a self-described secular Jew. You weren't sure what Simon or Nwazue believed. And you weren't exactly comfortable attending a bunch of services for things you didn't believe in or pretend to understand.

There was a memorial wall outside for all of Overwatch's fallen. Sometimes, early in the morning or late at night, you'd go out there and burn incense. It was a small thing. There was no gravesite. There was no funeral or wake. This, and revenge were all you could give.

You trudged outside, hating every inch of snow. It was pretty enough, but after the 9th Circle you would never like cold weather. You knelt by the wall, planting the joss stick in the snow. The smoke was heavy, not to your liking, but it seemed proper.

"Aishani would've like that."

You nearly fell over. Commander Morrison was on your left only a few yards away. He was in full blue overcoat and eyepiece. You hadn't even seen him in the shadows. Some secret
agent you were.

You exhaled slowly. "I like to think so, sir."

Shin would have laughed at you. He was irreverent, always said he'd be reincarnated as something fast and cute: a rabbit, an owl, maybe a ferret. It was endearing that he didn't choose the fiercest or the biggest creatures.

You had looked up the Durga Shatru-Shanti, that last prayer Captain Patel said when you left her. It was a mantra that was supposed to protect one from their enemies. For all the good it did her. A vicious streak of emotion bubbled up in your chest.

"These rituals for the dead, they're really for us," Commander Morrison said. "They're how we come to terms with it."

"Yes sir." You knew that. Just like you knew Captain Patel wasn't really praying for her own deliverance. Just like you knew she didn't expect the mantra to protect her. Just like you knew your anger was broken thing, lashing out because it hurt, not because it was right.

"I knew Aishani," Commander Morrison said. "And I knew her well enough to say she was at peace with her decision."

You bit your lip, wishing he would mind his own business. The Strike Commander may have known Captain Patel better than you did, but this was between you and the dead. "She might have been OK with it," you said, not looking at him. "But that doesn't mean the rest of us are."

"No," he said. "It doesn't. And that's something we all have to come to terms with. Good night, agent."

You stayed on your knees in front of the memorial, listening till the crunch of snow beneath his boots faded into the distance.

He was right of course. But that didn't make it any easier.

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You sat in Winston's office, off the lab eating a peanut butter and honey sandwiches. You'd made them before coming down. "We're having security breaches," you told him. "Someone's modifying mission assignments."

Winston stopped mid-bite. "Are you sure you should be telling me this?"

"I don't know how they're doing it. And while we have decent techs, I don't know them well enough to trust them, and I feel like our hackers are only so-so or untrustworthy. I'm getting hard copies delivered to the office, so it's got to be a network breach of some sort." Or you would at least like to rule that out before you started a molehunt.

"Does Commander Reyes know?"

"Yeah. I'm part of the "safety net." But I'd like to figure out how they're doing it. And maybe upgrade some of Blackwatch's systems."
"I have offered. Commander Reyes has made it abundantly clear that he doesn't want me uh "monkeying around" his computers. He would have to be "bananas" to let me go "apeshit" on his system."

You winced. "He really said it like that, didn't he? God, Gabriel is such a dick." You put your head down on Winston's desk. "Sorry."

"Why are you apologizing for him?" He paused. "You call him by his first name?"

"Privately and in a platonic way," you said. "I'm not apologizing for him. I'm apologizing because I'm going to put in a request to borrow you."

"Lucky-"

"Please." You swallowed. "There's more at stake than just making Commander Reyes or Blackwatch look bad."

Winston adjusted his glasses. Those big yellow eyes focused on your face. "Black Base Delta wasn't an accident, was it?"

"Aw fuck, you haven't been briefed? And they still had you look at pulse rifle? What the fuck?" Gabriel obviously didn't like Winston or Torby. But you needed their help on this. "I'm going to go talk to Captain Amari and Commander Reyes."

"Do you mind leaving the sandwiches?" Winston asked.

"You what?" Commander Reyes' sat at his desk, expression was thunderous.

"Requesting Winston and Lindholm be fully briefed and used as resources in tracking down the origins of our attackers, sir." You stood up straight, saluting as hard as you could. Captain Amari sat at your desk, observing. "Secondly, requesting Winston be brought in to upgrade our systems."

"I don't need a monkey to fix my computers, agent. We have contractors and techs that do just fine."

"Respectfully disagreeing sir. We have so far been unable to trace the origins of the security breaches. Bringing in a specialist might help eliminate network vulnerabilities, and let us focus on potential moles. Winston has already been partially briefed on the emergence of the pulse rifle and maintains Overwatch's mainframe. He is the logical choice, sir."

Commander Reyes gave you his full officer glare. If you'd actually done something wrong, you'd be quaking in your boots. But you hadn't, so you met his gaze.

"Denied," he said, drawing the word out. The bastard was enjoying this.

"Sir-"

"No."

"Sir-" You tried again.
"No."

"Gabriel!" You slammed your palms on his desk. "You're being an ass! I'm only one agent and while Jesse and Genji are great, I need tech support and I need people we can trust! Are you just setting me up to fail?"

"Get a hold of yourself, agent," he said sharply. "You are out of line."

You jerked back as if slapped.

"You are dismissed," he said.

You stalked out of the office.

"That went well," Ana said, resting her boots on your desk. "Am I supposed to write her up for insubordination?"

Gabriel looked up fuming. "It's not about the computers, Ana. I am well aware of the problem. I'm not ignoring it."

"Your house, your rules," she said. "But for the record, I agree with her proposal. Whatever your problem with him, Winston is an impeccable engineer. It was good of her to have a plan ready, wasn't it? Shows initiative. Certainly saved you some time and effort. I heard she was bribing him with sandwiches. Smart move."

"I've been collecting the mis-fires. There's a pattern, but I'm not seeing it. I need to get a few more to pin down the angle."

"Are you willing to risk one of these more...reckless missions going through?" Ana studied the ceiling.

"We'll just be more diligent."

"If they're electronically transmitted? Because it could anything from your network to your people to your encryption. Something is going wrong, Gabriel. Once was a warning. Six times is serious. This is something you need to talk to Jack about."

"I'll handle it, Ana. I just need a little more time to rule out certain possibilities." He paused. "You going to run to Jack with this?"

"Handle it, Gabriel," she said. "And I won't need to."

You met Jesse on the mat. "Now sugarpie, remember which fingers you're wearing."
"Don't want to talk," you said, tapping your basic tips. "Let's go."

Jesse laughed. "Commander finally pissed you off, huh? It happens to us all." He gave an easy smile and dodged your front kick. You followed through with a roundhouse, grazing his hip. "Better get used to it."

"Don't want to talk, Jesse."

"Don't be like that, huckleberry," he said. "Don't you want to hear my advice?"

"Don't want to talk," you hissed.

"Then don't." Jesse lunged forward and bopped you lightly on the nose, before dancing back out of your range. "Listen here. The commander's stubborn. You ain't gonna get nowhere hitting him head-on."

"I have before," you snarled.

"Well, you're special. But if the commander really doesn't want to do something, good luck moving him. The man's a mule in the mud."

"What?" You dropped your guard and stared at Jesse. He swept your feet out from under you, grinning as you landed flat on your back. "Damnit Jesse!"

"You gotta be smart, Lucky Strike." He held his hand out and you took it. "You turn this into a fight, and you won't win."

"So there should be begging and manipulation?"

"This ain't Sunday school, Lucky. This is Blackwatch."

---

Genji was in Belgium, tracking down whoever ran Neostratum Industries. Jesse was chasing another lead in Cuba.

Captain Amari did not write you up for anything. She just served you tea and told you to try another angle. You had one, but you didn't like it. So you waited, keeping Winston sweet with assorted peanut butter desserts. You weren't running goods any more; you didn't have the time. But you still liked getting presents, or bribes, for your coworkers. It kept the working relationship smooth.

Jesse's idea was passive-aggressive to the extreme, but fell just short of unethical. You were the only one paying the cost though, so it didn't matter.

You went through Gabriel's papers, carefully picking out the questionable ones. There were a lot. And if you wanted to be honest, you could guess that half of them were legit. But the language was ambiguous and you had to make a point.

You went over each document with a fine toothed comb. You circled questionable methods, orders, and requests. The stack on his desk piled up. You'd found at least two documents, one an order for a political assassination in Indonesia, the other a proposal to increase the budget by forming an alliance with Vishkar. You made a note to track down whoever
suggested that one. It was ridiculous.

Winston was sorting through the wreckage of the 9th Circle. He called it Black Base Delta, but he might have been the only one who got the nickname. The explosives were military grade, but not an uncommon formulation.

Your eyelids were heavy and you drowsed, knowing if you fell asleep at your desk, you'd wake up with terrible neck pain. A bad choice since you had hand-to-hand practice tomorrow.

You woke up to Commander Reyes coming into the office. You lifted your head off the desk, ignored him, and went right back to paperwork. Once you had finished, you set the stack on his desk.

"Questionable activities marked and noted, sir." You were keeping it formal now. Because he'd set the boundaries again. He was Commander Reyes. You were just an agent. It wasn't emotional blackmail, you told yourself. You thought the two of you were friends. He'd pulled rank and shut down that assumption. You were respecting that.

He nodded tersely and you went back to your desk to review Genji's incoming report. Genji had attached photographs. The CEO of Neostratum Industries was a brown haired man with a beard. More interestingly, he was meeting with a red-headed man. You studied that face. It was familiar. Add 10 years. Change the hair color to brown. Put on another thirty pounds: It was former base Commander Gleeson, looking awfully young and spry for a dead man. He couldn't have afforded the youth-restoring gene therapy on a base commander's salary either.

You didn't hesitate. You sent Genji the order. "Keep him under surveillance. Requesting extraction."

You wrote up the report and forwarded it to Commander Reyes.

It was your third day of sleeping in the office. Commander Reyes was only speaking with you to issue orders. You were steadily losing steam, verifying every document that crossed his desk.

Captain Amari stopped by with tea.

"You look rough, agent."

"It doesn't matter how I look," you said dryly. "I've got work to do."

"This seems petty," she said.

"Petty is a proud Blackwatch trait, ma'am. We follow our leadership in lockstep."

Captain Amari covered her mouth at that response. "McCree and Torby are betting on who will crumble first."

You blinked.
"The odds are against you, Lucky Strike," she said mildly. "But that's nothing new, is it?"

"Just don't let the commander know. It will only make him dig in his heels."
"Mum's the word," she said, leaving you a thermos of tea and some dry biscuits.

You missed Captain Patel, but Captain Amari made it easier. You missed Shin, and there was no easy replacement for that either. You'd try out the vibrator soon. Really. Except then you'd have to tell Torby and Angela about it and that was going to be so awkward.

It wasn't your diligence that turned the tide. You fucked up. You missed one. You shouldn't have been trusted. To be fair, you'd been juggling training, administrative duties, extra verification, and Operation Shit Spiders. It had been a miserable week in Commander Reyes' office. No friendly conversation. No late night kitchen runs.

Commander Reyes sat at his desk, holding a printed copy of a mission proposal. He silently handed it to you.

"I stopped it before transmission," he said. Captain Amari was there sipping tea. Her expression was politely blank.

"I'm sorry, sir," you said.

"Was this what you wanted?" Commander Reyes growled. "What exactly did you plan?"

"No sir," you said. You met his eyes, jaw set defiantly. "No sir. My plan was to show you how serious I was and impress you with my diligence." You swallowed. "Obviously, it didn't work, sir."

"Hmph."

You could feel him studying you for any deceit. You met his eyes with no trouble. "Are you asking for my resignation?"

"That is falling on your own sword, agent," he said. "We don't do that here." He brought up a chart on his tablet. It looked like he'd been tracking all unauthorized documents and narrowing down changes and timing. "The misprinted physical deliveries have come to a trickle. Probably because they aren't getting through."

That was good.

"But despite me having our technicians run all sorts of diagnostics, the electronic copies of our documents are being altered." Commander Reyes glared at you. "I needed extra time to verify that our servers weren't trustworthy and to pinpoint patterns between alterations."

You stared at him.

"We can initiate your plan," he said for your poor frazzled brain. "You can bring in the barrel of monkeys."

You sagged in relief. "Thank you sir."

"Ana, can you leave us?"

"I'll deliver the happy news," she said without inflection. But she patted you on the back as
"You're a stubborn idiot," he said once the door was shut.

"I am what I am, sir." You emphasized his title, because petty was a Blackwatch trait.

"You don't." He huffed a breath, rolling his eyes. "Dios mio. That's why you're so worked up. Because I pulled rank."

"We're either friends or we aren't, sir. I'm trying to respect your rules, but it doesn't work when you change them on me."

Gabriel uncrossed his arms. "Friends, huh?"

It was a long beat. How else could you describe it? You wouldn't have survived without him and vice-versa. There was something there. An affection? A respect? An understanding? There was trust. There was a bond. You just couldn't put it into words.

"If we were enemies I would have stabbed you by now," you said, instead of talking about feelings. "In the neck."

"You and your vampire instinct."

You shrugged.

"Friends then," he said, testing the word.

"We weren't friends before?" You shook your head, a stone in your stomach. Maybe it was better not to talk to him about it.

"Please stop giving me that hangdog look. It's awful."

"It's my face."

"I was...unfair. Sorry." He took his beanie off, fingers working through his hair. He focused on a specific spot on the wall. "I have carne asada marinating. Get your work done and I'll make some tonight. We can eat it in the office."

"OK," you said, because that was a bigger apology than you expected and because maybe Gabriel was just as emotionally stunted as you. "Thank you."

"You get to deal with the monkey," Gabriel said abruptly.

Gabriel's carne asada fries were delicious. You slept in the rec room again. Things were moving in the right direction. Torby and Winston were already revamping the entire system.

Torby designed you more blades, the originals were for slashing. These were thicker, for thrusting attacks. Then he casually asked you about the vibrator, smile shrewd. You still hadn't used it.
Then you got the call: Genji was on his way back with Gleeson in tow.

You met Jesse in the interrogation wing late in the evening. He was still in uniform and his smile was grim.

"You eaten?"

"A couple hours ago."

"That should be ok. There are barf bags in the observation room, if you need'em."

You took a deep breath. "Jesse McCree, it sounds like you're trying to scare me."

"Friendly warning. Commander verified your target is who you say he is." He squinted at you. "And if that's the case, I guess you won't mind how messy it gets."

You've seen some shit. But you've never been a big fan of torture. You thought about skipping it and asking for the transcript, but that didn't seem right.

This time you were on the other side of the glass. The polygraph wasn't torture, but it was an interrogation. This was an enhanced version. Jesse leaned against the wall. You pulled up a chair.

Gabriel was already at work. "You look good for a dead man, Gleeson."

"It's not what it looks like, Commander," Gleeson gibbered. "I barely escaped with my life. We were betrayed."

"I noticed," Gabriel said. He moved like predator, all swagger and anticipation. He was fast, maybe faster than Genji. "You've seen my work Gleeson. Cut the shit."

"It wasn't me!" Gleeson screeched.

"Wrong answer," Gabriel murmured and picked up the bolt cutters.

You clenched your left fist as Gabriel started with his left hand. He looked at the window, smiled fiercely, and cut off Gleeson's index finger. Your own stubs twinged, but you didn't look away.

You needed reinforced gloves to keep your fingertips from gouging your palms. You'd ask Torby about it later.

Gleeson screamed. "Orders! I had orders!"

"From who?"

"I thought it was Morrison," he sobbed.

Gabriel bared his teeth. "Oh?"

"Upper brass, higher than you. Everyone knows you resent Morrison for usurping you! He was just pre-empting you!"

Gabriel cut off his middle finger, the sound of snapping bone turning your stomach. "Not buying it. Talon was involved."
Gleeson screamed. It made your stomach clench.

"Try again."

"I wouldn't lie to you, Reyes! Talon mercs were the bullet, someone higher up was the trigger!"

Gabriel paused, watching the blood pour out of Gleeson's finger stubs. "Names, Gleeson."

"I don't know any!" Off went the ring finger and you closed your eyes for a moment, centering yourself. Those weren't your fingers. Yours went all at once and you didn't even notice. It was completely different.

"Wrong answer," Gabriel purred. He held up Gleeson's left hand so the man could see the damage. "What was the plan for the base?"

"There was data - all gone now. It didn't get backed up. Capturing you was a bonus! They thought they could turn you. They still want you. Morrison's too idealistic to play their game, but you-" Gleeson began to laugh wildly.

Gabriel rolled his eyes. "What kind of data?" Gabriel put the bolt cutters down. "I'm thinking I want to move to softer tissue now, cockless wonder."

Gleeson babbled everything he knew. He had a few helpers in the base. He didn't know if any survived. The data was what needed to be destroyed. He had no idea what it was. UN stuff, above his pay grade. There were sympathizers in both Blackwatch and Overwatch. He didn't know names. He didn't know where the gun came from.

Gabriel cut him anyway. You didn't throw up. The fingers left you with the most visceral sensation; everything else was minor. Gleeson was partially responsible for everything. You'd lost your friends, your lover, and your home. And through it all Gabriel smiled viciously. Or was he Commander Reyes? The line was getting blurred. He was Commander Gabriel Reyes and while you knew the protocol of how to address him, you weren't sure how to think of him any more. The significance of the fingers hadn't been lost on you, though the meaning was less clear.

Gabriel asked questions. Gleeson gave answers. And you watched.

"You want in, Lucky Strike?" Gabriel asked, looking at the mirrored glass.

You stood.

"You don't have to go in there," Jesse said. His jaw was clenched. "Commander makes everyone sit in the first time their mission takes them this far. Makes sure they understand what they're doing when they take on this kind of job," Jesse took his hat off. "But you don't have to join in."

"I understand, Jesse."

"No you don't, Lucky. He's not normally like this."

It was hazy, like a dream. You practically floated into the interrogation room. It stunk of blood, offal, and human waste. Gleeson had voided himself.

"Pleasepleaseplease," Gleeson begged. Blood and foam flecked his face. His eyes were wild like a fear-maddened horse. You didn't look at his abdomen. Gabriel had made a mess of it.
"Names," Gabriel said.

"Petras! Viali! Ngumi! Maximillien! Shimada! Morrison! Nguyen!"

Every time Gleeson mentioned Commander Morrison, you could see the darkness jolt through Gabriel's eyes.

"You think he's got anything else useful?"

"No," Gabriel said. "And I don't care. He got Aishani killed."

"Do you remember me, Gleeson?"

"Pleaseohpleaseohpleaseohpleaseohgodno."

Of course not, you weren't important enough to remember. There were a lot of things you wanted to say. Gabriel gestured at the tray of instruments, his expression almost beatific. There were a lot of things Gleeson deserved. For Captain Patel. For Shin. You were no angel. In that room of revelation and suffering, the ones you couldn't save lingered. You saw Gabriel there, stained with blood, his mind in a dark place. He was here with you now. He was alive.

You examined the tools, mostly out of morbid curiosity. They didn't disturb you, not like they should have.

"We don't need him any more?"

"He's all yours," Gabriel murmured, so close you could feel his heat radiating on your back. It was a comforting, even in a room like this.

You drew your tanto and you cut Gleeson's throat. "We have enough nightmares," you told Gabriel. "We don't need more."

Gabriel stared down at you, his pupils too wide, his nostrils flared. "We're not saints, Lucky. Gleeson knew better. He fucking knew. Actions have consequences."

Gleeson was a bloody mess and he got what he deserved. Actions did have consequences. Neither you nor Gabriel needed to spend extra time torturing people: you didn't need to pay for that. You wiped your blade on a towel. "I think you're freaking Jesse out," you said. "You want me to call the Strike Commander or Captain Amari?"

"I'm fine, Lucky," he said, voice tight. "You're bleeding."

You looked down at your left hand. "I uh...still have control issues." You didn't tell him that watching him amputate Gleeson's fingers disturbed you more than anything else you'd seen.

Gabriel looked down at you, his arms bloody. It wasn't a big room, and you should have been uneasy being so close to him in this state. But it was Gabriel. He had carried you through the snow. He had given you the clothes off his back. There were days you were furious at him, but you weren't afraid of him.

"Can I get you some whiskey? Water?"

"Jesse's probably already called Ana." He wiped sweat from his brow, smearing blood across his face. "I don't normally get this carried away."

"This was personal," you agreed. You tentatively reached up and patted his back with your
good hand.

He looked down at you skeptically. "You do realize you're trying to comfort me after I tortured a guy past sanity?"

"Wow, when you put it like that, it sounds bad. And like aftercare. Ugh."

"You got a problem with aftercare?" Gabriel raised a brow.

"In this context, yes." But you didn't pull your hand away. "Come on, you need to get cleaned up. I hear the blood of traitors causes cancer," you said leading him out of the room.

Strike Commander Jack Morrison leaned against the wall outside. He was dressed down in a black t-shirt and cargo pants, his bright eyes on Gabriel. There was an intensity to him you hadn't seen in prior visits. He crossed over in two steps, his presence filling the hall. Your theory was right; he was one of those who could turn it on and off.

"Gabe," he said like it was air in his lungs.

"Jack," Gabriel murmured.

"You OK?"

"Fine."

"Got something right here," Jack tapped his temple.

"I know. Gonna have to shower."

There was rhythm to their responses, the words not mattering as much as the eye contact. Morrison surveyed Gabriel like he was looking for cracks in his armor. Gabriel stared at Jack like he was the only lifeline in a storm.

You sidled away, feeling very much like you were intruding. In an outer hall, you ran into Jesse.

"You OK, Lucky?" He didn't try to see what was going on in the hall behind you.

"Oddly OK." You managed a smile. "I'm uh not sure what to say about that."

"Don't talk about it if you don't want to," Jesse said. "I thought it was going to get worse." He had a funny look on his face. "Good de-escalation."

"Not going to lie, the finger thing made me really uncomfortable."

Jesse nodded. "Yep. You're pretty handy with a knife."

"I don't go looking for fair fights," you said. "I don't know if I can get to sleep now. I'm going to take a shower and have a drink. Maybe not in that order."

"You want company?" Jesse didn't look at you. "For the drink, Lucky. Seeing that shit doesn't make me wanna tumble anyone."

"Yeah," you agreed.

You showered, cleaned your knife, and met Jesse in his room.
Jesse had a couch. You sat down. He took a swig of whiskey, then handed you the bottle.

"I'm not squeamish, Lucky."

"I know." Loveable as Jesse was, he was a killer for Blackwatch.

"I don't like seeing him like that. It's...disturbing."

"I got that," you said, taking another drink.

"The commander's a stand-up guy. Just wish he'd stop digging his grave," Jesse said.

"You really care about him," you said and passed back the bottle. It was a little surprising. Jesse was personable about everyone, but you didn't take his declarations of affection seriously.

"Yeah. He taught me a lot." Jesse sighed. "He didn't used to be this...tightly wound. He was still a bastard, but he wasn't so torn up."

"You don't have any lingering resentment for him making you work for Blackwatch?"

"Nah. Used to," he said. "But it's been a good place for me. The only complaint I have is Captain Amari won't give me a second look."

"She has a daughter," you said. "Between soldiering and mothering, she probably doesn't have time for ..."

"I know," Jesse said. "I know."

"Sorry, I'm not good at saying the right thing." You took a big swallow of whiskey. "Sorry."

"I really like her, Lucky. She's fierce. She shoots straight. She is damn pretty like you said." His expression grew dreamy.

"Oh god, don't remind me. I was delirious."

"You were cute," Jesse laughed. "Crazy girl wearing Commander Reye's clothes and spouting nonsense." He dropped onto his bed laughing. "And shit spiders. Oh darling, that's the best report opening ever."

You sat on Jesse's couch, drinking. It was kind of surprising that you hadn't been drinking more. Your shrink said it wasn't a healthy outlet, and Gabriel kept you so busy, you didn't really have time to self-medicate. But you felt warm and Jesse was muttering about how pretty Captain Amari was. Smiling, you put the bottle down and curled up on the couch.

"We should build blanket forts with Genji," you said.

"I don't know if that would translate right for him," Jesse said.

"OK, we should do this with Genji. With movies or popcorn."

"Get drunk and babble?"

"Yeah." You grinned.

"OK," Jesse said. "We'll ask him next time."
It was Jack that helped him into the shower, stripping the bloody clothes off, adjusting the water, lathering up the washcloth. He was tired now, the anger a dull ache underneath the crushing weariness. Gabriel stood in the shower letting the hot water pour over him.

She should have left it alone. Gleeson deserved more than what Gabriel gave him. And what Gleeson kept saying about Jack... He could have made it last for a very long time.

_We have enough nightmares._

Gabriel sighed, watching the bloody water circle the drain. That was true too. It was Gabriel's duty to punish Gleeson for his sins. But it was Lucky's right to decide Gleeson's fate. Was she even cut out for Blackwatch? Maybe. It hadn't been blustery morality or squeamishness that drove her to give Gleeson the coup de grace. Gabriel had really expected her to cut and run. She should've been scared to see him so close to the edge. She'd made the kill for him. Because he was a man who couldn't let things go. He would have wrung every drop of blood out of Gleeson and come back for the marrow. This was a thing they both understood. She'd survived her friends. He'd let down his subordinates. Aishani was dead. They had a responsibility to fix things. It was a fucking mess. And then the damn ingrate called Jack, of all people, to see him like this.

"Gabe?" Jack's voice echoed in the bathroom.

"Still here," Gabriel muttered. "No window to throw myself out of."

Jack pulled back the curtain. He was nude, cock semi-hard, and he stepped into the shower behind Gabriel.

"Want me to wash your back?" Jack moved with confidence, but his voice gave away his unease. They hadn't been like this for awhile. Not since before the demotion. Things had been better with Jack since Black Base Delta. But they hadn't progressed beyond an occasional kiss or shared meal. Despite Aishani's words, he hadn't let himself completely forget that things between them were complicated.

But Jack was here right now, when he needed him. That counted for something.

"Yeah," Gabriel said, his voice rough. "Thanks."

Jack's hands moved gently across his back and Gabriel leaned into the touch.

"I know you don't like me to watch you-"

"I know you don't like to watch me-"

They stopped, simultaneous in their confessions.

"You first," Gabriel said.

"I'm sorry," Jack said, resting his forehead between Gabriel's shoulder blades. "About everything."

"Gotta be more specific," Gabriel said because "everything" was a copout. And maybe he
was just a little petty.

"I'm sorry about your people. I'm sorry about Aishani. I'm sorry you're the one who's stuck making all these impossible calls. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I'm sorry I was blind." The apologies poured from Jack's lips and melted into the steam of the shower, fogging up the world around them.

Gabriel turned around. Jack's eyes were the blue of the ocean, and looking into them was always such a shock.

"I want to do better," Jack said. "I miss you."

Gabriel slumped against the wall. "You picked a hell of a time to say this."

"There was never going to be a good time, Gabe."

He remembered Lieutenant Sato laughing as he'd cleaned up Lucky's bloody face on the mat. He remembered the emptiness in Lucky's voice when she talked about her dead lover. Those encounters were only hours apart. Jack's words, they didn't fix everything. They didn't even fix the things Jack himself had broken. But they were a start. He just had to get to the next step.

"Yeah," Gabriel said. "I miss you too."

Jack's hand brushed his temple. "You still got something right here." He began to rub the area with a soapy washcloth. "How does this even happen?"

"I need you to help me see myself," Gabriel said after Jack was done. "I get too caught up sometimes."

"I know," Jack said. "Same here."
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was the best night’s sleep you’d gotten since arriving in Switzerland. And maybe it was because you’d killed a bad guy last night. Despite Jesse’s couch being lumpy and smelling like liquor, you’d been comfortable. You awoke to Jesse’s alarm.

"I’m getting changed then hitting the office. Thanks for drinks," you told him.

You got a grunt in response. You flitted out of Jesse's room, only to be met by Genji. He held very still.

"Nothing happened," you said. "I slept on the couch."

"As you say," he said.

You sighed. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"As you say."

"Dick," you muttered. "We're not inviting you to the next one then. No movies, or hair styling, or popcorn for you."

Gabriel was in a strangely cheerful mood. Actually, scratch that. You knew why he was cheerful. There was nothing strange about it. Someone got laid. And it wasn't you. Happy Gabriel in the office was a blessing. Happy Gabriel in combat classes was a nightmare.

You were paired off against Genji. Why were you always with Genji? It was the fingers, you realized. Or Gabriel liked watching you get tossed around like a frisbee. Genji had started blocking anything from your left side. It was kind of unfair.

Jesse had been paired up with a hacker called Riggs, long black hair, thin straight nose, serious air. Riggs was cute, you decided. And he'd never been a jerk to you.

"Seriously," you told Genji. "After the interrogation, we were both drained. There was nothing except him pining after you-know-who. And then we talked about cool slumber party ideas."

"I am flattered," Genji said. "But I am afraid that I am not interested in you in that way."

You face palmed. "You've been trolling me this whole time, haven't you?"

"As you say," he agreed.

"Strike Commander, what a surprise," Gabriel said brightly. Everyone straightened up.

Morrison had entered the gym wearing blue sweats. They matched his eyes. He had to be
"At ease," he said, warmth and authority coming from his voice in equal measures. "Gabriel," he said, and you had vivid memories of last night. "Mind if I join in?"

"Not at all. Genji, come here for this demo." That wasn't unusual. Genji could take the most hits out of all of you. "Lucky," Gabriel practically purred. "Why don't you partner with the Strike Commander?"

Ha ha ha. Fuck. "Sure thing," you said, your enthusiasm a little strained. You remember Captain Patel's kicks. Morrison's were going to be worse.

Morrison strode up to you and extended his hand. "Call me, Jack." You could feel everyone watching. Not because you were interesting, but because it was the Jack Morrison. You shook, and he was so good-natured he gave you a well-measured firm handshake that didn't even make your bones creak.

You were warmed up and you watched with slight horror as Gabriel wrestled Genji to the mat and then pinned him to the ground. "Less throws, more pins. Begin." He grinned in your direction.

You'd been nice to him last night. That was a mistake. Obviously. You didn't know if he was getting you back for killing Gleeson early or seeing the big sexy subtext between him and Jack, but he obviously had it out for you today.

Jack lunged at you, and you danced backward. His reach was farther than Genji's and you nearly took a foot to the stomach. He wasn't scrawny by any stretch of the imagination. Jack was all muscle, though not as bulky as Gabriel. And he was faster. You knew he was going easy on you, but you barely dodged a haymaker.

"Are we fighting or dancing?" Jack asked lazily.

Trick question! It was tag. You were running away in circles and Jack was chasing you. You feinted with your right hand and tried for a knife hand to his throat. He only clicked his tongue and knocked your hand away. He struck and you barely blocked his blow to the side of your head. Unfortunately, his legs were moving too and he did one of those dreaded leg sweeps. You hit the ground and rolled, barely dodging his mount.

Cocky bastard was grinning, his blonde hair not the least bit mussed. You hated him a little then, for being so happy and good-looking while kicking your ass. He tackled you, pinning you on your back underneath him, as he straddled you. He was heavier than he looked and you hooked his leg, trying to buck him off.

He just laughed, his hard body pressed against yours. You spun your hips trying to snap him off. He leaned forward, one of his hands wrapping around your throat. "Better think fast," he said lightly. And then he squeezed.

Your vision darkened. The world went silent.

He was going to kill you. He was going to choke the life out of you while straddling your hips. Captain Patel had stopped shooting and they'd already captured Gabriel.

You screamed, a feral sound ripped from you throat, your fingers prying his hand off your neck. You snapped your head up, aiming for the cyborg's nose. He grunted and you flipped him off you. You didn't feel your knife, so you punched him. There was already blood from the
headbutt, but that wasn't going to keep him down. So you had to hit him. A lot.

Two sets of hands dragged you off the cyborg and you thrashed.

"Easy sweetpea," a voice said. "We got you. Come on, Lucky. You're OK. It's OK."

And then you were yourself, Genji holding one arm, Jesse holding the other. Someone was laughing in the background. And when you looked down, you saw Strike Commander Jack Morrison, his eyes wide, blood gushing out of his nose. You might have split his lip too.

"Oh," you sagged, Genji and Jesse still holding you up. "Oh shit." The classroom was eerily quiet except the rough laughter coming from behind you. Gabriel stepped forward, mirth evident on his face, and offered Jack his hand.

"You OK, Jack?"

"A little shocked." Morrison tilted his head back, stausing the flow.

"Your face was pretty priceless."

"My face is pretty bloody." 

You flinched "I...uh...am so sorry." You had Jack Morrison's blood smeared on your knuckles. You sat there, forcing yourself to breathe normally. You were dead. You were kicked out. Then you were dead, because you'd just punched the Strike Commander in the face. Worse, you punched Gabriel's boyfriend in the face.

"I always knew you had it in you, Lucky. You think too much. You should be using more instinct." Gabriel paused. "Though I thought Genji would be the one to push you over the edge," he said. "Thanks, Jack."


Your brain stuttered.

Jesse and Genji released you.

"Class dismissed," Gabriel said. "Go get Jack some ice, Lucky."

Jack's expression was impossible for you to read, mostly because he was holding an icepack over his face.

"I'm really sorry, Commander Morrison," you said.

"I said call me "Jack," he muttered from behind the ice.

"It's a little blood, Lucky. It's not a big deal." The three of you were in Gabriel's office. Jack had stripped off his bloody shirt and was sitting in Gabriel's chair. You tried not to stare at his chest. But you kept sneaking glances. He was very toned, with a dusting of blonde hair and pink nipples.
"I'm fine," Jack said. "A little embarrassed, but this is nothing."

Gabriel sat on the desk and leaned over to kiss Jack. They looked good together. You felt heat traveling up your cheeks.

"She's called Lucky Strike for a reason," Gabriel smirked.

"Because I'm lucky, not skilled," you added.

"That didn't feel like luck," Jack said. "Forgot about your fingers."

"Sorry," you said again.

"Stop apologizing," Gabriel said. "It's annoying."

You sat on your desk. Jack tossed the ice pack in the trash and leaned against Gabriel.

"I didn't see what happened. What was the trigger?" Gabriel asked too casually.

"I uh...he had me by the throat and squeezed. I kind of blacked out, but more like...I don't know."

Jack frowned. "Has someone tried to strangle you before?"

"Yeah," you said. You had your right hand over your neck. "I didn't know I'd react that way."

"Talked to your shrink about it?" Gabriel asked.

"I honestly didn't know it was an issue. I mean, I've avoided a lot of different deaths; I don't have reactions to rocks, scorpions, or toasters."

Gabriel opened his mouth, then closed it again. He took another moment. "Triggers aren't always logical. I can only begin to guess yours. Cyborgs was the obvious one."

Your brow furrowed. "Is that why you put me with Genji?"

"You once killed eight people in a night," Gabriel said. "I'm only pairing you with experienced operatives. Genji is the best adapted to handle you if you freak out."

"I didn't do it bare-handed," you said.

"Taking a combat knife to a single cyborg is pretty impressive," Jack said. He looked comfortable in Gabriel's chair, almost boyish. "You did it to three."

You rubbed your face. He was making it sound more impressive than it actually was. "It wasn't a fair fight."

"So who tried to strangle you?" Gabriel asked.

"There was a smaller cyborg right before we got out of the base. You didn't see him, because the big guy was busy punching you."

Jack gripped Gabriel's thigh, his mouth pressed in a flat line. The expression gave his face a vicious cast. It was the eyes. His eyes went cold with a murderous anger you recognized. It hit you then that Jack Morrison really loved Gabriel.
"Yeah, saw it in the mission report. He had you flat on your back, but you managed to stab him."

"I cut my back drawing the knife," you said.

"I saw that firsthand," Gabriel said and it made you squirm. "Nasty little nick you had there."

You took a deep breath. "He took me down and decided I was your...mistress. Said he wanted to fuck me while he strangled me. Didn't have time, but he was pretty excited about whatever he could do. Captain Patel's gun had gone quiet. And I could hear the other guy just slugging you." You didn't remember the guy's whole face, just that lower jaw and neck. "I stabbed him through the throat." You mimicked a stabbing motion with your left hand, then turned in ninety degrees to simulate the twist. "Then I got behind the big guy and did the same thing."

Jack leaned forward, resting his chin on his hands. "You dragged Gabriel out?"

It was all the report, but there was something in Jack's eyes that you couldn't identify. But you understood he wanted to hear it from you firsthand, and maybe you owed him that much.

"I was hopped up on adrenaline, but he's heavy. I had a stolen headset and was tracking the countdown. Gabriel wouldn't get up, but he wanted to yell at me about not following orders. I didn't care, because Captain Patel told me to keep him alive. I couldn't get him completely clear of the blast zone though."

"You know, Gabriel came back with almost no shrapnel wounds," Jack said. "But you..." "Captain Patel told me to keep him alive," you said, looking at your desk. "I wasn't being heroic. Our attackers wanted him dead. They'd killed everyone else. I can be real petty. It was really a big "fuck you." That's all."

"Thank you for shielding me," Gabriel said. "You didn't mention that in your report."

They both watched you with some kind of fragile emotion you didn't want to think about and you felt the blood rushing to your cheeks. "There's no way to say something like that without sounding like you're bragging. Like "Oh look, I saved your life this many times. You owe me, pleb." After you carted me through the snow, I wasn't keeping tally."

"You're an idiot," Gabriel said gruffly. "Aishani was right. You're too stupid to be left to your own devices."

"Thank you for bringing him back," Jack said. He was really looking at you now, so very different from your first few meetings. You wondered if he was just talking about Black Base Delta. "I'm glad Gabriel has you to rely on." There was a tinge of pink in his cheeks and he was so pretty you couldn't look directly at him.

"You guys can't just go saying things like that," you muttered. "I'm not evolved enough to handle it."

"It's just good to know that deep down, Lucky Strike is mostly lizard brain," Gabriel smirked. "I'm also going to point out that my assistant can totally kick your new assistant's ass."

"Why are you so competitive?" Jack muttered. "I didn't even get to pick my assistant."

"Overwatch Barbie has it bad for Jack," Gabriel smirked.
"She's really efficient," Jack said weakly.

"She looks like Barbie. Complete WASP name too. She thinks that if she can just collate harder, she'll win his heart."

"Ainsley is very...earnest," Jack said, massaging his temples. "She's also Director Petras' niece. So if you see more of Jack around here, that's the reason." Gabriel exuded smug. You weren't exactly sure why he was so pleased with himself. The man was like a cat.

"Shall I requisition more chairs?"

"Make it a couch, with a fold-out bed."

"Really?" You weren't sure if you crammed enough incredulity into that one word, but you tried.

"Would you rather we used your desk?" Gabriel purred.

You worked your jaw, trying to make words come out. You managed a short chattering noise.

"He's kidding about the fold-out bed," Jack said. "We'd break it."

There were names to cross-check. After yesterday, you didn't think Jack would have betrayed Gabriel. Someone had to investigate, and it wasn't your place. You attached the Gleeson interrogation transcript and video to a message and sent it Lacroix. He was cleared for it.

You'd identified some of people Gleeson named. Antonio Vialli was a mega-rich CEO with family ties to the Camorra. You studied his picture. He was the one meeting Gleeson in Genji's surveillance photos.

Ngumi was Adhabu Ngumi AKA Doomfist, a vicious cyborg mercenary.

Anh Nguyen was a highly controversial nationalist and UN ambassador who seemed to have a massive grudge against Overwatch.

Shimada was a powerful Yakuza clan.

You cross-checked other Morrisons, but contextually, you knew Gleeson meant Jack.

And Petras? Well, Director Petras had been appointed by the UN. He was rarely at the HQ, mostly seen making statements to the UN. Jack was the Face. Gabriel was the Muscle. Petras was the Sphincter, pushing all the shit out. Or at least, that's how Gabriel described it.

"It looks like we have a fully automated science lab in Greenland." Gabriel said. They would be less secure than actual bases. You had to move fast.

"So we should ask Winston to mine the backups?"

"You ask the monkey," Gabriel said.
You rolled your eyes. "Why are you such a dick to him?"

Gabriel didn't look up from the desk, but you could feel his attention. "I'm not."

"You are."

Gabriel gave you a look. "Have you ever seen Planet of the Apes? Apes take over, enslave humanity, and are a general nuisance. Now Winston is apparently from a secret base on the moon and he's the only super smart gorilla that doesn't want to kill the humans and he coincidentally was able to build a rocket ship to carry him to earth. You buy that?"

When he put it that way...

"It's fine to be suspicious. I'm suspicious of everyone. Doesn't mean I'm a dick to them."

Gabriel snorted.

You paused. "Have you been reading his logs? There are a lot of anomalies in our mainframe. He's running a backtrace on the ones he can pry open." You stretched, feeling your lower back twinge. You'd been sitting too long. "We need better hackers. He's come up with a laundry list of troublesome behaviors."

"I know we need more trustworthy hackers. I'll look into."

"I've compiled a list of Gleeson's names with dossiers." You tapped your stylus against the desk. "He named Petras but..."

"Hard copy only, keep it off the books."

"I meant, which one? Yeah, I can see the politician sabotaging us, but there's a whole family of them. His niece could be fucking shit up in Jack's office. His brother has some pretty questionable financial holdings. His uncle-"

"All of them. Keep it quiet," Gabriel said. "Delegate it if you have to."

Genji was the best choice. You sent him and Winston their respective assignments.

"Vialli is the next link," you said.

"I'm on it." Gabriel looked up. "How do you feel about being on mission rotation?"

"...If it's combat, I'd strongly prefer someone I trust at my back." Word had gotten around that you'd "attacked" Jack. After that Jack made a point to be seen walking with you through the mess hall, chatting pleasantly about chili. He'd clapped you on the back and laughed when you told him that real chili didn't come from a can and what the hell was wrong with him? But you were still getting the cold shoulder from rank and file Overwatch agents.

Conversely, your fellow Blackwatch agents now thought you were insane, but competent. Apparently, everyone got beaten up by Genji. Not everyone got to punch Jack. They were getting used to you sleeping in the rec room. Sometimes you overhead things like "Who cares whom she's sleeping with? I'd sleep with the commander in a heartbeat!" and "She's obviously not sleeping with the boss, because she's on the couch all the time, hogging the throw pillows." Those statements were strangely validating.

"All right." Gabriel stood. "It's your turn to cook." He cracked his neck. "Jack's probably
You mentally cycled through your ingredients. "You think he'll like curry udon?" You'd have to put some aside for Genji too.

"Yeah," Gabriel said. "Make sure you do those soft-boiled eggs."

"You're awfully bossy," you said, a flicker of warmth in you chest.

"Because I'm the boss." He crossed his arms. "Deal with it."

You and Jesse ended up in Tokyo. There was a link in the Shimada connection that Gabriel wanted taken alive. A mid-level Yakuza boss, Kigarashi Fuma had been "vacationing" in Europe recently. Right now, he was staying at a fancy casino, eating gold-flecked sushi and cube-shaped melons.

"I'm just saying, we need jobs that give us those kind of vacation benefits," Jesse murmured, his hand around your waist. He wore a surprisingly nice black suit with a bolo tie and his signature hat. Your cherry red boots went thigh-high, covering your scars. The hem of your matching red dress barely brushed the tops of your boots. Even your gloves were red. Jesse looked like a business man. You looked like a fetish whore.

"I'm just saying, next time, you be the sex worker."

"You look good, baby," Jesse grinned. "You know the boss picked it out, not me, right?"

It was a struggle to keep your face vapid and smiling. But if you didn't, you might smear your lipstick. "Let's just get to the room, OK?"

"Did you pick up the wagashi already? I ain't fussy, but Genji-" Jesse asked, looking around.

"Yeah. Genji was pretty adamant that he wanted his fancy traditional desserts. I got all the stuff shipped out this afternoon. Not risking leaving it behind if this goes south."

"Maybe I should get Ana some tea."

"She'd like that," you said. "You should get her some wagashi too. They're supposed to go with tea. She'd probably have to invite you to eat some with her."

"Huh." Jesse smiled down at you. "You're good."

"I'm a sucker for lost causes."

Snorting, Jesse pushed you into the stairwell. You froze as he pinned you to the wall, his jaw grazing your neck.

"Grab my hair or something," he said. "Ow, like you're enjoying yourself, sweatpea."

"Sorry." You loosened your grip and stroked his hair while he planted the device. You'd hit two other elevators earlier. Here and the central elevator - the one Kigarashi was most
likely to take, were riskier.

The two of you stumbled out and to the elevator, your skirt sliding up too high. Jesse turned you away from him and pushed you against the elevator wall. His hips jerked against you and you yelped. "You're knocking it off kilter."

"Sorry honeypie," he grinned, burying his face in your hair. "I'm being convincing. Move your hips a little."

You acquiesced, wondering when you'd become a sex mime. Maybe that's what happened when you didn't get laid. You just went through the motions as a sad mockery of the real thing. You still hadn't worked up the nerve to use the finger vibrator. Not that you didn't have other toys, but you really didn't want to have that personalized product review conversation with Torby.

Jesse dragged you out of the elevator and the two of you stumbled past some startled looking men with elaborate tattoos. Yakuza. Jesse pushed you against the designated hotel room door, while fumbling with his keycard.

You moaned, and it came out stilted. Oh well, your role was a prostitute. You were supposed to fake it.

Jesse huffed into your neck and got the door open, quickly pushing you inside. He shut the door hard and then started laughing. "You sounded like a dying goat. Ain't no one thinking you're turned on."

"Shut up." You shook your head. "We're two floors under Kigarashi's suite. I'd rather take him out the window."

"We need him alive, Lucky. Stick to the plan."

You readjusted your weapons, wishing you could wear your combat gear instead. Your tanto was strapped to your thigh and covered by the boot.

"You should keep that outfit."

"Shut up, Jesse."

"No, really. It looks good on you. Commander has an eye for that kind of thing."

"I'm sure I'll have to use it if I'm undercover."

Jesse paused. "Morrison spends a lot more time in the office with you two."

"Petras' niece is his new assistant. Gabriel says she keeps throwing herself at Jack."

"You sure Morrison's not a little worried about how much time the Commander and his lovely assistant are spending together?"

"Considering, we're working and that he's there half the time, no." The thought had crossed your mind, but Jack never seemed displeased to see you. He could be faking, and the Strike Commander was a good actor, but your gut reaction was that he just liked being there, if only to get away from his assistant.

You didn't have any illusions about your ties to him. You were Gabriel's friend. Jack accepted you because of it and because you weren't in his direct chain of command. He was a
decent person and he would be friendly to you because of that. Nothing more, nothing less.

"It ain't awkward at all?" Jesse probed.

"Only where Gabriel talks about having sex on my desk. When they get all...affectionate, I just leave." You might have also booby-trapped your desk. "I mean, we're having a chili cook-off next week. You want in?"

"Hot damn, about time you picked something good to make!"

"...I thought you liked my cooking," you said, double-checking your fingertips.

"Of course I do, but chili. Chili! I make mine with lots of bourbon and porkbutt."

"Huh. OK. Well, whatever you make, I'm sure it will be better than Jack's. He said he was opening a can and adding cheese. I think he's joking, but...sometimes I can't tell."

"OK, as long as you're not stuck in some awkward love triangle."

Your heart twinged. You were stuck on something else. Shin had talked to you about Tokyo. There were places he'd wanted you to see. You couldn't remember them all. You'd gone to a shrine today and bumbled through a ritual prayer for the dead.

"I'm not over Shin," you said. "But I'm doing better. I can check out guys and not feel guilty. But my head isn't in that game." You checked your burner tablet. Patched into the security network, you found Kigarashi heading toward the elevators, one bodyguard at his heel.

Jesse adjusted his holster. "He's in place."

You and Jesse exited the hotel room. You took the fire escape two floors up, not encountering anyone. You leaned on Jesse, as the two of you waited for the elevator.

Ding.

You and Jesse stumbled inside, before Kigarashi and his bodyguard could get out. Jesse took the guard, driving his fist into the man's liver. You fell against Kigarashi, pressing your middle finger to his neck. You felt the needle pop through your glove and into his flesh. He gasped, stiffened, then fell against you.

"Hit it," Jesse said.

You activated the scramblers, shorting out localized surveillance. It was a casino. They'd rush to the vault first, giving you a clear exit route. You held Kigarashi against you, like you were helping his drugged ass out to his car. Jesse deposited the bodyguard in the stairwell. Then he came back to help you with Kigarashi. The fire escape door opened, siren disabled, to a side street. An SUV, keys in the ignition, awaited you. You and Jesse loaded Kigarashi into the back. Jesse secured the target. You drove out to the airfield.

All in all, it went smoothly.

Genji got to interrogate Kigarashi, and you didn't sit in. The transcripts would be enough.
You'd picked up so souvenirs in Japan and lots of snacks. Jesse had managed to wrangle an invite to tea after presenting both Captain Amari and the visiting Fareeha a beautifully wrapped box of wagarashi each. He hadn't liked the desserts one bit, and neither had Fareeha, but Captain Amari found them charming. She seemed to enjoy the tea Jesse got her too. Jesse was over the moon. You gave Fareeha some of your Meiji chocolates and said they were from Jesse. Because even if he didn't have a chance, you supported him.

You delivered candy to Torby and Angela, reporting that the injector had worked well. You asked for some kind of cap to keep from unintentionally triggering the mechanism when you were scrabbling around.

Torby grumbled, but he delivered one the next day.

You went all out for the chili cook-off. Little bread bowls, pepperjack cheese, sour cream. Cooking it the night before ensured it had time for the flavor to set. You used chunks of brisket and chuckeye in addition to coarse ground sirloin. The meat simmered till the fat would melt in your mouth. You would show Jack the power of seasonings: smoked salt, anchovies, adobo sauce, sherry, habanero peppers, cinnamon, chili powder, cumin, bay leaves, allspice...

The kitchen smelled delicious.

"You're definitely going to beat me," Jack said, as he came in. He was wearing his blue overcoat and eyepiece. Must be fresh from a mission. You didn't see Gabriel.

"That goes without saying. Chili doesn't come out of a can, Jack. That's not real chili. Whoever told you that lied." You might have raised your voice.

Jack grinned at you, his hair falling in his eyes. "I want to make an alliance. Gabriel and Jesse have formed one."

You scowled. "What?"

"Jesse made a smoker out of an empty oil drum. He's smoking a pork butt. Gabriel's making chorizo."

"Son of bitch!" You swore. "I totally saved his ass with Fareeha. And he didn't even offer me a spot."

Jack chuckled. "I can make light and fluffy cornbread. Just help me pick out the spices. All I have is taco seasoning in a packet."

You crossed your arms. "What else you got?"

"I don't know," Jack said with a shrug.

"You got any good booze?"

Jack snapped his fingers. "Yes. Wait, what do you need?"

"XO Cognac."

"Be right back." Jack flashed you a winning smile, perfect for a recruitment poster, and it might have melted part of your face. He was really too pretty.

You went back to stirring your chili. Fucking McCree. That traitor. You expected that
Jack was back in ten minutes. He'd shed the overcoat and eyepiece and his black turtleneck was skin tight, clinging to his broad chest and shoulders. More importantly, he had a large unopened bottle of XO cognac. "I get them as a "appreciation" gifts," he said almost apologetically.

"Gimme," you said, opened it, and sniffed. You poured yourself a small glass and tasted it. Oh yeah that was nice. Fuck you Jesse. "OK, I'm in."

"The cornbread's better fresh," he said. "But I'm good for it tomorrow."

The cognac was worth way more, even if he didn't deliver. You gave Jack instructions on white chili. He chopped the onions, garlic, and jalapenos. You got him some canned navy beans and added cumin and white pepper. You donated some sherry and chicken stock. Then you poured yourself more cognac, because it was nice.

Jack took a sip out of your cup. "Damn. We should drink this."

"Yes," you agreed.

Jack got the base done, sautéing the aromatics and chicken with seasonings. He added the liquid and the beans and you were pleasantly surprised that he could actually cook.

"Tomorrow, add the heavy cream after you heat it up." You took your pot of chili back to your room because who knew what kind of dirty tricks Gabriel and Jesse would stoop to.

You came back and Jack had already cleaned up. He grinned at you as he put his pot in the fridge with a label that said "Property of the Strike Commander." It was fancy. You were a little jealous. You wanted fancy labels too.

"That is good," he said. "Better than in a can." He looked down at you. "So I hear you sold my pants once."

You put your hand over your face. You knew this was going to come up. Gabriel wouldn't have been able to keep that to himself. If you'd know the nature of their relationship, you never would have said anything. "I transported your alleged pants. I have no idea if they were real."

Jack laughed at you, which was a relief. "Now whenever I'm missing clothes, I tell Gabe to ask you about it."

"It's probably why he never asks me to pick up his dry cleaning," you said.

Jack grinned. "Maybe I'll offer a bounty on his clothes. You in?"

"Not worth my life, Jack."

"Want to finish this?" He held up the cognac.

You looked around. It was late. There weren't a lot of people out, but you didn't need any more rumors. This was the longest time you'd spent alone with Jack. It was actually kind of fun. "Not here."
"The office," he agreed. He started off at a brisk pace.

You ended up in Gabriel's office drinking expensive cognac with Jack.

"You actually got the couch," you said, staring at the back wall. "I am never sitting there." You sat down on one of the chairs across from Gabriel's desk.

"You're welcome to use it. Probably more comfortable than any of the common areas ones," Jack said, seated on Gabriel's desk. "There's no foldout bed."

You looked up at him, narrowing your eyes.

"It's come out that you're apparently narcoleptic. Or that your room is haunted. Or that Jesse has loud sex every night and it keeps you awake. I think he started that one." Jack shrugged. "We thought you'd be more comfortable in here. You already sleep at your desk."

"Thanks," you said, examining your gloves. You waited for the uncomfortable questions.

"It's not a big deal," Jack said, rubbing the back of his neck. He was turning a brilliant shade of red, possibly from the booze. "We haven't had sex on it," he blurted out, his eyes darting to your side of the office.

Son of a bitch. "What about my desk?" You got up and checked your trap.

"Gabriel uh...found your thumbtacks...and box cutters. Nice placement. We didn't see them."

"Seriously?" Your jaw dropped and you couldn't look at Jack.

"Well, we had to stop to pull out the tacks," Jack said. "Gabriel's a little sore about that. That's probably why he teamed up with Jesse."

You stared at your desk and tried very hard not to think of Gabriel bending Jack over your desk. Just like you tried very hard not to think of a nude Gabriel sprawled across your desk, Jack on top of him-

You downed the rest of your cognac and poured more. You drank till the burn of your blush was drowned out by the burn of the alcohol.

"I'm going to have to set fire to everything and start fresh," you told Jack. "Stop smiling at me, you asshole. I hate you all." You covered your face.

"The couch is untouched," he said. "I promise."

When you sobered up, you'd find the bleach.

"Reprobates," Gabriel boomed as he entered the office and you nearly fell off the couch.

You looked up. Jack was still in Gabriel's chair, wiping drool off his chin. You'd taken the cognac and hidden it under your desk. Because you were going to have to clean it. Because...
"I hate you," you told Gabriel. "You have a perfectly good desk! It's even bigger than mine. Why?"

Gabriel raised an eyebrow at Jack. Jack just grinned at you both. His hair was mussed.

"You couldn't resist bragging, could you?" Gabriel sighed. "The couch is a peace offering. We haven't done a thing on it."

"Yet!" You hissed.

"Keep it up and we will," Gabriel said.

"I will burn everything."

"So, who's coming to judge the chili?" Jack asked.

Gabriel gave him a suspicious look. "Gérard's out of town, so we have Genji, Angela, Ana, and some other assholes I don't give a shit about."

"He means Winston, Torby, and Reinhardt," you said.

"Reinhardt? Are we going to have enough food?" Jack cracked his neck and made a face. Instantly, Gabriel was there beside him massaging his shoulders.

"I didn't invite them," Gabriel said.

"Reinhardt overheard me telling Torby and invited himself," you admitted. "And he was so excited, I couldn't say no. Even if it threw off the judge count."

You, Jesse, Gabriel, and Jack ended up in the kitchen putting your finish touches on the chili. Jack wore an apron and kept kissing Gabriel. You were pretty sure he was doing it to sabotage the other man and you really hoped it was working.

You added cognac and reheated your chili, tasting it as you stirred. The spices had melded well. You ground black pepper and added some hot sauce. Your bread bowls would be out of the oven soon and your cheese was already grated. Jesse's chili smelled smoky and sweet. Gabriel's smelled like hot spices and bacon. Jack tasted his chili and gave you a wink. You turned back to your dish.

"Anyone need some cold refreshment?" Jack asked, breaking a pack of blonde ale.

You took one, and began plating. Chili in breadbowl, Jack's cornbread on the side, cheese on top.

Jesse happily chatted with Ana and Angela. Winston didn't look particularly enthused to be there, but it could just be Gabriel's presence. Torby and Reinhardt immediately helped themselves to the beer. Genji was stealing cornbread, but since it was from Jack's portion, you didn't care.

You were done first, and you set everyone's bowls in front of them smugly. Because who didn't love bread bowls?

Reinhardt beamed at you. It was so open and pure you didn't regret inviting him, even if he ended up voting for someone else. Torby went very quiet, but when he looked at you, he gave you a sharp nod of approval. Angela seemed quietly pleased as well.

Ana closed her eyes. "Bread bowls automatically win," she told you.
"Hot," was all Winston said, and downed a glass of milk.

"Then you won't be able to handle this," Gabriel said. He handed you a bowl. "Taste it and weep, chica."

"Because you mistook heat for flavor?"

"Not me. And I don't need fancy side dishes to win," he sneered.

You took a bite. Pork belly with mole, chorizo, sundried tomatoes, and fava beans. It was a smoky balance of piquant and sweet with plenty of spice. You gave him a grudging thumbs up.

Gabriel only grunted at you when he tasted your bowl.

Jesse grinned. "So spicy," he said, eating the cornbread first. Jack didn't need to say anything, happily coming back for seconds.

Jesse's chili surprised you in that it was really good. He'd smoked the pork butt and sautéed apples with his aromatics. Not as good as Gabriel's, and sweeter than you preferred, but solid.

The white chili is what surprised everyone. Mostly because they expected Jack to open a can and maybe grill some hotdogs. Gabriel gave you a long "I know what you did there" look, after Jack gave you half his cornbread. It was creamy and smooth, almost like a curry. It turned out like yours. You were kind of pleased.

Of course Reinhardt messed up the votes. He and Angela voted for Gabriel. Genji voted for Jack. Winston voted for Jesse. You secured Ana and Torby's votes.

You tried for a chef tiebreaker. Voting for your own was poor sportsmanship. You and Jesse then voted for Gabriel's chili. To your surprise, Gabriel and Jack voted for yours.

So in the end, you and Gabriel tied for no actual prize except bragging rights. And since this had initially been a contest between you and Gabriel, it solved nothing. You didn't mind.

You didn't actually like your therapist. But then, you didn't have to. In fact, you were starting to suspect that it was the act of seeking help, not the "talking about your feelings" that made the difference.

She had good tips for dealing with grief, and sometimes it was nice to have someone who didn't actually care about you listen to your problems with an objective ear. You didn't want the pity or well-meaning sympathy of a friend. Maybe you were being stupid, and yes, you knew you were, but if they pitied you, they wouldn't respect you. You couldn't handle that.

You gave up sleeping in your room. Your shrink had offered a sleeping pill prescription, but that wasn't the problem.

Today you were out at the memorial wall again. It was early and you held note cards in between your metal fingers. The most important one said "Shin: Were madly in love. Had kids. Or dogs. They were awful. We didn't care, we liked them anyway." There were others, but that was the one that stuck with you. They were all futures that couldn't happen now. No meeting
Rivka's grandchildren in a cafe and listening to her berate everyone. No taking Captain Patel out for drinks and reminiscing about old times. No attending Lao and Valdez's civil union and telling embarrassing stories. You bowed your head. You'd come up with your own rituals now.

Then you set the cards on fire, watching them burn away to ash. It was OK. You could let go of them now. Really.

The wind caught the embers and carried them upward. You stood there long after the flames died, your metal fingers so very warm.

Blackwatch needed better onboarding protocols. Making Faustian bargains with criminals wasn't a bad tactic, but that was no way to staff your organization with trustworthy reliable people. You weren't a bureaucrat. You weren't. You were just trying to make things run smoother. And you couldn't depend on Overwatch's HR department to fill your very specific needs. Winston had been a really good sport about helping out, but his workload was insane.

"I need a new hacker, Gabriel."

"You have access to the Interpol databases. I'll sign off on whatever clemency agreement you want. Go pick one." Gabriel didn't look up from his brief.

"I need a trustworthy new hacker, Gabriel. For Shit Spiders."

"Go ask Jack," he said, letting you know that he didn't have any idea where to get one either.

You rubbed your forehead. "Anyone have any tech-oriented family members?" Because it wasn't nepotism if you recruited them for their skills. And it wasn't nepotism if this was about trust issues...was it?

Gabriel looked up. "Huh. Not a bad idea. Why don't you expand that search?"

You thought of Lao and Rivka. Rivka had grandchildren, and a grandson she complained about more than the others. You were pretty sure that meant he was her favorite. You started to dig.

Rivka had one son with three children. Ziv Mihret was the only boy listed. You pulled up a picture off a social media network. He didn't really look like her, his face narrower, almost pinched, and his skin several shades darker. His hair had grown a little wild in an asymmetrical fro. He was tall and gawky, like he hadn't grown into his body yet. He was a recent computer systems engineering graduate of Tel Aviv University and had already completed his conscription.

You went a bit further, checking his transcripts, internships, and social media. He'd spent a lot of time in Addis Abba. OK, his mother was an Ethiopian Jew. He played a lot of online games. You were pretty sure he preferred men and was keeping it a secret from his family. Your snooping was definitely a violation of privacy and maybe an abuse of power. But you were on a mission.
Winston agreed his qualifications would be acceptable.

You forwarded his information to Gabriel.

"Go recruit him, if that's what you want," Gabriel said, not even looking up.

You messaged Winston that you'd need him available for a long distance interview and you checked in with Overwatch HR so you could go over hiring protocols. You looked up at over at Gabriel who grinning at his terminal. You were now 99% sure he was sending Jack obscene messages.

At least someone was having fun.

You took Jesse with you, because he was friendlier than Genji. Ziv lived in a student neighborhood, his flat small and cheap. You stopped to buy bourekas from a street vendor. The triangular-cut flaky phyllo dough was stuffed with cheese, potatoes, and spinach and topped with a hard-boiled egg. Jesse looked uncertain.

"You got to try stuff so you can take good stuff back to Captain Amari," you said.

"I'm eating this one," he told you after one bite.

The two of you walked leisurely around the apartment building, eating your lunch.

"So this is Rivka's grandson. Am I making a terrible error in judgment?"

"Guess that depends on the boy," Jesse told you. "You going to tell him about his grandmother?"

"If he joins up. I can't really dangle that in front of him without clearances." If he joined up, he would see that last video. You weren't sure if that was the right thing to do or not.

"No time like the present," Jesse said. "I want to be back in Zurich for tea."

You knocked on the door. There was a long pause and you could feel the scrutiny from the peephole. Ziv opened the door and his face unfriendly. He was in his early twenties and bony.

"Hello," you began.

"I'm not buying anything," he said in accented English.

"I'm not-"

"I don't want religion."

"I'm definitely not-"

"I'm not interested," he said and began to shut the door.

"I knew your grandmother and wanted to offer you a job," you blurted out.
Jesse snickered. "Smooth, Lucky."

Ziv's shoulders stiffened. "I know what my grandmother used to do, and I will not work for the Mossad. Good day." He shut the door in your face.

"I'm not with the Mossad," you said to the door. "Honest."

"If you knew my grandmother, what did she say about me?"

"That you were a good-for-nothing and lazy," you said, then wondered if honesty was your best policy. "I assumed it meant you were her favorite."

The door opened. Ziv stared hard at you. "Your name is "Lucky?"

"No, but she called me that," you said.

"Lucky Strike?"

Oh, he had heard of you. "I'm not here for that date," you said quickly.

Ziv made a face. "She didn't." He looked at your face. "She did!" He buried his face in his palm. "Savta was impossible."

"Above my pay grade," you said, and found that it didn't hurt as much as it used to.

"She...spoke of you," he said finally. "Said you got her tahini and were a disrespectful half-wit, who could only be trusted under adult supervision."

Jesse laughed at that.

"I can't deny that," you said after a moment of thinking.

"It meant she liked you," Ziv said. "Come in."

He had a neat flat, small and homey. Jesse looked strange in it; he didn't fit into normal settings. You wondered how long it would be before you were like that too. You noted a family portrait on the wall, Rivka sitting in the center, her glasses gleaming.

"I need someone who's good with computers. Your grandmother...I don't even know how she did half the things she did."

Ziv shrugged modestly. "She taught me everything I knew. But probably not everything she knew."

"I'd like to set up tests, an interview with my head tech, and get your consent for a background check, polygraph, all the invasive procedures."

"You haven't even said who you work for."

"I think you already know."

"Since Savta worked with you, it was a black ops division of Overwatch," he said. "You're just a rumor."

You shrugged. "I am."
Ziv looked away. "Savta didn't die in a plane crash, did she?"

You tilted your head back and closed your eyes. You remembered her final signoff. "I think you already know."

He was silent, because it wasn't your words that answered his question, but your face. You didn't look at him, because you understood that you didn't have a right to his grief.

You heard him swallow. "So you're offering me revenge?"

"And health insurance," you said, remembering Captain Patel's pitch.

Ziv snorted. "I live in Israel. We have universal health care."

Winston was delighted with the test results and interview. He'd be handling Ziv's acclimatization, because you didn't know how to onboard a hacker. Lacroix was going to do the polygraph. And you had hired your first hacker-lackey. Hackey? You were going to stop now. The power had obviously gone to your head and shorted out your brain.

The holes in your cybersecurity were closing. The problem wasn't solved, but now you had a handle on the situation.

You suspected Gleeson was right. Talon was a major player. Talon was a problem. But Talon only the triggerman. There were too many figures in the UN who had vested interests in maintaining instability. You couldn't call it a conspiracy, because you weren't sure they were acting in concert. But it was starting to look a lot more complicated than just betrayal.

So you dug deeper and you trusted your team would be there to fish you out if you got in over your head.

A lot of underlings didn't particularly like Gabriel, which was fair, because Commander Reyes was a hardass, no-nonsense, son of bitch with an axe to grind. Most people understood they could rely on him, but his workplace interpersonal exchanges left a lot to be desired. You could tolerate his abrasiveness because you got to see the person outside the job. And because somewhere along the line you forgot to be afraid of him.

"Goddamn scum-sucking taintworms!" Gabriel snarled as he slammed the door behind him.

You looked up, took a sip of coffee, and then went back to scanning reports.

"Fucking bureaucratic shitstains." He dropped into his chair and putting his boots on his desk. "I'll show them budget cuts. Clip the fat right off their heads-"

You waited for the muttering to abate. "Good meeting?"
His head whipped around and he narrowed his eyes at you. "Fuckers want to expand Overwatch reach while cutting our operations budget by a third." Blackwatch got its funding from the operations budget. There was a blackbag slush that you didn't question too closely; though you were pretty sure Genji had been funneling mafia assets into it. "Someone had the nerve to suggest we draw our funds from "other enterprises." This isn't the CIA. We don't run drugs and deal weapons to scumfucks!"

"Who? I'll add them to the list."

"I made several additions to the list," Gabriel said tersely. "Then they started asking questions about operations they had no business knowing about."

"Ziv and Winston have started uh...their individualized investigations. I'm expect to start hearing back from them today."

You checked your mailbox. "Oh, Ziv's got something for me. I'm going to down to the lab. Hmm." Jesse was in Spain. You'd have to ask Genji.

You made your way down to the lab, flexing your fingers. Your control of the blades was getting better. Angela had been making monthly upgrades to the software, tweaking the sensitivity. Torby still hadn't made you a protective gauntlet yet, muttering something about how every kid wanted to be "Doomfist."

Ziv sat cross-legged on the conference table, staring hard at his tablet. "You were right to hire me, Lucky. I don't know what kind of shitshow Reyes was running, but your systems were a mess."

"For the love of cheese, don't say that in front of him," you said, tilting your head back and pleading silently with whatever was upstairs that Ziv took your advice. You didn't want to have to hire a new hacker. "Please."

"I mean some of these people he caught and hired? Should've just shot them. Their protocols are full of holes and some of them are even intentional." Ziv threw his hands up. "I finally watched the video."

"Ah." You rubbed your forehead. "I'm sorry. Jack demoted the guy. And I might have accidentally transferred him to Antarctica."

Ziv raised a brow. "You can do that?"

"Technically, no. But Blackwatch is petty. So yes, maybe we bent some rules and did something like that. And maybe Commander Reyes helped."

"Savta would still be alive if Blackwatch's systems hadn't been compromised."

"Maybe," you said. "But it wasn't the computers that busted in and shot everyone."

Ziv huffed. "That our enemies knew all our moves ten steps ahead didn't help."

"Truth," you agreed. Ziv had been given full access to Shit Spiders and once, when he was drunk, he asked to see your scars. He was on the team, and Rivka's blood, so you'd rolled up your pant leg and taken off your gloves. He didn't say anything, just took in the damage with sharp amber eyes. And then everyone went back to drinking. He knew. That was enough.

"I've cleared two people. And then I have two more for the commander, one of them's
internal security so you know he's done some damage. Ben-zona!” Genji leaned against the table. You hadn't heard him come in and apparently, neither had Ziv.

"Here." Ziv handed Genji a file. "You take that one. Lucky can go get the other one."

"Commander's going to want you to sit in on the...interrogation." You blew out a breath. "It'll likely be messy."

Ziv smiled at you with bright white teeth. "I don't think I'll mind."

Vladimir Ivanov was not a small man; he was part of Blackwatch Internal Security or In-Sec, kind of like an MP only less law-abiding. You wondered if Ziv had meant to give Genji this one. You flipped through his dossier. He'd been Spetnatz once and he outweighed you by at least a hundred pounds. Ziv had found some pretty damning messages in his personal communications. You approached him in the hall as he was coming back from the gym.

"Hey, Ivanov. Commander wants to see you," you said.

He turned around, narrowing his gray eyes at you. He kept his head shaved, and had some rather elaborate tattoos on his limbs. All in all, he went out of his way to nonverbally scream "I am a badass."

"I don't answer to the commander's whore," he sneered and kept walking.

Well, then. You hadn't really expected that response. Maybe he knew you were on to him. Yup, that was it. And so you'd have to take him down before he tried to escape or destroy evidence. Definitely good justification; that's what you'd tell the review board if it came down it.

You eyed his neck. You couldn't kill him, Gabriel needed to interrogate him. You calmly walked up behind him. "Seriously, Ivanov-" you put a hesitant whine in your voice, sounding like a helpless little girl.

He whirled, and you struck him in the throat, metal fingers extended. Your control was better. No blades popped out.

He grabbed his neck, face turning red, and dropped to his knees.

"I said, "the Commander wants to see you." The proper response would've been "Yes ma'am." Or maybe "on the double, ma'am." Or even "understood." That, was completely uncalled for." And then you punched him, because you didn't need to monologue. You just needed to get his unconscious body to the interrogation room. You called Genji. You weren't dragging Ivanov through the base.

Then you went to find Gabriel. "Prep the interrogation room," you told him, peeking your head in the office. "We've got live ones."

Gabriel stood, adjusting his hat, his smile was wide and unpleasant. "You always know how to cheer me up," he said, too happy and too vicious for your comfort.

You paused stood there, wondering if you were making a mistake. Maybe it would be better to get Lacroix.
"You can come too," Gabriel said, looking down at his desk. "If it doesn't bother you." Then he looked you dead in the eye. "I trust you to keep me from going too far."

How could you say no to him after that?

Chapter End Notes

So much plot and fluff stuff. There were parts I wasn't sure about, but you know what, it's written, I've edited too many times, they're in.

If you were curious, I'm several chapters ahead, but I go back and edit for a few days because I write late at night and stuff gets jumbled as fuck. Right now it's all "is this sexual behavior out of character for Jack/Gabriel because I've read so much Reaper76 smut I legit can't tell." Then it's like "lolololol, nothing is out ooc for them, they're sex fiend super soldiers!" Because I've read so much Reaper76 stuff I uh...yeah.

Off to make soup. Literally. Because I'm hungry.
Nine months in, you were halfway down the list. Traitors talked and some got their 9mm pension plan. Ziv was heavily modifying the Blackwatch systems. Genji was dealing with the Shimada connection. Gabriel had personally assassinated the Vialli patriarch in what was meant to look like a N’drangheta hit, and raided his private office. Winston was still decrypting that chunk of data, but Ziv had doubled the pace.

You suspected the whole Vialli family was corrupt, but you could only link the dead man to Talon with any certainty. Jesse had taken down Ngumi, but another "Doomfist" had risen in his place.

You, Ziv, and Winston were sorting the data from the Greenland science lab. Rivka had managed to mask and route the data there. But there was so much and you didn't even know what you were looking for. Winston and Torby had upgraded the Blackwatch systems hardware, with Ziv doing maintenance weekly. Gabriel was easing up on Winston and Torby, to your relief.

Jack still showed up at Gabriel's hand-to-hand class when he had time. Gabriel always partnered him with you. Which sucked, because Jack cheerfully wiped the floor with you. You were starting to wonder if Jack secretly hated you and was trying to drive you insane. You started hitting him for real. He didn't seem to mind or let up.

Gabriel never sparred with you. You assumed it was to avoid feeding the rumor mill. That was OK. You didn't need another super strong person to kick your ass in front of everyone.

"Got a short assignment for you, if you need to get out of the office," Gabriel said while you dredged through the 9th Circle's backups.


Gabriel rose and came over to your desk. "Stiff?"

"Yeah," you said.

"You want me to work on it?" He asked. "I can see the tension from here."

You scratched your head. Gabriel was touchy feely with Jack, and that was about it. "Yeah, I guess. Thanks."

"You look like you're in pain," Gabriel said, clearing his throat. "Angela does this kind of thing too if you'd be more comfortable with her."

You didn't feel like walking all the way to the infirmary. You got up and sat cross-legged on the couch. "Just don't do one of those crazy bone cracking things that leaves me unable to move."

"Like snapping your neck?" Gabriel asked. He sat behind you, the couch sinking under his weight.
"That would be bad," you said, looking over your shoulder warily.

His large hands rested on your shoulders, and very carefully, he began knead. You groaned. He was strong, his fingers working the knots out. "OK, you could've made a fortune as a masseuse."

"Jack talks too much."

You tried to think of a time Jack mentioned massages. "He's never said anything about your back rubs."

He chuckled. "I give a lot of happy endings."

You hung your head. You'd walked right into that one. "I hate you."

One hand carefully worked along your neck. You swallowed and held very still.

"Too much?" Gabriel asked.

"I'm OK," you said. You weren't going to freak out because Gabriel touched your neck. No one was squeezing your throat. No one was hurting you. You could breathe. You took several deep breaths, just reassure yourself of that.

His fingers rubbed carefully, loosening the tension. He moved down your midback, focusing on the muscles around your shoulder blades. "These are interconnected. Working this muscle group will also help relax your shoulders." His voice was soothing.

"OK," you said. It hurt, but it was a good soreness. Gabriel had strong hands and while you'd expected him to use more bruising force on your knots, he was surprisingly gentle.

"Do you want to hear about the assignment?" he asked.

"OK," you said. Because at that moment, you would have agreed to anything he asked.

"Jack's going to be at a diplomatic conference in Paris. I'd like you to go watch his six."

You raised your head, making your very specific "Are you fucking serious?" face. "I'm sorry, did I hear you right? You want me to go to Paris with your boyfriend and make sure no one kills him? Because your boyfriend throws me around the mat every time we spar and thinks it's hilarious when I punch him. Your boyfriend is like ten times stronger than me, five times faster, and super deadly. Your boyfriend is a goddamn super soldier."

Gabriel's fingers traveled down your spine, working your fatigued lower back. "I am too. Doesn't mean I don't depend on you."

Oh. The upholstery suddenly grew very interesting. "Why?"

"Ainsley's going with him." Gabriel's knuckles dug into your muscles. You winced. "If she's part of Petras' plan, he'll be isolated. Ana and I can't go without drawing attention. Jesse and Genji are occupied. It could be nothing. It could be everything. I'm not willing to take that risk." He pressed down on a sore spot making you wince.

"In what capacity?" You'd never make it as Jack Morrison's overt bodyguard. Just like being his second assistant would probably set Ainsley off on you.

"You'd be in civilian clothes."
"Does Jack want me to go?" Which was a nice way of checking to see if Jack knew what Gabriel was up to. You looked over your shoulder. Gabriel's focus was on your back and he pressed on another muscle group causing your entire low back to twitch.

"Yes. How are you so tense?" Gabriel asked. You could feel the frown in his voice.

"It's a side effect of being a workaholic punching bag."

"I thought Jesse was helping you out," Gabriel said in such a neutral tone, you weren't sure what he meant.

"Jesse is a good friend and great coworker. He makes missions run smooth and does occasionally help with paper work."

Gabriel silently rubbed your back, obviously waiting for you to continue.

"We're still trying to convince Genji to join us for a slumber party: monster movies, hair-braiding, and blanket forts. But I guess Genji's too cool for that kind of thing."

Gabriel snorted. "What are you, six years old?"

"At heart. Maybe we should invite Captain Amari and Fareeha," you decided. You'd have to leave off the alcohol, but it would still be fun. Jesse would like that. "She can shame Genji for missing out."

"Are you still having problems with...other agents?" Oh, maybe that's what he meant.

"Not really." You stretched your neck, feeling the bones pop. "But I don't really have the time or inclination to socialize outside our little circles. Paranoia is not conducive to making friends."

"I get that," Gabriel said. Yeah he should, he embodied it.

"You sure Jack wants me to go?" You'd seen him the other night, and he hadn't said a word about this.

"Yes."

"Then why isn't he asking me?"

"Because you're my assistant," Gabriel said, sounding oddly offended.

"Huh." You sighed. Gabriel would have needed to clear it anyway. "OK."

"You'll need some new clothes," he said, because apparently he knew that you only owned one suit and countless generic Blackwatch sweats.

"No hooker outfits," you grumbled.

Gabriel continued to massage your back, his hands very warm. "It'll be tasteful." His thumbs worked another knot, digging into your back. You gripped the arm of the sofa, letting your head hang loose. He kept finding the fatigued spots and working the muscles loose, switching between your shoulders and low back. His hands were so warm and soothing. Eyes closed, you gave a soft mewl.

Gabriel froze. "Are you all right?"
"Uh...yes," you said, voice too squeaky. "I'm good. Thanks for the back rub," you almost melted off the couch, but Gabriel was there steadying you, both hands on your shoulders.

"Any time, chica. Thanks for agreeing to go."

Even in your hazy state, you were suddenly suspicious of Gabriel's intentions. "What aren't you telling me, Gabriel?"

"It's too late, you've already agreed to go," he said smugly.

You were going to kill Gabriel. You were going to put him in a sack, roll it down the hill, and straight into the Lake Zurich. It would be great. You could sip lemonade and watch the him slowly sink into the harbor.

"Please stop making that face," Jack said. "You're scaring my assistant." He didn't sound too bothered.

"My apologies, sir." You smoothed your expression over.

You stood beside Jack on the private Overwatch jetliner. Your outfit actually wasn't so bad: fitted black waistcoat, black cloth gloves, crisp white collared shirt, narrow legged black trousers, and polished Italian leather ankle boots with a slight heel. Your bright blue pocket square matched Jack's overcoat. You had a pistol holstered snugly under your waistcoat, and your **tanto** in a sheath on your low back. You were Jack's...valet? Butler? Accessory? You decided on the title Assassin-Butler. You were a dreaded Assassin-Butler, the last of your kind. Roaming the world to fight evil and serve a good cup of tea. "More prosecco, sir?"

"No thank you, Ms. Strike," he said, sounding amused. It wouldn't do to use your real name, but really?

"I'll take some," Ainsley Petras said hesitantly.

You debated throwing the bottle at her. Instead, you made a neat turn and poured her a glass, resisting the urge to poison it. You were wearing your combat attachments, because it was a special occasion. You served it silently, noting that Ainsley wouldn't actually look at you.

There were several cover stories that Gabriel had offered. Jack Morrison fan club member, complete with t-shirts with Jack's face on them. Movie producer, with stiletto heels and a too-tight skirt-suit. Sponsor showgirl, wearing some bizarre sexualized version of the Overwatch uniform made from spandex. There was a French maid outfit too, but you were pretty sure that Gabriel was just fucking with you at that point. You would have been fine with "low-key reporter" but for some reason that wasn't in the repertoire. Something about the "sanctity of the press" and "not putting reporters in danger so you could play undercover." Which was bullshit, but Blackwatch did shadier things than pretend to be a muckraker. So to the world, you were Jack's hand servant, if anyone asked. Jack had even practiced "Oh yes, Ms. Strike is in my personal employ. Next question." Ainsley was his professional assistant.

Ainsley knew you were her counterpart in Gabriel's office. Jack had explained that someone had lost a bet and this was the result. He might have heavily implied it was Gabriel.
Ainsley looked uneasy, and you figured if she was really in on the conspiracy, or even remotely intelligent, she'd know you were Jack's bodyguard.

Gabriel was absolutely right to call Ainsley "Overwatch Barbie." Blonde, blue-eyed, and obviously from money, she looked like the very rich girl next door. Her designer skirt suit was blue, a few shades lighter than Jack's, and cut to flatter her cheerleader figure. She wore pearls and very understated makeup making her lips a glossy pink, and her eyes soft and wide. Her default expression was a beauty queen smile and she was so very perky. She didn't swear, but she spoke with a breathy voice you had to lean in to hear. She was a future trophy wife, all pageant smiles and limp handshakes.

You didn't like her. Not because she and Jack looked like they could be an Aryan power couple. Not just because she kept touching Jack and speaking earnestly to him. Jack could take care of himself. No. Your poor roots were showing. You had no patience for entitled rich girls playing white savior. If she didn't stop talking about her charity trip to help are those "starving orphans in Africa" you were going to open the emergency exit and throw her out. And if she didn't stop talking about how that trip "really changed her perspective," you were going to stab her with the crab fork. It would so cute. So. So. Cute.

"Ainsley, I'm going over my speech. Don't you have an itinerary to review?" Jack's voice was military firm, and disapproving. It felt weird, considering he never spoke to you that way.

"All done, sir," she beamed. "Landing at 3PM. Fifteen minutes to meet the press. Hotel by 4:30. Reservations at L'Occident at 6PM. Diplomatic drinks and cigars after."

"Is Ms. Strike covered in the reservations for L'Occident?" Jack asked.

"No, Jack. I didn't realize she was accompanying us."

"See if you can get her in to all of our scheduled events. If not, she can take your spot."

"But I have all your briefings-"

"It's mission-critical, Ainsley. That's all I can say."

"Oh. Yes sir. I understand." She regarded you both with big doe eyes. "I'll call in some favors. My aunt knows the head chef personally. She says the onion tartes are spectacular."

You started reaching for the crab fork.

"Ainsley, I need to focus," Jack said sharply.

"Sorry, sir," she said, sounding hurt.

Gabriel had explained that you'd need to stand to attention in public. So you were stuck, on the fancy jet, standing behind Jack's comfy chair, staring impassively at the walls. It was only five days. You could do five days.

"Ms. Strike, can you take a look at these documents? Make edits as needed."

You felt Ainsley's eyes on you as Jack passed you a tablet, without looking up. "Of course, sir."

"This was all Gabriel's idea," was written across the messaging screen. You pretended to be deep in thought. "I'm sorry."
"You're enjoying this," you wrote back. "You are all so close to being murdered with a crab fork."

"Please. If it gets me out the meet'n greet."

You refrained from smiling.

"The outfit is good. You look very proper and dangerous."

"I am the legendary Assassin-Butler of Blackwatch, cutting throats and serving tea. Sometimes in that order."

Jack began to choke-cough.

Ainsley sat up, alarmed.

"May I get you something to drink, sir?" You asked, blandly.

"Damnit, yes please," Jack managed to get out. You poured him some sparkling water and served it, impassive expression firmly locked in place.

You were getting used to going to infiltrating expensive places with Blackwatch, usually by playing an unsavory role. You had lots of practice with that before ever joining up. This was different. You were part of Strike Commander Jack Morrison's entourage. Even if you were his "hired help" you sat at the table and ate with painstaking politeness.

The onion tартes were good, not that you were going to tell Ainsley that. Neither of you were seated beside Jack. You were at the far end of a long table, back to the wall, eyes on the exits. There was Overwatch security in place, along with other governmental forces and the occasional intelligence officer. Your presence was overkill, but that wasn't an excuse not to do your job.

Jack was between two world leaders, calmly explaining something with great authority and saint-like patience. This was the Jack you'd seen in the media. Not the Jack you made chili with. The role-change could be jarring, but you were getting used to it. Gabriel vacillated between NCO crude, seductively charming, and flat-out murderous, and while it could be disturbing, it wasn't quite the same transformation Jack made.

"So I bet you're real close the Strike Commander." You heard to your right. You turned your head slowly, noting that the fat man wasn't talking to you, but Ainsley.

"I beg your pardon," she said, crimson streaking her cheeks.

That would be the ambassador from Austria, Lukas Pichler, if you remembered right. He was ruddy, balding, and already in his cups.

"You can't fool a man like me," he boomed. "For shame, putting young women there to be exploited." His was growing steadily louder. "Or maybe that's how you like it."

You set your utensils down. If Ainsley Petras was part of the problem, you had no problem consigning her to a terrible fate. Hell, earlier you were ready to murder her with any available
piece of silverware. Even if Ainsley Petras was just a self-absorbed idiot, she was still part of Overwatch, and letting her be humiliated would set a bad precedent. You got out your tablet, pretending to check for messages.

You stood, and walked over to her seat. "Ms. Petras, my apologies for interrupting," you weren't looking at her, but Pichler. "But your uncle, the Director, has asked you to call him."

"Thank you, Ms. Strike," Ainsley said, holding her head up. "Please let him know I will contact him after dinner."

You gave Pichler and long empty stare, and then returned your seat. He averted his eyes and seemed unnaturally interested in his sausages. None of you had actually caused a scene, but you caught Jack watching you out of the corner of his eye. You disengaged, returning to your sole meuniere. It was delicious, and maybe you could work this into your plans.

People kept mistaking you for the restaurant help and holding out their empty glasses and plates to you. You ignored them; it was the most fun you had all evening. That didn't happen to Ainsley. It must be a smell or a posture. She smelled like money. You were obviously an outsider. You and Ainsley flanked Jack during the after dinner cocktails, Ainsley smiling pleasantly the entire time. You kept your hands behind your back, very careful how you flexed your left hand. The dinner was delicious. Dessert was lovely. The company ruined it all.

You didn't speak, opting to pour non-alcoholic cocktails for Ainsley and Jack. They had to mingle, but they needed clear heads. Your expression stayed flat, and uninterested. You were the hired help. No one cared what you thought.

Jack did diplomatic doublespeak well, never committing to anything, but letting each person know they'd been heard. He actually made it look like he was seriously considering their proposals. You heard everything from various methods of integrating omnis to giving special preference to their nation's manufacturers. You wondered how Gabriel would have handled these asshats. He could obviously finesse people, as demonstrated by getting you here, but would he have the patience for these idiots? You paused, well he did run Blackwatch. Maybe Gabriel would be fine. You wouldn't or couldn't do Ainsley's job.

This was just the VIPs for the conference. Tomorrow, there would be lots more people to worry about.

The ride back to the hotel was tensely silent, Jack in a meditative state, Ainsley in some kind of mope. You drove.

The three of you had separate but connected rooms. There was a large common area, and it was one of the more expensive hotels you'd stayed in. It was very modern, none of the fancy curls and scrollwork furniture you expected from French period shows. Everything was ergonomic and vaguely unrecognizable. The couch was shaped like a hotdog bun. The table had multiple asymmetrical tiers, like a cat tree. You were afraid to look in the bathroom.

Ainsley disappeared to her room, presumably to change out of her four inch heels.

"That was nice of you," Jack said after the door clicked.
You shrugged. "You couldn't do it without causing a scene. And she's Overwatch. You don't fuck around with us."

"You're really into this Assassin-Butler role," Jack said, smiling warmly.

"It is a good outfit," you admitted. "But I'm still pissed."

"It's a good outfit," Jack said, eyes lingering on your pocket square. "You're wearing my colors. It's like I'm a feudal lord."

"Or lady. I'm just wearing your token because you need me to gain victory in your honor." You smirked at him. "But I'm not chivalrous. Try not to faint at the sight of blood."

"That works too," Jack said, not at all bothered by the flip. "Thanks again for coming. I really appreciate it." He tapped your cheekbone, right under the eye. "You need an eyepatch. It will make you look like a mafia hitwoman."

"I'm an Assassin-Butler," you told him. "I'm too classy to work for the mafia. Now go to bed young master Morrison. You have a long day tomorrow."

You settled on the couch, wrapping a blanket around you. It was a central location, a good way to monitor the situation and keep Ainsley from trying to sneak into Jack's room. You were almost asleep when a door opened. You cracked an eye.

Ainsley traipsed out in a matching sky blue pajama set and satin robe. You counted to ten, trying to swallow all your horrible thoughts.

"Are you awake, Ms. Strike?" Ainsley asked, knocking on your bedroom door. Well, that was unexpected.

"I am now," you muttered and she jumped.

"Oh, I didn't see you there. I-" She wrapped her robe closer. "Are the rooms not to your liking?"

"No problem with the rooms," you said. Your stuff was in there. A few weapons and more uniform suits.

"Umm..." She took in your blanket and uniform, obviously trying to figure out your angle. "Thank you, for earlier."

"You're welcome."

"I could've handled it. I have in the past. But you did it so smoothly. I don't think Jack even noticed."

You didn't say anything to that.

"You're a passable butler," she said. "But I'm not stupid. I know you didn't lose a bet. Are we in danger?"
You shrugged. "Being in Overwatch is dangerous."

"You can't even tell me, can you?" She crossed her arms, hugging herself. "I hate this, you know. I thought it would be different. Like I could change the world. And working next to the Jack Morrison? That's every girl's dream."

You wrinkled your nose.

"OK, that sounded stupid. But I'm the envy of my peers. All my college friends are begging for introductions. He's handsome, charismatic, super strong... And completely emotionally unavailable. He's all-business. No fun. Like, he's kind of a jerk. I know he works hard, and kills things, but it wasn't supposed to be like this."

You stifled a laugh. "What did you expect from the job?"

"I-" She sat down in a chair, tucking her feet under her. "I thought it would romantic. Danger, excitement, hearts pounding: the perfect set up for love. I'd be part of something important and I'd get to be close to him. But...I thought he'd be a gentleman."

"Has he been...ungentlemanly?"

"No that came out wrong. He's not a bad person," she waved her hand. "He just works all the time. He's a whole different person in front of the cameras. He has this way of making people love him. But in real life, he's just cold. He barks orders and expects everyone to live up to his high standards." She sniffled. "I had the biggest crush on him, and I thought, fine, if I just work hard enough, he'll see how pretty and clever I am, and he'll be charmed. Instead, I'm working myself into exhaustion for a guy who will never think I'm good enough. I don't know why I'm telling you this."

You had no idea either. This was girl talk, you realized. Once upon a time you'd talk to Lao and Rivka about feminine things: clothes, jewelry, Shin. But that was a lifetime ago. You talked about work and mutual friends with Captain Amari. Most of your conversations with Angela were mostly about your prostheses. You were going to use that vibrator soon. Honest.

"It's fine," you said.

"My uncle thought it was a good idea," she said. "He got me the job and told me to follow my dreams. He likes Jack and wants him in the family. He thinks Jack is way better than the other guy. Your boss Reyes. Doesn't think he's leadership material. Says people won't follow a guy that...uh...low-class."

Low-class? Jack came from a poor background too. He meant "black." You clenched your teeth, trying vainly to keep your face placid. It didn't really work.

"Sorry, that's what my uncle said. I don't have a problem with him, he's just kind of rough around the edges."

"He is," you said, quashing the urge to remind her this was a military organization, what the hell did she expect?

"I just- I don't stand a chance with him, do I?" She looked up you blinking rapidly.

"Do you actually want him?" You unfurled your blanket, trying to get comfortable. "There's the "ideal" of Jack Morrison. And there's the actual Jack Morrison. And now you're one of the select few to know the real Jack Morrison," you lied smoothly. "He is what he is. Do still...?"
"I just think he could change," she said. "I've seen it when he's warm and lively and makes people feel safe."

"You'll drive yourself mad trying to change someone," you said. Especially to fit your own selfish ideals. "You deserve someone who appreciates you for you." As did Jack. "If the Strike Commander isn't that man, maybe it's time to move on."

She hung her head at that. "I-"

"Do you like working at Overwatch?" You tapped your fingers, wondering how to bring up the director.

"It's...challenging," she said. "But my uncle says I'm doing a good job. He's come in to check on me and sometimes shows me how things work."

You wondered if this was some kind of double-blind. "I've heard you're very good," you said convincingly. "Is Overwatch what you want?" You didn't have to argue with her. You just had to ask her the right questions and let come to her own deeply tangled conclusion.

"I don't know," she said. "You know, I was going to knock on Jack's door tonight and throw caution to the wind: an intimate setting, alone with him, maybe I could change his mind..."

It was a struggle to keep your face neutral.

"But I don't think it would have worked. I would've made a fool of myself, wouldn't I?"

You weren't going to dignify that with a direct response. Because once you started, you wouldn't be able to stop. "You're a lovely young lady," you said, even though she was close to your age. "But you already have concerns about his...ways. Even if you did have a night of passion-" You almost choked on those words. "What about the next day? Do you think he'd change that quickly?"

"I guess not," she said sadly. "It was a good dream though."

Pity, sympathy, and empathy swirled involuntarily. These were human feelings, and you tried not to dwell on those. You weren't a saint, but Ainsley was apparently so lonely, she had to be to come talk to the Assassin-Butler for emotional counseling.

That would take awhile, and you had to be up at five.

"Would you like some tea?" You asked, because maybe you could drug it and get some sleep.

"Umm, yes please." You got up and found an entire tea service in the "appertif" nook. You'd watched Captain Amari enough to know how it worked. You found chamomile tea, and valiantly resisted the urge to drug her, even just a little.

"I'm sure your uncle will be very understanding," you said.

"He really wants me to get Jack to come to Nantucket this summer. He talks about it all the time. Like, I think he likes Jack more than he likes me."

Your hand didn't shake as you poured the tea. You served her first and then took your own
cup. "That can't be true."

"It is! He's got this whole retreat planned."

"Huh," you said. "Where exactly?"

"I'm not sure. He was emphatic that it was a "men's" thing but not to worry. He wasn't inviting anyone else from Overwatch, just Jack. You know how it is on the east coast. Very who knows whom, which Ivy League did you attend, how big is your Aspen home, etc."

You nodded, even though you didn't have a clue. "I see."

"When was this supposed to happen?"

"First week in August, I think. He seemed so confident that Jack was interested in me and would love to get to know me." Ainsley clutched the teacup. "It's not me, is it?"

"You've already pointed out that he's a man married to his work," you said, pleased with your own diplomacy.

"That's right. I don't think he's the kind of guy who can make himself emotionally available to another person," she said. You thought of all the times you'd seen Jack and Gabriel touching and cuddling, reminding each other that the other was still here. "Like, the job is everything to him." Hazy as it was, you remembered the look on Jack's face when he found Gabriel after the base exploded. The sheer relief made your heart hurt.

"You're in Overwatch," And rich. "The world is open you," you told her.

"You're right, Ms. Strike." She downed the rest of her tea. "I'll sleep on it." She stood up and marched resolutely to her room. The twit didn't even thank you or offer to help clean up.

Jack spent a lot of time on stage making speeches about the good Overwatch had done and calling for unity. You stood in the wings, holding bottled water, and watching Ainsley. She'd spent the last two days in a flurry of messages, hopefully finding a new direction for her life, one that would take her far away from you. As it was, she'd stopped being so painfully earnest, but it was only by degrees. She was still annoyingly perky.

Thunderous applause sounded and Jack walked off. You cracked open the water and handed it to him.

He took it and downed it in one swig. "Thank you, Ms. Strike."

You were going to stab him. But you settled for a curt nod and you took the bottle to dispose of. "You're free till the luncheon. That's two hours out. Did you want to go socialize?"

"I'm peopled out. You scout out any quiet places?"

"Yes," you said.

"Let's go."
You led him out the back, checking the halls for paparazzi. There was a cafe on the fifteenth floor, far above the assigned convention center activities, and you'd "unlocked" the terrace access.

Jack needed a hat, you decided. Sure, that was Gabriel's thing, but Jack's unruly blonde hair was pretty recognizable. You ushered Jack out to the terrace, and ordered some coffee and chocolat au pain at the cafe.

In the corner of your eye you caught sight of a familiar blue skirtsuit. Jack hadn't invited her, had he? You walked swiftly out of the cafe and quickly made it to "authorized personnel" door.

Jack sat on the ground of the terrace, legs flat, staring up at the sky. You handed him his drink and chocolate croissant.

"I think Ainsley followed us."

"Really?" Jack cocked his head. "She's been...better lately."

"I'll tell you about it later," you said, for the millionth time. Because you didn't want to get into the Petras connection just yet. You wanted to see Genji's most recent dossier before you started laying things out.

You bit your into your croissant. The dark chocolate filling was perfect with the coffee.

"Thanks, Lucky. I'm sorry it's been so hectic." Jack gave you a wry smile.

"I joined Blackwatch because I wanted a life of ease and luxury." You were careful not to get chocolate on your gloves.

"I do appreciate you coming, it's made this more...bearable." He was staring off into the sky.

"I think you just wanted someone else to suffer alongside you."

"Isn't that what friendship is?" He tilted his head back, looking at you upside down. How could he go from inspiring to cute so easily?

You blinked. "I think friends don't want to let their friends suffer."

"Agreed. But when they are suffering, friends step in." Jack took the second half of his pastry in one bite. "Before...I didn't want to ask Gabriel for help. I thought he should have been...happier for me."

"He did get demoted," you said.

"Yeah," Jack ran his fingers through his hair. "I mean, I thought it was more of a lateral move. I was wrong, about quite a few things. And then I was too proud to ask for help. That was my second mistake."

"Your first?"

"Not being there for Gabriel," he admitted. "But we're working through it. Almost losing him like that..." Jack sighed. "It scared me so badly, Lucky. But you don't want to hear all this...stuff. I guess, I'm trying to say that I appreciate it, and it's important that I communicate that."
And that being friends is more than just...wishing good things on people. It's taking an active role." He drank his coffee. "I'm babbling."

"You are babbling, sir," you agreed.

Jack shot you a dirty look. "I wasn't sure how to ask, but I'll just do it instead of dancing around the subject."

"Oh boy," you said.

"What was he like?" Jack asked, and you didn't need to ask whom he was talking about.

You bowed your head. "Shin was of those dualities that's hard to describe. He was clever and strong, a better fighter than I'll ever be. Underneath it all, he was playful. He liked life, but he would have made a good assassin. A real mission-first, but stop to smell the roses kind of guy."

You tilted your head back, feeling the sun on your skin. "He made me feel like I could do anything. I don't know if it would have lasted, but it was real."

Jack pat the back of your left hand.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, you're a real buzzkill," you told him and finished your coffee.

And that's when the shooting started.

Jack was on his feet instantly, sidearm in hand.

The shots came from inside the building.

You took point, but Jack grabbed your arm. "I can take more hits than you," he said.

"I'm your bodyguard."

"Get behind me. That's an order."

"Gabriel assigned me to you. He's my CO." You slipped in front of him quietly prying open the access door.

You could hear Ainsley whimpering.

"Where is he?" An impatient voice demanded.
"I don't know!" she sobbed.

"She's his assistant. He has to be here somewhere." You slipped inside, holding up your hand so Jack would wait.

The door was in small alcove. You flexed your left hand, and priming your attachments. There were six of them, in full tactical gear, wearing masks. They were cybernetically-enhanced. You clenched your teeth. Blood pooled on the cafe floor.

The leader held Ainsley by the neck. "Where is he?"
"I don't know!" she wailed.

"Spread out, he was last seen on this floor." The leader lowered Ainsley. "He'll be wanting her back alive, so if you find him, make sure he knows we have her."

You flattened yourself against the wall, a pair of boots growing closer. You waited till his shadow fell on you and you turned into him, pressing yourself against his chest before he could react. Your left hand pressed against his throat, and your needle shot out, filling him with a powerful sedative.

He gurgled slightly, and you pulled him into the alcove and set him down. You handed Jack his assault rifle.

You pointed at the unconscious man then held up five fingers then pointed toward the hall.

Jack gave you a dark look, but nodded. He pushed ahead of you and went down the hall. Rolling your eyes, you raised your pistol and followed.

Two of them rounded the corner. Faster than you could react, Jack fired, two shots, two kills; they fell, heads leaking ooze. You raised a brow, but Jack was moving ahead of you. You checked them as you passed. Those bullets were big. They were very dead.

Two more came running, the element of surprise gone. Jack fired again, and you threw your hands up in frustration. They too, were dead before they could hit the ground. "I know you're out there Morrison! Get over here, or I'll snap her neck!"

Jack gestured for you to stay put. Then he stalked out to the cafe. The layout of this floor was a loop. You went back the way you came, debating on picking up a gun. They had some impressive armor. You could shoot, but you didn't want to risk hitting Ainsley. The paperwork would be a nightmare. You had one tried and true method. You reached behind you and drew your tanto.

"Let her go," Jack said. He stood in cafe, facing the cyborg holding Ainsley.

"Drop your weapon, Morrison, or I'll crush her pretty head!"

Ainsley began to scream.

You emerged behind the cyborg. Jack glared at the cyborg, no wait, that was meant for you. And slowly began to set the gun down. "What the hell is this about?" He boomed.

"You really think we're going to answer your questions, Morrison?" The cyborg sneered. "Get on your knees. Hands on your head."

Jack obeyed, and you appreciated him serving as a pretty distraction.

You padded silently behind the remaining cyborg. There was a port on the back of his neck. You aimed a little higher. Three feet. Two feet. You lunged, flexing your left hand and digging into his shoulder. With your right, you pushed the tanto through his throat and twisted, the blade catching on whatever was connected to the port. He flailed, dropping Ainsley. You pulled your weapons out and let him drop. He wasn't properly dead yet, so you laid him on his back and cut his throat.
Blood soaked your gloves, your blades ripping the fabric as they drew back into your prostheses. The nice thing about metal fingernails was that blood didn't get under them. But you were going to have to clean your blade mechanisms. Still easier than blood out from under real fingernails.

You looked up to see Ainsley watching you with terrified blue eyes. Jack stood behind her, his face grim.

"Are you all right?" You wiped your blade on the cyborg's pants.

"Oh God, where were you?" She looked between Jack and you.

"Ambushing cyborgs," you said, because it was kind of a stupid question. "I'm going to radio Commander Reyes to pick up our survivor," you told Jack.

"Wait, how did they find us?" she asked.

"How did you find us?" Jack asked.

"I saw you leaving and followed. My uncle wanted to meet with you. I figured I'd come find you and let you know, but then you disappeared- " She began to sniffle. "He was going to kill me!"

"Maybe," Jack said. He glanced over at the cafe. The unlucky barista had been executed behind the counter.

You pulled out your tablet and called Gabriel.

"Lucky?"

"We were attacked. Jack's fine. We have a survivor. Come get him before the French try to claim jurisdiction." You closed the call and took pictures of the dead cyborgs.

"I-I can't do this," Ainsley sobbed, clinging to Jack. "I-I resign, sir."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Jack said, not sounding that way at all. "May I see your tablet?"

Ainsley got a private flight out of the country. Poor thing.

You and Jack sat around the bloody crime scene, waiting to "handle" things. You had the pleasure of watching Jack tell the gendarmes this was "Overwatch business." Official sanction was kind of nice. But you couldn't get used to it, not with being a member of Blackwatch.

You checked the drugged cyborg. This formula was pretty potent. He was still out, but Jack commandeered some gendarme omnic-restraints for him. You sat at a cafe table, watching Jack bark orders. You really wanted to clean your hands, but it would have to wait.

A copter landed on the terrace and Jesse climbed out. He and Jack dragged the unconscious cyborg aboard.

"Bring me desserts!" Jesse told you. "I'm serious! Captain Amari wants madeleines!"
You waved.

Jack drove back to the hotel. You had a police escort this time, for the good that would have done. And Jack wasn't talking to you, which was a shame, because you had a lot to talk about. Maybe he was just like that after combat. Gabriel was always tetchy when he first got back from a mission.

In the privacy of your hotel room, you peeled off your gloves and carefully removed your prosthetic fingers. You cleaned your hands and switched in the basic models. Then you began to clean, getting the blood out of your finger blades.

There was a knock at the door.

"It's unlocked," you said.

Jack strode in. He was still in his coat. "You disobeyed my direct orders."

You nodded, carefully wiping your blades. They would probably have to soak. You'd been stuck at the convention center too long. "I told you, Gabriel assigned me to you. You think I could go home if anything happened to you, Jack? Gabriel told me to look after you."

Jack bared his teeth at you. "I'm a decorated SEP officer. My coat has omnium plates in it. I can take a bullet or seven."

You shrugged. "You're the Strike Commander. I'm just a grunt. What did you think it meant when I came along? I'm your bodyguard for this run. It's my job to get between you and danger." You were going to have to soak these. You placed them in individual containers and filled them with solution. Then you popped open your injector and began to refill it.

You looked up. Jack was staring. You stopped moving.

He froze, then turned his head, his cheeks turning red.

"I'm sorry, I hadn't seen your hand before," he said. "Torby and Angela did a good job."

"They did," you said.

The silence stretched between you.

"Do you think I could face Gabe if something happened to you?" Jack said, still turned away.

"I think he'd know I was following his orders and you'd both have a terrible guilt-wallowing party. Him more than you, since he tricked me into coming." You had learned that post-battle you were oddly flippant. Like the adrenaline wasn't gone, but you knew everything was fine, so you were free to calmly talk shit. It amused you, but annoyed everyone else.

"Gabe's right, you're an idiot," Jack said, leaning against the doorframe. There was no heat in his words.

You finished with your prostheses and started on your blade. "What would you have done, Jack?"

"It's not the same." He crossed his arms. "I can't argue that your decision was tactically sound. But I'm not here as the Strike Commander. I'm here as Jack. And I'm pissed off at you."
"For taking the last kill?" Because Jack was a competitive bastard, no matter how much he denied it.

"For scaring me," he said.

"Huh." You weren't angry, not like he was. You knew you were right, and you knew he knew it too. So you just nodded. "Sorry for scaring you," you said. You didn't need to tell Jack it was the right choice. He knew that as well. Just like you didn't need to tell him you'd do it again. He was just going to vent. Gabriel was different, you'd have to fight him tooth and nail, because he was always convinced he was right.

"Friends help friends," you said. "They don't just sit on the sidelines and send good wishes. As interesting as it would be to see you save the world on your knees, I figured I'd better keep Ainsley alive. For posterity."

Jack laughed sharply. "You and your vampire instinct."

"We all have our talents. You shoot much faster than me."

Your left hand began to shake. You were in cooldown now and you needed to eat. "I'm hungry, Jack."

He sighed. "Yeah, me too. Want to order room service?"

"Sure." You stood, and Jack backed out of your doorway. "You know, you were the first person to ask me about him, well other than the shrink."

Jack rubbed his forehead. Maybe all this excess emotion was too much for him. You were drained. There was something on his face. You unfolded your pocket square, licked the corner and carefully dabbed Jack's cheek. He held very still, his eyes on darting between your face and the cloth.

"This is chocolate," you told him, holding up the piece of fabric. "You killed four cyborgs, yelled at the gendarmes, and drove through Paris with chocolate on your face."

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome."

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween! Posting because no idea if I'm writing tonight. Have to heavily edit last night's...whatever I did. (It was like 4AM and...what the hell did I write?)

It was also like "how many consecutive sex scenes are too many?" Because chafing and we need some plot... Meh, editing.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I haven't written slash in years and I can't actually remember when that was. Lol. Sorry?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You got off the plane, no longer a fancy butler, but a Blackwatch bum in sweatpants and a hoodie. Gabriel, Captain Amari, and Jesse were waiting for Jack and you. Jesse hugged you and Gabriel gave you a measured manly arm clasp. You saluted Captain Amari. Jack and Gabriel embraced, one of those masculine one-armed half hugs that was better suited for comrades than lovers.

You handed Jesse a box of pastries, madeleines included, and Captain Amari a box of loose leaf teas. There were macarons for Genji, when he got back from his mission. You'd bought Gabriel a fabulous replica of a musketeer hat. It was black with a huge white feather. Very Blackwatch pimp. It was in your luggage.

Jack and Gabriel were off, speaking in business-like hushed whispers, that you suspected was just cover for the fact they were going to go tear each other's clothes off.

You blinked. That was unnecessarily graphic. You were going to have to try the vibrator attachment out soon.

"Winston softened the cyborg up," Jesse told you.

"What?" You couldn't picture Winston condoning any torture.

"He disconnected his arms. The guy can feel them, but he can't move them. Gabriel's been... Well, he waited for you." Jesse sighed. "He was not happy about everything. He almost handled the pickup instead of me. But Captain Amari reminded him that leadership couldn't just up and run off to Paris whenever the fancy struck them."

You laughed. "Jack is a beast in combat. He downed four cyborgs in minutes, all T-box shots. Like, they should have sent three times as many."

"I could do that!" Jesse said.

"Yeah, I know. But one minute he was all smiley and shit, then it's "I'm a serious super soldier, watch me kill things! Rawr!" Then he wouldn't talk to me for hours because I got the last guy with my tanto."

Jesse coughed. "What?"

"The last one had Ainsley hostage and was all "surrender or I'll kill Overwatch Barbie." So Jack went out to face him, and I snuck up behind him and stabbed him in the throat. Wait, am I getting predictable?"

"I guess it's better than you constantly going for the family jewels. The implications are
certainly less...disturbing." Jesse shook his head. "Thanks for the pastries. Was that tea you got Captain Amari?"

"Yeah, figured it'd go with the cakes."

Jesse lifted his hat to scratch his head. "I appreciate it, Lucky."

"I'm rooting for you," you said.


You shrugged. "Not there yet. Just...looking."

"Any good-looking ones?"

You remembered Jack smiling up at you in Paris. You remembered Gabriel's deep concentration while he rubbed your back. You almost smacked yourself in the head. They were good looking. They were also together. "That hacker, Riggs. He's cute. Doesn't talk much though."

Jesse shrugged. "I've thrown him around in the mat a few times. He's not as tough as you."

"Ouch, poor guy." You weren't the worst person in Gabriel's class. But you were the one getting kicked around the most. "Is that your "friendly" way of telling me he's not worth my time?"

"I don't right know," Jesse said. "Gimme a week. I'll have it figured out."

You were surprised to see Jack in the interrogation viewing room. The Strike Commander needed plausible deniability. He didn't need to come witness Blackwatch's dirty work.

"I'm here for Gabriel," he said, reading your look. "And because those bastards came after me."

Captain Amari, Lacroix, and Jesse joined you.

The surviving cyborg was strapped to a table. His arms and legs had already been removed, but they were still connected through wires. He was pale, sweat dribbling down his face.

"State your name, affiliation, and mission," Gabriel said, sounding bored.

"Yancy Koch. Nguyen Private Security. We were to capture and extract Jack Morrison."

Anh Nguyen's man then. You got your tablet out and began to take notes.

"Where are you based out of?"

"Hanoi."

"Where'd you get your fancy limbs?"
"Work. Most of us were...injured vets. We signed contracts with the House of Nguyen. They gave us a second chance at life." You felt an involuntary twinge of sympathy.

Gabriel's jaw clenched. "I see. How were you going to get him out of there?"

"We had roof access. A transport was supposed to meet us once we confirmed possession."

"Were you supposed to kill all the witnesses?"

"Everyone but Morrison and Petras. We had her picture. She was deemed too valuable to kill."

You could feel Gabriel's stare through the glass. He couldn't possibly see you, could he?

"You ever been to Canada?"

The cyborg began to hyperventilate. "I-I-"

And like that, your sympathy evaporated.

"Thought so," Gabriel said. He took out his bolt cutters and patted the cyborg's left hand. "Just how sensitive are these?"

"I can't feel anything," the cyborg began.

Gabriel tore through the index finger and the cyborg locked up, his eyes widening.

"Does that hurt?"

"N-No."

Gabriel plucked off the middle finger. "Is that so?"

"I don't feel a thing."

Gabriel snapped the ring finger and pried it out of the socket.

You could feel eyes on you, but you kept taking notes. Why was it those fingers? You're the one who lost them, not him. But then, who were you to judge? You went for the neck.

"Fair enough. I was just checking." Gabriel picked up a curved blade. "You've got plenty of flesh to work with. Did you or your party spare anyone in the Yukon?"

"I don't know. My orders were to ensure there were no witnesses."

You stretched your left hand out, very careful not to close it as you clenched your right fist. You really needed some kind of armored gloves if you were making hard fists.

"You like shooting noncombatants, Koch?" Gabriel slid the blade up his abdomen, and a red line sprung up behind it.

"Oh God, I was just following orders!"

"Keep him alive," Jack said, and you belatedly realized Gabriel was wearing an earpiece.

"You're going to tell me all about those orders, Koch. And if I'm satisfied, you might get to live," Gabriel said in a low voice. "And if I'm not, well, I'm sure I can find ways to cheer myself
Some of Koch's data didn't add up and you charted it accordingly. Gabriel was personally chasing down a lead in Siem Reap, and he'd taken Jesse and Genji, expecting heavy resistance. It irked you a little that he'd left you behind, but then who would be left to do paperwork? Gabriel liked going on missions and maybe it was better you didn't do a lot of runs together. He was even more obnoxious when he had guns.

You sucked down some sludgy coffee and debated begging Ziv to bring you some food. He could drop off more reports and maybe grab you a burger.

A familiar single knock sounded, and the door opened. Jack strode in, in full Strike Commander regalia, carrying a bag.

"Gabriel's still out," you said.

"I know." He pulled up a chair and set the bag on your desk. "I brought some cake. Figured you could use a break."

"Thanks," you said. Because this was the first time Jack had come to the office with the clear purpose to visit you and not Gabriel. It probably meant he needed something. You put your work aside and cleared space.

Jack had brought an entire small iced chocolate cake. It smelled of chocolate and fruit jam. If you remembered correctly, Jack had some meeting in Vienna yesterday. "Is that a sachertorte?"

He gave you a funny look. "Am I the only person who didn't know what this was? Ana told me to buy one for her. I thought you'd like one too."

You shrugged. "You're the Strike Commander, not a food critic."

"That means "yes you hoosier, quit being such a bumpkin."

"I would never directly disrespect a man who brought me cake." You steepled your fingers. "Not while the cake was still on the table anyway."

Jack snorted as he pulled out a canister of whipped cream and plasticware. "While I suspect you could eventually eat the whole thing on your own. I want to try it." He proceeded to cut you a large slice and sprayed on a generous dollop of whipped cream. You got up, refilled your coffee, and poured him a cup.

"Thanks, Jack." You gave it ten seconds. "Do you need something?"

Jack continued cutting the cake. "A clone to handle all my public appearances. And a vacation."

Huh. You sipped your coffee.

Jack took a bite of the sachertorte. His eyes widened, a looked up at you with slight awe. "This is really good," he said, mouth full of cake. It was kind of adorable.
You took a fork and cut yourself a bite. Chocolate sponge cake with apricot jam and chocolate icing. This wasn't too sweet, and rather dense. You sipped your coffee, savoring the taste of expensive chocolate.

"What's the occasion?"

"Does there need to be one?" Jack huffed.

"No. Cake is a good enough reason for cake." Jack occasionally brought food to your meals. You and Gabriel did most of the cooking. Sometimes Jesse would join in. But Jack and Genji mostly just showed up to eat. You didn't begrudge Jack that. He had a crazy schedule. Eating with Gabriel was more about companionship than freeloadng off Blackwatch. Maybe you were just bad at accepting gifts. And maybe Jack was behaving suspiciously.

You ate your cake, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I guess I wanted to say "thanks." For having my back in Paris." He smiled at you brightly. It was a good smile, all light and Jack Morrison's patented blinding charm. You pulse sped up for a moment.

"You're welcome," you said, keeping your voice as bland as possible.

"You're suspicious," Jack said, the smile fading. He studied your face with the cool calculation of the Strike Commander. You were getting used to how he did that. It was unnerving, but that was Jack. He had buckets of charisma and he channeled it accordingly.

You shrugged. "Being part of an undercover investigation into the black ops arm of a security agency does that to you."

"So I shouldn't bring you gifts?"

"You don't usually," you said.

"I-you're right." You expected the sheepish smile, the hand on the back of the head. Maybe an embarrassed "sorry." Something cute to disperse the tension. Instead he just looked you in the eye and said, "I'm a shitty friend."

You shrugged. "I figure you got my back in a firefight. That's good enough."

"It's really not," he said, looking a little disturbed. "We had this talk in Paris."

You shrugged. "You're the Strike Commander. That alone takes its toll on your personal relationships."

"...Yeah." Jack sighed. "I noticed."

"I mean, being a shitty friend doesn't help either." You put some cake in your mouth before you added to that.

Jack narrowed his eyes and sat back in his chair. "Do you think I betrayed, Gabriel?" he asked flatly.

"If you mean, do I think you're part of the conspiracy that tried to kill him? No." You looked down at the cake. You hadn't really expected him to come out and directly ask you. Because honestly, you didn't think Jack really cared what you thought. "I don't know enough about
what happened in your relationship to say whether or not you "betrayed" him at some point."

You wondered then, if you were wrong and about to pay for it. But after that day on the roof in Paris, you couldn't help but trust Jack. Maybe you were getting too paranoid.

"You were suspicious of me in the beginning."

"Yes," you agreed. "I was suspicious of everyone." You still were. You just hid it better.

"Why?" Surprisingly, he didn't sound hurt. There was a genuine query there.

"The situation didn't add up."

Jack leaned forward on the desk. "Explain."

You'd been thinking about this for awhile. Talked about it with people. Did some good brainstorming with the understanding that you would never say that shit to Jack Morrison's face. Ha! "So, Ziv is really good at his job, don't you think?"

"Agent Mihret is an asset," Jack said. "His skills are impressive and he's got leadership potential."

"You think we should promote him over Winston? I mean, Winston's so...Let's just say, maybe the general public would like a young handsome man and not a gorilla in charge of our tech. You know? The image is all wrong. Sure, Winston is capable but-"

Jack stared at you, disappointment on his face. "Have you been listening to Gabriel's conspiracy theories?"

"Fast forward. For whatever reasons, you give Ziv Winston's old job. Are you going to demote Winston and shuffle him off to climate-change R&D? He'd be good at it. You know, give him something to manage, but then you make sure everyone knows that Ziv's in charge. You could give Winston a consultant status, come up with another position title worthy of his experience, or give him a chance to save face. But you don't."

Jack wasn't slow on the uptake. "That's bad management."

"Yeah, I agree."

He sat back in his chair. "Go on."

"Doesn't mean Ziv's not qualified. Doesn't mean Ziv is bad at the job. It does make you wonder what upper management is trying do besides sabotage Winston. I mean, I'd be worried about the strain on their friendship, wouldn't you? They certainly wouldn't be working well together after that."

Jack inhaled sharply.

"I can't take credit for the theory. Me and some others worked this out." You weren't going to mention Jesse and Captain Amari just yet, in case Jack didn't take this well. "So it doesn't make sense. Not unless someone was actively trying to fuck over Gabriel. I mean, the situation sucks and Gabriel's proud. He's going to take it as a slight."

Jack was quiet.

"And then I thought about Captain Patel. She's my personal hero, but she was a real stickler
for the hierarchy. I have to ask, was SEP really rigid about the command structure? I figured they have to be. If your super soldiers don't respect authority..."

Jack nodded. "Yes. Hierarchy was drilled into us. Aishani was no exception."

"You were Gabriel's second. And suddenly the roles are reversed. That's not going to be a smooth transition. Less so when Gabriel gets shuffled over to Blackwatch. He's going to wonder if you had some bearing on that decision, you know, to get him out of the way." Because Jack was proud too. He'd rise to the occasion and then resent Gabriel for not being happy for him. "Overwatch has all kinds of psych evals and forecasting analytics. You really think we should have missed that?"

Jack was watching you closely, his face too blank.

Your throat itched.

"Gabriel has always been difficult." Jack sighed. "They told me I had a cleaner record, and I was a less...divisive figure."

"That's true," you agreed. "I don't think you're a bad man for the job, Jack. I just wonder why they treated Gabriel they way they did."

Jack nodded curtly.

"You're obviously leadership material," you said, because you didn't want to hurt his feelings. His big super soldier feelings. "Being Gabriel's second had to be rough. You had to be approachable, friendly, someone the squad could come to if they were too...shy to deal with Gabriel." And he had to be tough too, because that kind of environment didn't allow for weakness. It explained how he was so good at being the charming idealistic leader one moment and the ruthless Strike Commander the next. "Shin did the same thing for Captain Patel. He smoothed over a lot of her rough spots."

"You do it too," Jack said. "There's been a sharp drop in HR complaints about Gabe."

"Probably because we're on a molehunt, he personally killed two former agents, and has been weeding out the shitty ones. Everyone's thinking twice about filing complaints."

Jack shook his head. "You act as a buffer for him."

You shrugged. "I'm his assistant; it's my job." You'd learned more from Shin and Captain Patel than you realized. Like how to deal with grumpy super soldiers. Most importantly: feed them a lot and don't make eye contact when they're wound up. "But my point is, whoever made that call, handled it so badly, you have to wonder, was it on purpose? And once you look at the purpose, you also have to wonder who stands to gain?"

Jack cut another slice of cake. "So your suspicions?"

"Petras is obviously high up there."

"He promoted me," Jack said. He took a deep breath, not looking at you. "There were several UN figures that played a role and encouraged me to take the job. I can make a list."

"That'd be helpful." You took another bite of cake. "So back to my suspicions. At first, I wondered how you could miss the big glaring red flag that, but then I learned from personal experience. Gabriel is really good at being petty and enraged people to distraction."
"After seeing you together, I don't think you would willingly betray him." You paused. "You haven't had this talk with Gabriel yet, have you?"

Jack looked at the floor. "You can be alarmingly insightful, Lucky."

"Yeah, I know your first impression of me was that I was an idiot. I give that out a lot."

Jack laughed, not denying it. "I feel like an idiot. When you explain it like that...well damnit, how did I miss it?"

"Ego," you said without thinking. Then you popped a bite of cake in your mouth because damnit, friend or not, this was your boss's boss and maybe you shouldn't be that honest.

"You're as blunt as Gabriel complains you are." Jack sounded tired. He rubbed his eyes.

"I don't know why that surprises you. And that's the pot calling the kettle colorist epithets. While on fire."

"Sometimes I take people for granted," Jack said after a minute. "I'm sorry."

"You brought me cake," you said, unsure of how to take that. "As long as it's not poisoned, that's a declaration of friendship in my book."

"Thank you for helping me see myself." He looked at you so earnestly, it hurt. It was easy to see how Gabriel fell into those blue eyes and never crawled back out. "I get too caught up sometimes."

Winston pulled some interesting location data from the dead cyborgs. Koch had spilled quite a bit. And Anh Nguyen had bumped herself up the head of your list.

Jack had kept Ainsley's tablet. He and Gabriel had chairs behind Gabriel's desk. Lacroix and Captain Amari took the couch. Jesse and Genji sat with you around your desk.

You went first, giving a recap of Gleeson's testimony. Everyone had the transcripts. Then you explained the conversation you'd had with Ainsley as the Assassin-Butler.

"Wait, you talked her into quitting?" Gabriel asked.

"It's what she really wanted," you said sincerely. "I only helped her realize that."

"Huh," he said. "I thought she wanted in Jack's pants."

"She did, but he was too much like her father, and she just couldn't deal with the implications of that realization."

Jack covered his face. "Unnecessary-"
"She kept bringing up her uncle," you continued. "Either Ainsley is a completely unwitting fool. Or she's a genius mastermind implicating the Director in her plot. I'm kind of leaning toward the former, but the latter actually wouldn't surprise me. She said her uncle liked Jack better than her, wanted her to seduce him into the family, and made plans for a "men's only" retreat for the first month of August in the New England area. It all sounds sketchy as hell to me."

"Agent Mihret found very high level tracking software in her tablet. She might not have willingly given away your location," Captain Amari said. "He's inspected her terminal and found traces of similar work."

"She said her uncle would come down and "help" her with work. I'm assuming he had access to everything she could see, and then some." You'd written a report up that night, because Ainsley had said too many things that you needed purged from your head.

"That the director is conspiring with a hostile UN member is a pretty farfetched accusation," Lacroix said. "I take it you have found more tangled things."

"Well, it seems that your old base was in just the right spot to pick up some very interesting data transmissions," Jesse said, looking at you. "Winston said something about northern lights and magnetic pulses and Agent Cohn's unauthorized tech modifications, but I stopped paying attention. You guys received massive packets of encrypted Talon weapon programs. It covers pulse rifle production, neural reconditioning, some highly unethical biology mods, and that's just the stuff the nerds have decrypted. The real jackpot is that some of the location tags haven't been scrubbed or rerouted. So we can find where some of this data came from. Hanoi was on the list, if you were wondering."

"The Shimada are their allies in this," Genji said. "There are contracts out on Captain Amari, Commander Reyes, and Strike Commander Morrison. But interestingly enough, you're the priority target, Agent Lacroix. As is your wife."

Lacroix narrowed his eyes. "Send me everything."

"Agent Mihret has also finished decrypting Vialli's data. The old bat stockpiled blackmail on his allies," Captain Amari smirked. "He kept locations, in lat-long, down to the seconds. His information also corroborates the weapons R&D. And yes, these cyborgs are mostly being routed through Hanoi."

"It looks like all roads lead to Hanoi," Gabriel said. "I'll start planning the op."

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"Riggs is a homebody," Jesse said, not very enthusiastically. "Writes letters to his mother, gets snickerdoodles sent weekly, and no one has anything negative to say about him."

You stirred the milk. "I don't want to think about it today."

"OK darling. Is some of that for your poor chilled Jesse?"

You were in the staff kitchen, trying to decide which type of hot chocolate you wanted most. You had a whole backpack of cookies- you might have gone overboard, but given the occasion, you weren't taking any chances.
There were dark chocolate curls with a generous mix of fresh peppermint oil. There was an organic fair trade milk chocolate with mini-marshmallows. There was a wonderfully spiced Mexican hot chocolate filled with chili powder and cayenne pepper. And there was whiskey. Lots of whiskey. Maybe you'd do that instead.

You poured Jesse the milk chocolate with mini-marshmallows and stirred in the milk. He took it eagerly. "Ow hot! That's a lot of chocolate, sugarpie. You feeling OK?"

"I-" You paused. You weren't sure how you were feeling just yet. Maybe because you were trying not to. Justice, you believed, would be the best therapy, but your shrink kept talking about how important it was to have a future to work toward. Something not tied to the trauma of your past. Something just for you.

Jesse nudged you.

"I don't know," you said. "It's an odd day."

"Well, I saw Morrison limping toward the Commander's office. Maybe you should go commiserate." Jesse's tone was odd.

"Maybe," you said.

You looked up to see Jesse frowning down at you. "You ain't pining after someone, are you?"

"No one alive," you said. "Pining" wasn't even the right word now. Thinking of Shin made you sad. It made you determined. But he was dead and you had accepted that a long time ago. It was more the absence, the place where he used to be. You dreamt of him last night. You were eating ice cream and throwing pennies in a pond. Captain Patel was going to meet you there. It was a nice dream. You still woke up with tears on the pillow.

"Oh." Jesse sipped his chocolate. "This is good," he said. "Want me to take you out to town? You can meet a good-looking...whatever you're in the mood for, and have some fun?"

"I've thought about it," you admitted. "But I'm not there yet."

"OK," Jesse said. "You let me know. I'm a great wingman. Well, better than your other options."

You tried picturing Genji as wingman, and cracked a grin. "Thanks Jesse."

"Want to watch a movie? I have Transformers XXII. They cast omnics as-"

"Nah, I'm going to go finish mapping some of the notes. I want the next phase of Shit Spiders done before winter's up." You poured the milk into a thermos and packed your chocolate back up in your backpack. You could decide what you wanted after you got back to the office.

You walked in to see Jack sitting in Gabriel's chair face down on the desk, Gabriel was working his shoulders. Jack groaned, and Gabriel laughed.

"That's what you get for being stubborn."

Jack said something unintelligible.

"Should I use Winston's lab instead?" You asked.
"Nah, Jack doesn't need a happy ending," Gabriel said.

"Jack needs all the happiness he can get," Jack muttered. "And failing that, Jack needs food."

You closed the door behind you. "All I have are sweets."

"I'll take them," he said, not raising his head.

"Should I ask?"

"UN meeting. Director Petras was asking uncomfortable questions. Some about Ainsley. I put him off, but uh...that's the spot Gabe."

You grabbed three mugs from the cupboard. "Spicy, mini-marshmallows, or peppermint?"

"Marshmallows," Jack said. "Wait what am I getting?"

"Spicy," Gabriel said.

Rolling your eyes, you made them each a mug of hot chocolate. There wasn't enough warm milk left for you to have a full batch, so you topped off the peppermint with whiskey.

You set the mugs down on Gabriel's desk. Jack sniffed the air and raised his head. "Whiskey?"

"That's in mine. You have milk chocolate."

Jack picked up his mug, closing his eyes and inhaling. "Oh, that smells good."

Gabriel sipped his. "That's a lot of hot chocolate, chica."

"I wasn't sure what I wanted, so I ordered three different kinds." You pulled some cookies out of your bag. "I might have gone overboard with the cookies."

Gabriel raised a brow. "What's the occasion?"

You contemplated lying. Your period was the perfect excuse, and you had been saving that one. But honesty was the best policy with Gabriel. "Shin's birthday." You took a drink, the burn of the whiskey made up for the tepid temperature of the chocolate. The peppermint combined with the whiskey wasn't bad.

Jack and Gabriel exchanged a look. You sank back in the chair. "Don't get all wound up. I wasn't throwing him a party. I just knew today would be...off. Figured I'd need a pick me up. Got a little carried away."

Jack opened up a box of sandwich cookies, chocolate with cream filling. "You want to talk about it?"

"Not really." You took a cookie. "Not much to say. Just...feelings."

"Psych have any helpful insight?" Gabriel asked.

You shrugged. "Thinks I need to put myself out there more. I mean, we were together less than a year. And it's almost been a year since everything went tits up."
"No timetable on grief," Gabriel said. "You're ready when you're ready. It's not a race or a competition."

"Yeah. I don't know. Shit Spiders means there aren't a lot of people I can trust. Maybe Shin just represents a time when I was happy and things were simpler. Fuck if I know." You downed the rest of your chocolate and refilled your mug with whiskey.

"Are you...unhappy here?" Jack asked.

"Meh. It's not the location. It's the fucking conspiracy. It's all complicated and stupid."

"What would you be doing if you weren't here?" He took another cookie. "I mean, when this is over. What do you want to do?"

You shrugged. "I haven't gotten that far."

Gabriel gave you a sharp look.

"What? It's not like I'm planning to lay down and die. I'm just really focused on the now. This is a lot of work. But I like it here. I'd probably stay on." You paused. "Why? You thinking about retirement already? I know Gabriel's old, but-"

"Step onto the mat. I'll show you old..."

"All that stuff I say about hope and the future isn't bullshit, Lucky." Jack crossed his arms ignoring Gabriel. "We all need something to work toward. It makes us fight harder. I know we're all swept up in something bigger than us, individually. But it's not going to last forever, and you need to start planning what you want to do after."

"Yeah, maybe." You kind of wished you hadn't said anything now. Jack's pep talk was well-meaning. But now you felt like a charity case. Poor grief-stricken Lucky Strike. Doesn't know how to live outside a crisis.

Because one day, Gabriel Reyes and Jack Morrison weren't going to be in Overwatch. One day Captain Amari would be gone. One day Jesse or Genji might up and quit or never come back from a mission. And then...?

You hung your head. And then it would be a mess all over again. You didn't want to see that day. The thought of it broke your heart, because now it seemed inevitable. How could you have thought otherwise? "Wow, now I'm even more depressed than when we started. Good talk." You grabbed the whiskey, but Gabriel caught your wrist.

"You and me. Mat. Let's go."

"I'm not sober," you told him.

"Oh I'll sober you up," he promised.

You tried to pull away. "I'm not in the mood."

"Come on. Don't make me drag you," He said, yanking you to your feet.

You thought about making him drag you kicking and screaming. That would just lead to more disturbing rumors about everyone's personal lives. Mostly yours.

"Aww, she's sad, I'm gonna beat her up. That'll fix it," you muttered.
"Just gonna knock some sense into you," Gabriel grumbled.

Jack sighed. "I'll get a med kit."

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You were mostly sober by the time you got the gym. It was late. The gym was empty. You had your basic fingers on, so no drugging him and running. You thought about just running. You could hide under Captain Amari’s bed forever. You'd live off tea fumes and biscuit crumbs. Jesse could smuggle you candy.

Jack sat there, holding his mug of hot chocolate and eating your cookies. He seemed oddly calm about the whole thing. Maybe he was still holding a grudge over all those times you were stupid-honest.

Gabriel stripped down to a thin white t-shirt and sweat pants. You did not need to watch him stretch. You didn't need to see how well-muscled he was all over. He could easily crush your head with his thighs. Or pretty much any part of his body.

You rubbed your forehead and then tied your hair back. You took off your gloves and studied your fingers.

"Better warm up," he said.

It would hurt marginally less if you were loose when he kicked your ass. You began your stretches, pointedly not looking at either of them. You'd take a hit, ragdoll, and beg off because you had work to do in the morning.

When you stood, Gabriel had his hands up. He grinned at you, the set of his jaw nowhere near friendly. His eyes gleamed with excitement. You nearly took a step back.

"Come on, Lucky Strike. Show me what you got," he rumbled, crooking a finger.

So much for Plan A. He was getting into this.

You went for the ankles, practically sliding into him. He kicked at you and you lunged past it, grabbing his knees and knocking him off balance enough to take him to the ground.

It was like hitting a rock, a very warm, slightly hairy rock, but the impact hurt you more than him. You punched him in the liver, but not hard enough. You weren't sure you could break past his six pack shield. He rolled sideways and you fell backward, forcing yourself to tuck and roll. You got back on your feet and Gabriel smirked at you from the floor.

"Come here," he growled. "You're going to end up on the ground anyway. I'll save you the fall."

You charged him, springing off the mat into an airborne kick. You struck his chest, but Gabriel's hand caught your ankle and whipped you to the floor. Landing on your back, you bit into your lip. Blood filled your mouth.

"You always did like doing things the hard way," he said, straddling your chest, his knees pinning your shoulders to the mat. You thrashed underneath him, but it was like hitting a brick
wall. He was heavier than Jack or Genji and you couldn't budge him.

He shifted, leaning over you. One hand went to your neck. You froze, his fingers pressing lightly on your throat.

"You should tap," he said.

You turned your head to the side, forcing yourself to breathe. Gabriel wasn't going to choke you out. Gabriel wouldn't hurt you...badly. He gave a squeeze.

Rational thoughts evaporated. Snarling, you grabbed his thigh, and bit down hard through the fabric. You bit till you could taste blood, the searing heat letting you know it wasn't yours.

Gabriel swore in a violent stream, and grabbed his thigh. His weight shifted and you slid out from under him, blood dripping down your chin. You wiped your mouth with the back of your hand and charged, your left hand straightened. He whirled, his arm snapping out to knock you away. He was fast, but not as fast as Jack, and you ducked underneath and lunged up, smashing into his chest with your metal fingers. You'd been aiming for the neck, but he'd dodged.

His arms closed around you, trapping you in a bear hug. Your ribs creaked as he squeezed you against him. Hard things dug into your soft tissue, your hips, your stomach.

"I should bite you back," Gabriel growled, his voice a rasp. He stared down at you, pupils huge.

"Fuck you," you hissed back, glaring up at him. You tried to squirm away, but he had you pinned. You threw yourself forward, crown of your head smacking him in the nose, just like he'd showed you. Gabriel swore and you reared back, going for another shot.

He slammed you into the mat before you had a chance. You rolled sideways, and drove your elbow into his stomach as he tried to pin you again. The short punches in the floating ribs might have repelled a normal human, but Gabriel flipped you around, his arm wrapping around your neck, pressing your back to his chest. You couldn't reach his arm to bite, so you kicked. When that didn't work you shot your elbow back, trying to hit a weak spot. He didn't choke you this time, just held you immobile against his chest. Panting, you tried to slip out of the chokehold, your fingers digging into his arm. You pressed hard, searching for the nerve that would make him release you. You squeezed, till you felt his arm spasm.

Slick with sweat, you slid down and sprung forward, feeling the air whoosh overhead. He'd grabbed at you and missed. You whirled, straightened your left hand and struck as Gabriel charged you, driving you back down into the mat. You hit him in the neck, but his momentum carried him forward, throwing you on your back.

He gagged, holding his throat and glowering down at you. You went to hit him again, but he dropped off of you. Unsure if he was plotting a second run, you tapped. Then you went flat on the mat, all your limbs burning. Gabriel had gone half strength, at most. You had no illusions about that. It didn't matter. You were in one piece and he was sitting overhead rubbing his neck. Good. He was the one that went after you. You'd just used his own strength against him.

"You OK, Lucky?" Jack asked gently.

You were going to hurt so much tomorrow. "I hate you both."

"You bit me!" Gabriel said, his voice raw.
"You were choking me. What else was I going to do?"

"Tap out," he said.

"Yeah, that'd be the logical thing to do," you said. "But if you...strangle me, I don't react well. And unlike Jack, you knew that going in. I have no sympathy." You closed your eyes. Your heart beat in time with the blood in your skull. You were already hurting pretty badly. If Gabriel tried to go for another round, you were going to tear his face off. Actually, you'd probably just die.

Someone crouched beside you, and you cracked open an eye. Jack's gloved hand tilted your chin up and he wiped your mouth off with a soft cloth. He wore a look of concentration.

"I can't tell how much of that is yours and how much is Gabe's."

"Half?" you guessed. He dabbed at the wounds and his gloved fingers brushed against your lips. Jack's focus was on your mouth and it made you self-conscious. "Did I bite a chunk of my lip off or something?"

"No," he said abruptly and put one hand on the side of your neck. You flinched. "Does that hurt?"

"A little." You were going have bruises, probably in the shape of Gabriel's fingers. "I think my back is going to be one big bruise," you said.

"Hold on," Jack said, and the comforting yellow light of a biotic emitter began to numb your pain.

Gabriel sat down on the other side of you, giving you a good look at the bloody tear in his pants. You couldn't see the wound, but you'd ripped his pants with your teeth.

"You bit me," he said, still incredulous.

"Sorry," you said a little insincerely. "You freaked me out."

Gabriel sighed. "Yeah, I got it. No breathplay. Message received, Lucky."

Jack was blushing now. Maybe watching Gabe fight really did it for him. You couldn't blame him. Gabriel was good looking.

"We should clean up the mats," Jack said.

"I'm going to lay here a bit longer." You tried to move your left shoulder. That didn't feel right. "How was this supposed to help?"

"If you wanted to mope, I thought I'd give you something to mope about."

"Gee, thanks."

Jack moved over beside Gabriel and started cleaning the bite. Gabriel crossed his arms. "Got you out of your head, didn't I?"

You turned on your side so you could look at him. "Not following."

"You think yourself into a corner and get stuck. A little exercise fixes that." Gabriel's hand lingered on Jack's shoulder. "Thanks," he said bending over and kissing Jack.
You turned your head. They were right beside you. You could feel the heat radiating off them. And you weren't completely oblivious. Gabriel had been hard while fighting you. You'd felt him very clearly when he'd trapped your body against his. He was...proportionally big. You closed your eyes. Well, there were some unsavory implications there. The most likely one was that Gabriel got turned on from hand-to-hand combat. It figured. It explained why he rarely sparred in his combat class. It explained why Jack showed up to them so often. No wonder he was so grumpy after combat missions. The chafing had to be hell.

Jack groaned, and the tension in the room ratcheted up. You could not stay here and listen to this. No matter how much you wanted to.

"I'll get the bleach wipes and clean this up. Then I'm going to bed," you said, struggling to get upright.

Gabriel released Jack and gave you a neutral look. "We making you uncomfortable?"

"I'm tired," you said. "Everything hurts."

"Wore you out already? After one mouthful?"

Those two were ready to go. Gabriel was dropping innuendo like cluster bombs. Normally, it didn't bother you, but normally you didn't have to go wash the taste of your commander's blood out of your mouth.

"It's not that I bit you," you said. "It's that I nearly lost my teeth to your thighs then drowned in your blood. I'm done for the night."

Gabriel gripped your forearms and hauled you up against his side. "We can get this cleaned up. Do you need to go to the infirmary?"

"I'm fine. Just sore."

You took a step. You'd kicked Gabriel and your foot felt like you'd smashed it against a rock. You were going to be limping.

"Take the emitter," Jack said.

"Thanks." You hobbled out of the gym, desperately not thinking about whether or not Jack and Gabriel were going to wait till they got to a private room.

You dreamt of him holding you to the mat, his hips pinning you down. You started to say Shin's name, but it was Gabriel's weight on your body and Jack's hands on your wrists. Gabriel gave the most deliciously masculine laugh before leaning over and biting down on your neck, teeth not quite breaking flesh.

"This is payback," he said.

You whimpered as he ground against you. You could feel the outline of his cock very firmly between your thighs.

"He likes it when you struggle." Jack kissed the other side of your neck, his tongue flicking
down your collar bone.

"Let's get you warmed up," Gabriel purred, tearing your shirt off. "Don't worry, we'll be doing things the hard way..."

You woke up then, sore, horny, and mortified. Apparently dating Shin had made sparring into foreplay for you too. He would've been so amused. It was finally time to try out your vibrator attachment.

"-So in conclusion, while the noise level is acceptable, I feel it could be reduced and the heat output needs to be better monitored. You could make thermal control part of the package as well. And you could improve range of use by offering programmable patterns of vibration as well as additional lubrication options, rotors, and a softer covering to prevent chafing."

Torby and Angela stared at you in comic horror.

"Still, it was a satisfying prototype. Will you be wanting it back?" You asked.

Torby narrowed his eyes at you. "Well played, Lucky Strike."

Jack gripped the bars of Gabriel's headboard. He was too tense for restraints tonight. Gabriel knelt between Jack's tensed legs, his teeth worrying at the Strike Commander's inner thigh.

"Stop teasing, Gabe." Jack was hard, he had been since he'd watched Gabe wrestle you to the ground. It got worse when you bit Gabe. You'd caught him staring, your swollen lips stained with blood, your body shaking with exhaustion. The memory made him ache. "Either suck me or fuck me, can't take the edging right now."

Gabriel pushed three of his fingers past Jack's lips. "Get them wet for me." Gabriel's voice was a low rumble. Jack eagerly slid his tongue over the digits and Gabriel pushed them in to the third knuckle.

Jack sucked on Gabriel's fingers, his hips jerking upward, wiggling his invitation.

"So needy." Gabriel pulled them out. "Turn over. I want to pound you into the mattress," he growled.

Jack rolled over, his fingers digging into the sheets. "I think you mean you want to pound Lucky into the mats, with your cock.

"Smartass." Gabriel's calloused fingers slid into Jack's puckered hole. Jack clenched around him, knowing Gabe enjoyed some resistance, just like he liked the burn of being stretched. "But still so tight," Gabriel thrust roughly, as Jack began to pant. "Gotta get you nice and sloppy."
"Fuck...I can take it Gabe. Just hurry up." Jack shuddered as Gabriel's fingers sped up, going deeper. Jack buried his face in the crook of his arm.

Gabriel withdrew his fingers and grabbed the lube off the nightstand. Jack stiffened as Gabe worked the cool gel into his passage.

"Going to wreck you tonight, Jack. Can't hold back now." Gabriel pressed the head of his cock against Jack's entrance. He was long, but it was the girth that was intimidating.

Jack moaned into the bed as Gabriel slowly pushed in, the pleasure of being so full momentarily blanking his mind. He clawed the sheets, his whole body shuddering from the intrusion.

"Gabe," Jack gasped, his neglected cock leaking against his thigh. He pushed back against the thickness stretching him. It burned along that fine line between pain and pleasure in a way that wound Jack up and left him gasping.

One of Gabe's hands slipped around his throat. The other gripped his weeping cock. Jack squirmed as Gabriel's mouth slid down his neck.

Gabriel was in to the hilt, his body trapping Jack against the bed. Gabriel had always run dangerously hot, and Jack writhed, sweat already beading on his forehead.

"I felt your eyes on us," Gabriel's voice was low and hungry. "You wanted to see her under me almost as much as I wanted her there." Gabriel's fingers firmly squeezed Jack's cock, and began to stroke.

"Damnit, Gabe." Jack's hips jerked, as he fucked himself between Gabriel's cock and slick hand.

"Were you hoping to have her between us tonight?" Gabriel drove into Jack's ass. "Or were you thinking I'd bring you both back here and fuck you like this while she sucked you off?" Jack whined, the images vivid in his head. Those pretty lips wrapped around his dick while Gabe slammed into him. The hand on his cock sped up.

"You're so filthy, Jack," Gabriel purred. "Fantasizing about a threesome with one of your subordinates."

"You have no room to tal-" Jack groaned as Gabriel picked up the pace.

"Tell me about it," Gabriel commanded.

"I wanted to hold her wrists while you stripped her," Jack said, strain creeping into his voice. "I wanted to watch you inch inside her, see the look on her face while you filled her up for the first time."

"Fuck!" Gabriel swore. "Jack-"

"Do you think you'd fit? It'd be such a stretch..." Jack teased. He felt the moment Gabriel's composure snapped, his thrusts becoming hard and desperate. There were no words now. Jack pushed back, trying to ride it out. The older man's hands tightened around his neck and cock. Gabriel's hips jerked and he came inside Jack, hand still milking Jack's cock.

Jack's eyes rolled back as Gabriel's hot cum filled him. A few more ragged thrusts into
Gabriel's hand, and he came too, semen splashing his chest. He laid there a moment, legs shaky. Gabriel kissed the back of his neck and withdrew, cum oozing out of Jack's stretched hole.

It took Jack a few minutes to remember he had legs and sentience. He rolled over and Gabriel was there, kissing him hard enough to bruise.

"You fucking tease," Gabriel said without rancor.

Jack laughed softly. "You liked that a lot."

"Yeah, but I didn't realize you did too."

"I never had a problem with her." Jack could feel the blood rushing to his face.

"You weren't always interested either."

Jack's blush grew. "I've been thinking about it more."

"Since Paris?"

Jack rubbed the back of his head. He knew Gabriel wanted to hear him admit it. "You dressed her up and put her in my colors. What was I supposed to think?"

Gabriel laughed. "You prick. It was the fight that did it. You just like them tough and crazy."

Jack couldn't refute that. After all, Gabriel embodied those traits.

They'd gone a few more rounds, Jack having no trouble switching roles. More relaxed than he'd been in weeks, Gabriel lay there sweaty, sticky, and fulfilled. The bite mark on his thigh throbbed and he grinned at the bruise that was forming. It would fade soon, but he liked knowing it was still there.

"You deserved that," Jack said, nestled against Gabriel's chest. It was a small thrill every time he looked over and saw Jack's blonde hair on his pillow. He didn't want to get used to this. He loved knowing Jack was here, pressed against him.

"Yeah," Gabriel stretched, he ached, but in a good way. "But she didn't tap out or run away. That's progress."

"I guess." Jack yawned. "She's not me, Gabe. You can't just throw her on the mat and expect that to get her going. And she definitely noticed that you were turned on."

"Probably. Didn't mean to let it go that far," Gabriel muttered. "I got carried away."

"Mmm. You'll have to apologize. Might have freaked her out. Don't think this is how she goes about things."

"Fuck," Gabriel muttered. "You're right."

"Can I get that in writing?" Jack asked.
I keep thinking up fluff scenes and accidentally extending the story. I didn't think it would take this long to finish. Plot? What's that?! We need a Christmas special! (We needed a Halloween one, but I've been looking at my timeline and I don't think I can fit it just yet.) We need to go to the US and meet the families! Lacroix dinner party! Blackwatch/Captain Amari tea party! THE YULE (I mean Overwatch Appreciation) BALL! Reinhardt dancing! Exclamation mark abuse! Kittens! MORE CAKE! I uh...sorry. And part of me is like "no! Make the hard-hitting espionage and angst the core of your story!" And part of me is like "but I want to see Jack's dog!" So yeah.

Sorry, I've been eating lemon cake today (and I jogged/walked 2.5 miles, so minimal guilt) and I have this slice of amazing triple chocolate cake in my fridge and it will make the next two days bearable. So I'm full of sugar and excitement.
Yesterday had been Shin's birthday. You'd celebrated by drinking and getting your ass kicked. You'd bitten Gabriel and had involuntary dirty thoughts about two of your commanding officers. Shin would probably be pretty amused.

The biotic emitter had taken care of most of the bruising, but your muscles felt like wet clay. You were back at your desk, sorting through another chunk of the Greenland data dump. You found a cache of pictures. Valdez cooking. Lao and Valdez kissing. A blurry one of Nwazue raising her middle finger at the camera. Rivka and Lao building something haphazard and covered in wires. Simon bandaging Valdez. Captain Patel looking off-camera. Captain Patel shooting into the distance. And Shin. Shin and Valdez sparring. Shin and Nwazue drinking.

These were Lao's files. You sat back in your chair and cycled through them, finding one of you after you'd just joined up. Your uniform didn't fit right, and you were slumped against a wall making a dramatic "why me?" face. Shin stood beside you laughing.

You weren't going to cry. Because you were happy. Because all you had before were their ID photos from central records. It was stupid and superstitious, but yesterday was Shin's birthday. It would be like him to give you a gift for his birthday, a day late. You blinked rapidly and downed your coffee.

You would look through these later. Alone. Now you just had to focus on the Hanoi angle. Genji was off again, gathering intel on Nguyen's movements and facilities. You had to check Vialli's coordinates against known facilities in Hanoi.

You got more work done when Gabriel and Jack weren't here. It was lunchtime and Gabriel hadn't come in yet. Well, you didn't actually expect him, given what he and Jack had to have been up to last night. And you didn't need that image in your head, any more than you needed to be having dirty dreams about either of them.

You met Jesse in the mess hall and to your surprise, that cute hacker Riggs was with him. Jesse invited him to sit with you.

"You know Lucky Strike," Jesse said brightly.

Riggs smiled, but he didn't make eye contact. "By reputation," he said shyly.

"Oh God. I'm afraid to ask." You picked at your fries. He sat across from you, mac and cheese untouched. "OK, spill," you said, having enough of delayed gratification.

"You killed a cyborg mercenary with a knife," Riggs said, still not looking up at you. "You punched the Strike Commander into entering your chili cookoff. You have metal claws underneath those gloves. You're a certified badass, ma'am."

You turn your head slowly to Jesse. Jesse smirked and shrugged. "I...what?"

"You watch TV with your eyes closed," Riggs said earnestly.
"I'm...napping."

"Really? You always answer when people talk to you."

You looked between him and Jesse. "Jesse, what did you do?"

"Don't deny it!" Riggs said. "I saw you punch Commander Morrison. You took him to the ground! He spars exclusively with you in class!"

"Uh...I don't have...claws," you said. "But the cyborg thing is true."

"I knew it! Those normie Overwatch techs didn't believe the reports! You and Commander Morrison took down those terrorists in Paris and saved all those politicians. The Parisian tabloids ran blurry pictures of Commander Morrison's aide-de-camp "Ms. Strike." And for the record, I totally believe your relationship is purely professional ma'am. I don't countenance that kind of talk. But you fought alongside the Strike Commander, just the two of you. You saved Director Petras' niece! I bet it was awesome."

You remembered a blood-soaked cafe, too many dead bodies, and a terse, angry Jack Morrison. Saving Ainsley Petras wasn't awesome, considering the amount of crying she did. But you didn't regret it. "Yeah, I guess," you said.

"I mean...before that mission, we'd all heard rumors. But we know better now ma'am. You and Commander Reyes were on a top secret mission in Canada. I heard that when you wouldn't talk it was the Shimada that took your fingers-" His eyes widened when he saw your face and he hastily dropped his gaze.

"Those circumstances are classified," you said stiffly.

"Oh my God, I'm sorry. You don't have to tell me twice." He was practically shaking with excitement. "It was the Shimada!" He mouthed at Jesse.

Jesse was shaking with silent laughter.

"I'm just a regular agent, Riggs," you said, even though that was a lie. Regular agents didn't have a rumor mill coming up with bizarre inflations of their exploits.

"Of course, ma'am," he said.

"Yes, ma'am," Jesse repeated.

You resisted the urge to throw your plate at his head.

"Thanks, Jesse. I know this is all your fault, somehow."

"It's mostly because you dropped Morrison," he said, not quite denying it. "And the aftermath of the Paris trip. It's not just Riggs. You're getting mighty popular, Lucky. Following in Ana's footsteps."

"You're calling her "Ana" now?" You folded your hands under your chin. "Tell me more."
"Ain't nothing to tell yet, Lucky." But he preened under the attention. "I'm making her some chili this weekend."

"Don't forget the bread bowl," you said.

"That's what she said." Jesse paused. "I said that literally. And I picked up some baklava on my last mission. Reckon that'll get me invited to tea." He looked around. "Where is the Commander?"

"Probably taking the day off," you said. "He kicked my ass last night," you said. "Called me out to the mat and then threw me around."

"What'd you do?" Jesse leaned forward with a smirk.

"I got "mopey." Which is bullshit because I made him hot chocolate. Well, him and Jack. They got my cookies too."

Jesse stared at Gabriel's chair. "I don't get it."

"Me neither. I think he was trying to cheer me up." You shrugged. "It seems like a Gabriel thing. "Here's some physical pain to distract you from your silly feelings." It kind of worked. Don't you dare tell him that."

Jesse leaned back in his chair. "Morrison was there too?"

"He brought the med kit."

"Darling, are you-?" Jesse stopped. "You good with this? It's not crossing any lines?"

"I don't really like the extra pain, no. But Gabriel wasn't going at full blast or anything. And Jack gave me a biotic emitter afterward. That worked wonders."

"Hm." Jesse crossed his arms. "Everything's go well, though? It's staying friendly? Morrison's not...scratch that. Everyone's getting along?"

"Those two are always..." You shook your head. "I'm totally jealous of the amount of sex they're getting."

Jesse made a face. "What?"

"They keep their clothes on in front of me, but they're not hiding what they're doing. I might have to take you up on the wingman offer soon. I'm just...rusty."

"Won't know till you try," Jesse said, adjusting his neck kerchief.

And my perception of my surroundings is completely off." You shook your head. "I can't ever ask Riggs to dinner, because he's got a bad case of hero worship and that would be weird."

"I thought so too."

"You could've just told me."

"Would you have believed me without seeing it for yourself?" Jesse dusted off his hat. He had an odd smile.

"Good point." You laid your face on your desk. The circumstances of your problems had
changed, but the end result was the same. You were alone and needed to get laid.

You'd mapped out the various locations of interest between Vialli's coordinates, the 9th Circle data dump, and the cyborg extraction information. Nguyen had a large compound what remained of the Old Quarter in Hanoi. It wasn't in her name, and in fact had been hidden under the aegis of several shell companies, but it was large and connected to a private shipping company that Genji had traced to the Vialli family. You'd put in a request to Winston for closer surveillance via drones. He didn't specialize in SIGINT, but he and Ziv could work something out.

The office door slammed open and your pistol was in your hands before you realized it.

"Code White," Gabriel shouted. "Gear up!"

The blood drained from your face. You grabbed your go-bag, and followed him out. Code White meant an agent's family was under attack. Gabriel’s people were on the west coast of the United States. Jack's family was somewhere in the middle. Fareeha and her dad were somewhere in Canada, near the west coast. Those were all a long distance away.

You, Jesse, and Genji didn't have family to worry about. It was one of those rare moments your lack of roots felt lucky.

Jesse and Genji were already in the locker room. You strapped on your gray Blackwatch armor and pulled on your modified armored boots. Your tanto rested in the small of your back and you holstered your pistol on your hip.

Jesse tossed you a long gray scarf. "Dress warm."

Fuck. You'd avoided cold weather missions since you left the 9th Circle. For obvious reasons. You wrapped the scarf around your neck and pulled on your charcoal heavy coat.

"Where are we headed?" You picked up a carbine and extra magazines. It was your best performance gun: light weight, medium range, selective fire, and excellent accuracy.

"French Alps," Gabriel barked. "Move out." The four of you jogged up to the transport dock. Captain Amari was already in the ship. You climbed in and immediately began switching out your prosthetic attachments.

"Agent Lacroix sent out a distress signal twenty minutes ago. He was vacationing with his wife. We haven't been able to make contact and the entire area's gone dark. Satellite imagery has brought up a lot of activity." Captain Amari gave you the rundown. Lacroix was supposed to be in some kind of ski resort with his wife. He'd likely fled the area to avoid civilian casualties and seek refuge in some of the hunt lodges in the mountains. He knew the area well and was an experienced skier. The biggest concern was hostile forces. The second was avalanches. The elements came in third. Oh goody, because the cold and snow had been your biggest worries.

Overwatch was going to secure the area. Your Blackwatch squad was going to rendez-vous with Lacroix and provide protection.
You equipped your combat attachments and secured the others in your belt. You pulled on your gloves. Captain Amari distributed biotic emitters and additional cold weather gear. You took one of the ridiculous earflap hats, because stupid-looking or not, you didn't forget being cold.

Jesse snickered. "You going to be able to move under there, Lucky?"


Genji was staring now. He didn't say anything, but he didn't need to.

"It's not heavy," you told him. "These boots are heavy. They're going to suck. Also, put on a shirt. You're making me cold just looking at you."

"Ease up, Lucky." Gabriel inspected the shotgun across his lap. "It won't be like last time."

Of course it wasn't going to be like last time. You were prepared. You tightened the straps of your bag.

Muzzle flares lit up the night. The snow and the moon left the landscape with an almost dreamy brightness. You hit the ground running. The Overwatch squad had encountered heavy resistance around the ski chateau Lacroix had been visiting.

The pilots dropped you further into the mountains.

"Ana, get in position. Jesse, you're with Genji. Lucky, you're with me. Move out!"

The snow came up past your ankles. Gabriel held two shotguns, and you jogged behind him. He stopped, holding up his hand. He gave an odd whistle, almost a birdcall.

There was no response.

"Down," he ordered and you dropped, switching to a prone shooting position. The snow was pretty and fluffy. But you weren't fooled. The cold would set in soon and everything would be miserable. Gabriel crouched beside you. He pointed and you could see three figures in white jackets moving in the snow. They were armed.

You looked through your sights. "They're wearing masks and one has cybernetic legs."

You stayed in position, till Gabriel gave the go ahead. You shot fast, dropping them in bursts. The cyborg took two, and you were going to confirm that kill personally.

You looked up and Gabriel was smiling fiercely at you. You grinned back, until you remembered your theory about his combat arousal and had to drop your gaze. The two of you stayed low as you approached the bodies.

They were dead, but you cut the cyborg's throat and circuits, just to be sure. You found his radio and Gabriel clipped it to his belt.

"Targets spotted!" The radio crackled. "Southeastern quadrant! All available units converge!"
Gabriel radioed details back to the others. "Ana has eyes on them. They're bunkered down, with about two dozen hostiles closing in. Genji and McCree are going to take the ones in the south. We're going to come in from the west."

You reloaded before moving. Gabriel was much faster than you. Now you knew he wasn't even trying the other night. Which was a little demoralizing, considering how sore you still were. The cold wind hitting your lungs made running miserable and seemed to halve your endurance. You tightened your scarf, wrapping it around your mouth. You were going to check into a hotel once you got back to Switzerland. And you were going to spend the entire time in a hot tub. You were going to drink hot chocolate. You were going to put the hot tub in front of a fireplace and fill it with hot chocolate.

Shots whizzed by your ears and you dropped to the ground taking cover behind a tree. Gabriel began to shoot, double-firing his giant shotguns. You caught sight of muzzle flash in the distance and looked down the scope. You got off two shots before you had to duck again. Fuck fair fights. You'd give an ambush any day.

You bellycrawled behind a log and from this angle you could see the head better. You got off another two shots, and the enemy sniper's head exploded. You looked up to see Gabriel on the move again. His hellfire shotguns didn't need accuracy. You just pointed them in a direction and voila! Instant splatter!

Your fingers were starting to get cold. You glared at your breath in the air, and got back up, jogging behind Gabriel.

"We're getting close. Take shelter by those rocks," Gabriel said. He was sweating, despite the snow collecting on his hat, and you had an unpleasant moment of déjà vu.

You pressed yourself against a large rock and peeked around the corner.

About a hundred yards out you saw a tiny wooden lodge built into the side of the mountain. The ratta-tat-tat of automatic fire caught your attention.

You got on your stomach and began thinning the crowd. You weren't as effective from this range and you couldn't tell if Genji or Jesse were in the treeline to the south. Best not to depend on it.

Gabriel ran forward, shotguns primed. To your relief, Genji burst through the forest in the south, bloody sword drawn. Jesse was close behind, already fanning his revolver.

You crept closer for efficiency's sake. You focused on picking off the ones just out of Gabriel and Genji's short range attacks. You'd downed another couple of hostiles when you heard the snow crunch behind you. You rolled to the side, gun raised.

Two men in white jackets had their guns trained on you.

You didn't hesitate. You fired, shooting the nearest one in the head. You shifted, but not fast enough. The second man got off three shots, hitting you square in the chest. You reeled backward, unable to breathe. Your chest was on fire and you gripped your gun tighter. He stepped toward you, intent on checking his kill.

You clutched the carbine and pulled the trigger, dropping him to his knees. Blood bubbled behind the mask and he fell backward. You groaned and felt your chest. It didn't cave. No blood seeped out. Your armor had done its job.
Wincing, you rolled back over and lined up another shot. The woman's head exploded before you could pull the trigger. You weren't sure where Captain Amari was, but you were glad it was near here.

"Withdraw!" Gabriel's voice came over your radio. "They've set explosives. They're trying to trigger an avalanche!"

Of course they were. You wheezed a laugh and climbed shakily to your feet. Gabriel was rushing toward you and Lacroix, looking annoyingly dapper and strangely stylish, bounded behind him, a graceful brunette woman keeping his pace.

Great, a civilian was going to make you look bad.

You heard the rumble before you saw anything. They'd set the explosives by Lacroix's shelter. You jogged toward the rock formations, knowing you wouldn't be able to get clear of the area in time. The most you could hope for was that the curve of the mountain would partially shield you.

Gabriel caught up to you there and even as the wave of snow crashed down, he caught your arm and pulled you against the rocks.

"Swim!" He ordered.

You thrashed, knowing you had to keep the snow around you loose, and that you couldn't let yourself get disoriented. Gabriel stayed anchored to the rocks and didn't let go of your arm.

You lost sight of Lacroix and his wife.

Snow flowed around you, but the dangerous slabs of hardened ice didn't manage to cross the rocks.

Eventually the rumbling stopped, and you were only partially buried, almost floating on top of the snow. You'd gotten lucky. The rocks broke up the flood and the snow around you was loose. Gabriel was only chest deep. You looked around. "Lacroix?"

Gabriel swore. "Start digging."

You slid your pack off and began to kick through the snow.

"Over there!" Gabriel pointed a few yards out to a jaunty red scarf sticking out a sea of white. You dragged yourself over. Even if it was loose, it was wet and heavy snow.

"You alive?" You asked, clawing at the spot marked by the scarf.

"Mais oui, bien sûr," Lacroix said, a little muffled.

You dug, trying to create an air passage above his head. He blinked up at you, his wife smiling and nestled against his chest.

"Ah, Lucky Strike. This is my wife, Amélie. Thank you for coming to assist."

"Anyone need medical attention?"

"Non, just some help getting out."

You would take all the small mercies you could get. "Can you move?"
"Not quite. If you could keep digging?"

You looked over your shoulder. Gabriel was working his way out. Your hands were freezing and you just wanted to go drown in that hot tub full of cocoa. Your kept bailing. Lacroix and his wife helped, speeding along the process.

Gabriel was on the radio. "Genji, Ana, and Jesse got clear. Transport's picking them up first."

You worked your way back to your pack. You'd gotten a hang for the weird swimming motions. You tossed the Lacroix couple some handwarmers and stuffed some down your shirt. You hissed as they came in contact with your bruised skin.

"You OK?" Gabriel asked.

"Sore," you said. "How are you not freezing?"

"Side effect of SEP. When the adrenaline sets in, I burn hotter than most. Not great in tropical climes, but it makes cold weather ops easier. The downside is I need to eat more."

You got a ration bar out of your backpack. "I am prepared."

"You sound like a boyscout." He took it though, eating it in two bites.

"No, that's your boyfriend. I'm a survivalist. And after all this I'm moving somewhere tropical. No snow ever."

Gabriel snorted. "Come here."

You were too cold to protest. Gabriel pulled off his gloves and placed his warm hands on your icy face. You sighed.

Amélie murmured something in French.

"Yes, this is the most exciting double date we've been on," Lacroix said.

"What happened to your armor?" Jesse asked after you'd taken off your soaked overcoat and managed to clean some of the snow off on the transport. You'd have to change out of everything anyway. Your socks were soggy. That was the worst.

You looked down. Oh, that was bad too. Severe cracks, like fault lines, spread through your chest plate. You wouldn't be using this piece again. You could kind of see the smashed bullets, only because you knew exactly where they hit; you had the bruises to map them.

"Weird. That doesn't normally happen when you get shot," you said still looking down. "Maybe the impact combined with the cold fucked up the plate?"

"When were you shot?" Gabriel barked, eyes flashing.

"Two guys ambushed me after you went to clear a path for Lacroix. I killed one, but the other shot me in the chest. I played dead for a second, then shot him when he came to check on me."
Gabriel's face was hard. "Take it off."

"I uh...need some help," you said. The adrenaline was starting to wear off and already you knew you were in for a world of pain.

Gabriel didn't wait for Captain Amari. He unstrapped the chestpiece and pulled it off you. You exhaled slowly, the lack of a constriction a relief.

"Show me," Gabriel ordered.

Jesse leaned back in his seat, his expression hard to read. Genji wasn't paying attention, which let you know he was totally paying attention because he making an effort to look like he wasn't.

You pulled off your hoodie, stripping down to your bra. A massive blue-purple bruise had already started forming in the center of your chest. It stretched from above your collarbone to right below your sternum.

"Head and throat shots are where it's at," you said. "Otherwise they just get back up."

Nobody laughed.

Gabriel's mouth thinned. He knelt in front of you and poked a rib on your left side. You seized up, pain jolting through your body.

"Don't do that again," you hissed through clenched teeth.

He ignored you and poked the other side. His prodding fingers weren't comfortable, but it didn't hurt nearly as much on your right side. "Have you been spitting blood?"

"No. I would have said something."

Jesse turned on a biotic emitter, and the warm yellow light numbed some of the pain. "You shouldn't be relying on these too often, Lucky."

Captain Amari handed you a dry hoodie. "It's fine, Gabriel. She can go to the infirmary once we get back."

You sighed. So much for your hot tub plan.

Bruised ribs, no internal bleeding, big sucker of a bruise. You were fine, except for the pain. You sat in the infirmary wearing a stupid paper gown. Gabriel sat in one chair, Jack leaning against the wall while Angela gave you a mostly clean bill of health.

"Did you get all these bruises from this mission?" She asked.

"Did some sparring yesterday." You didn't look at Gabriel or Jack. They were mostly faded, but Angela knew you'd used a biotic emitter. She could probably guess how old they were.

Angela shook her head. "With who? Reinhardt? You need to be more careful, Lucky."
You went to shrug, then winced. "Yes, ma'am."

"Eat a good meal, use the emitter, come see me when you get up tomorrow. You'll probably be fine."

"Thanks." You pulled your pants on. Then you turned around and put on your hoodie. No bra right now. The pressure would be unpleasant.

You slouched on the exam table. Breathing was a little uncomfortable. But you did it anyway. Gabriel gathered up your things.

"Glad you're OK," Jack said. He'd watched the entire exchange silently, occasionally placing a hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "You need anything?"

"I had this elaborate plan to rent a hotel room so I could use the hot tub because fuck cold weather fighting...but I don't think I'm leaving the base tonight."

Gabriel regarded you grimly. "Did you get hurt because you weren't in fighting shape?"

You blinked. It took a moment for your patented Reyes-Regular English translator to kick in. "It had nothing to do with last night's sparring. I was a little slower, but even at my best, I can't guarantee I would have been able to kill both those guys before one got a shot off. And speaking of last night...are you OK?"

Gabriel snorted. "I have idiot-rabies now, but other than I'm good."

You shrugged and immediately regretted it. "Can't tell the difference."

Jack laughed.

Gabriel glared at him, then took a deep breath and looked you dead in the eyes. "I pushed it too far last night. I'm sorry."

You weren't sure if he was apologizing for choking you, or having an erection, or putting you in that situation in the first place. But you had it a feeling it was for all of the above. "You should be. I made you hot chocolate and you beat me up."

Gabriel awkwardly examined the floor. "Yeah. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Sorry."

Oh, he said it twice, he must really be feeling guilty. Good. "We're good, Gabriel," you said.

"Let me help you back to the office. Or your bedroom. Or the rec room. Where do you want to sleep tonight?"

"Office," you said, getting up.

Jack and Gabriel escorted you back to the office, Gabriel carrying your things and Jack hovering beside you, like he wanted to say something, but wasn't sure how.

You lowered yourself onto the couch with a groan. Gabriel set up the emitter and you sighed.

"I have to write up my report," he said. "Will it bother you if I stay?"
"It's your office, stupid," you mumbled.

"She's getting hungry," Jack said.

You opened on eye. "How can you tell?"

"You start name-calling."

"I'll get you something to eat," Gabriel said. "What do you want?"

"Something warm," you murmured.

Gabriel left you there with Jack. Jack pulled a chair.

"If we ever do something that makes you uncomfortable, you can tell us, you know that right?" Jack asked.

"Uh-huh." You closed both eyes.

"If you're not comfortable telling us, tell Ana. She'll do it."

"Yup," you agreed.

"You're not actually listening and you're falling asleep." He laughed softly.

"Got it in one."

When you awoke, Gabriel was at his desk. The biotic emitter was still running, and your aches had diminished enough for you to sit up comfortably.

"You were out for twelve hours," he said, not looking up. "How are you feeling?"

"Hungry."

Gabriel snorted. "How's your pain?"

"In my stomach, because I'm hungry."

"Idiot," Gabriel muttered. "I made you chicken and lime soup last night. You were out cold by the time I got back."

"You took too long. I passed out from hunger," you said.

Gabriel got up and went to the minifridge. He got out a covered bowl and reheated it for you.

"Thank you," you said and drank it straight from the bowl. It was hot, a little sour, and hit the spot.

"You had a close call last night," he said. He sat down beside you, hands folded in his lap.

"I managed to avoid losing fingers, getting blown up, or buried alive."
"You managed to get shot."

"You going to be unreasonable and mad at me for something I couldn't control?"

"I want to be," he said gruffly. "But no, that's not fair."

"That's big of you," you said. "I appreciate it." You put the bowl on the floor and debated lying back down.

"What can I do?"

You blinked. Gabriel either brought you things or told you in a roundabout way that you needed them. He didn't ask open ended questions. To be fair, who knew what you would ask for on a bad day? The heads of your enemies in hand-woven baskets? Elaborate prototype weapons? More cake, probably.

"Do you care if I go back to sleep?" You yawned.

"That's fine," he said, not moving. "May I sit here?" Gabriel was looking straight ahead, and not at you. There was a familiar unpleasant tension in his shoulders. He held himself rigid and still, but he practically vibrated with uncomfortable energy.

The last time you'd seen him anything like this was with Gleeson. It hit you then that you'd scared him. That last night's run combined with your ruined armor triggered something unpleasant in his psyche.

"Where's Jack?" You weren't sure what to do.

"Had some meetings he couldn't skip," Gabriel said, still not looking at you.

"I'll probably curl up against you because you exude the warmth of a thousand heat rocks." That was true, though you hadn't cuddled with Gabriel since that night in the Yukon. And you weren't going to call that "cuddling." That was self-preservation.

"I don't mind," he said, shoulders lowering a few centimeters. He finally glanced over at you.

You wrapped your blanket around yourself and leaned against him, his body familiar, the heat comforting. He delicately rested an arm around your shoulders.

"Is this...too much?" he asked. "You don't have to do this."

"Are you kidding? You're like a giant hot water bottle," you said, trying to sound flippant.

"Ah." He nodded. "That's OK then."

Jack walked in to find Gabriel sitting on the couch reading his tablet, you were asleep against him, your head resting against his upper arm. You had cocooned yourself in one of the many blankets you left around the office.

"She OK?"
"She's fine," Gabriel said. "Woke up hungry, talked some shit, and went straight back to sleep."

"You OK?" Jack asked, already knowing the answer.

"Doing better," he said.

"She really did a number on her armor. Reminded me of that time in Kandahar." Jack pulled up a chair in front of Gabriel. "I was fine too, Gabe. Just sore."

"Scared the shit out of me, Jack. Thought you were bleeding out underneath."

Jack leaned in and kissed him. "We're all here, Gabe. We survived. It's going to be fine."

You opened your eyes as you felt Gabriel shift beside you, and promptly pulled yourself upright.

Jack held Gabriel's face in his hands, their foreheads pressed together. Jack caught your eye and smiled knowingly. Then he nudged Gabriel. "You woke her up."

"Well, there goes my plan to see if we could have sex without her noticing." Gabriel sounded more himself.

"What is wrong with you two? Do you do this Captain Amari?"

"No, but I don't make soup for Ana either."

Apparently making soup for someone meant you could be a shit to them. You began unraveling the blankets. Your muscles still ached, but you felt much better. It was very warm in the office, probably from Gabriel's crazy body heat. And with Jack sitting here, it almost too cozy. Like you shouldn't get comfortable because they needed their space.

"Lacroix OK?" You asked.

"Oh yes, he and his wife are recuperating. Ana's handling it."

"All right. I'm going to go get changed and washed up." And you'd avoid the office for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

...Adding another small unplanned arc, because apparently I like to drag this out.

Question: Is it still going to be interesting after everyone falls in bed together? Because I have more plot after that. I just don't know if anyone else finds it interesting after "omg we had sexy times!" or if that was the payoff everyone was waiting for and after that everything else is just pretending/padding? IDK. That isn't a "tell me you love me or I'll quit." That's a "if you have a strong opinion on that kind of thing, I'd be curious
to know." I'm going to write it either way, and so far, I like what I've done, but writing acknowledged relationships in development is heavier, less fun, and more thinking than writing the unresolved sexual tension and attraction.
Guys, I wasn't planning on quitting after uh...climax. But I do appreciate the love. This thing keeps getting bigger and I'm like "can I stop...please?" And the story is all like "Hahaha. No." "But good things must come to an end. It's only the bad ones that go on forever and I need to work on non-fanfic writing." "Hahaha. No."

So yeah. Eventually updates may slow down, because this has been my life for 2 weeks, and I actually would like to see my friends and do things... "Hahaha. No."

Ahem.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a year ago today. It felt like a lifetime now, but the wounds still ached. Funny how time and pain didn't always match up. You pulled on your gloves and gathered up your offerings.

The sun hadn't risen yet, but they were waiting for you down by the Memorial Wall. You hadn't expected to see them, and you certainly hadn't invited them, but Gabriel and Ziv stood there silently. Gabriel had his hands in his pockets. Ziv was bundled in a puffy white coat, striped scarf, and a knit cap with ridiculous pompoms.

You nodded and knelt, lighting that awful incense Captain Patel would have liked. That was fine, your death rituals called for sacrifice, symbolic as it may be. It'd been a goddamn year, and you'd killed some of the people responsible. You weren't done yet, nowhere near close, but you liked to think she wouldn't mind the delay. You were doing the job right. Someone else had not, and while you knew it was not your fault, she had paid the price.

Rivka had also bought your life with hers. Maybe that hadn't been her intent, but she'd stayed and sent out that distress call. You weren't going to put hummus on the memorial because that was silly, but you'd gotten a hold of some myrrh oil and you think she would have liked it. It was strong and bittersweet and you poured it on the ground.

The **tanto** rested against the small of your back. Shin would be pleased by how much use you got out of it. And you knew he would be delighted by your work. The **tanto** was a good gift. The time he'd given you, that had been better. You got out a bottle of whiskey, a nice one, and poured some of it at the base of the memorial.

This too was for Julio Valdez, your shield; Chibundo Nwazue, your demolitionist; Simon Razafindrandriatsimany your healer; and Lao Yue, your baby hacker.

Your feelings hadn't changed over the course of a year, but maybe the pain had diminished. This was for you as much as it was for them. You took a swig of the whiskey, stood, and wiped your face with the back of your hand. Then you passed the bottle to Gabriel. He drank and passed it to Ziv. Ziv took a drink and poured the rest on the ground.

The sun was rising and you could see your breath in the morning light.
"Savta would've laughed at how fucking early and cold it is," Ziv said. "Then she would have told you how stupid you were for wasting myrrh." He turned abruptly and walked back to HQ.

You managed a wan smile. Gabriel's hand rested on your shoulder.

"That little shit poured out all the whiskey," he muttered. "What the fuck is wrong with him?"

You laughed at that and walked up the path toward Overwatch HQ, Gabriel's warmth at your back.

It was only a matter of time before someone asked. Jesse had assured you of it after you realized you were no longer a pariah. You weren't so sure.

"Hey, Lucky Strike, right?" A man in Overwatch blues jogged up behind you.

You looked over your shoulder. You were on your way back from hand-to-hand training. "Yup." Your fingers tightened at your side, but you forced yourself to look relaxed.

He was taller than you and on the slender side of fit. He had elegant cheekbones, a pointed chin, and a thin mouth. He'd shaved the sides of his head and let the rest grow long in a ponytail.

"Hello, I'm Joon," he said in British-accented English. He gave you a shy smile. It was cute. "Do you want to get coffee some time?"

"OK," you said, wondering what you were agreeing to besides coffee.

"Great." He smiled brightly at you and for half a second you saw shades of Shin. "How about now?"

You were sweaty, but not bloody. And it was just coffee in the mess. "OK." You walked a few hallways in silence. "What do you do, Joon?"

"I'm a sniper," he said.

The silence started up again and it wasn't the comfortable kind. He wasn't Shin, he wasn't going to be anything like Shin, and that wasn't a fair comparison to make. In the mess hall, you grabbed a coffee and a slice of cheesecake. You found a table and sat down. Joon joined you with a mug of coffee.

"Am I out of line?" Joon asked.

"What? I don't think so," you said. "I just don't normally grab coffee with strangers."

"Oh. Well, thanks for making the exception?"

"It was no trouble." You cut your cake and ate it in measured bites. "Sorry, not usually talkative after getting tossed around in training."

"Oh yes, I heard Reyes pairs you up with the cyborg. He's pretty tough, isn't he?"
"Very," you agreed.

"But he's a melee fighter. Can't really compare against a sniper," Yoon said.

You felt a twinge of annoyance. "Guess it depends on the situation."

"Of course," he said hastily. He put his cup down. "I guess trying to impress you is the wrong track?"

"It probably isn't wise to shit-talk one of the men who watches my back." You took another sip of coffee.

"That came out wrong," he said. "It took me all week to work up the nerve to talk to you. Sorry."

Slightly mollified, you held the coffee mug in both hands, savoring the heat. "OK."

"I do you want to get dinner some time?" He looked at you hopefully. And it was a relief because Shin would've just brought you dinner and made it a stealth-attack. Joon was not Shin. You could stop drawing the comparison and like him or dislike on his own merit.

"If it's on the base," you said after a moment. Because even if you didn't want to go, it was important to see people besides your coworkers.

"Great. I'll see you tomorrow night at seven?"

"Should be fine," you said, already regretting it.

"I've heard of Park Joon. He gets around. The shy thing works for him," Jesse said as you studied a potential evacuation route for the Hanoi mission.

"We had coffee yesterday. It was awkward. Then he asked me to dinner. I'm betting it's going to be twice as awkward."

"You like awkward or something, sweetpea?"

"Nah. Just trying to get back in the saddle. Might have a few false starts."

"Ain't a crime. You have needs," Jesse said almost too casually.

"You disapprove?" You finally looked up at Jesse. He sat on your desk chewing an unlit cigar.

"You could do better," Jesse said after a moment. "Gonna speculate that he's just looking for another notch in his bedpost. And you're a pretty nice one."

"Thanks, I think. Not everyone is trying to woo their one true love," you said. "Some of us just need to get laid."
The office door opened and Gabriel came in carrying three pizza boxes. Jack had the beer.

"Well," Jesse said, giving you a sly look. "I'm sure you'll have lots of fun. Enjoy your date, Lucky. Get laid. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." He grinned at Gabriel and Jack. "Hey boss, Strike Commander."

You couldn't see Gabriel's face, but Jack was giving Jesse a hard look.

"Everything OK? What'd Jesse do now?" You asked after Jesse shut the door behind him.

"No smoking, indoors," Jack said, face lighting up as he turned that devastating smile at you. "We got pizza and beer. Gabriel got you your own, because...anchovies."

You rolled your eyes. "They're delicious."

"If you say so," Jack said. "Why don't you take a break?"

The plan sat in front of you. As an evacuation route, you weren't sure about this one. You'd have to check to see if those Metro tunnels still existed. Vo Min in demolitions was from Hanoi. She might have an idea where to look. You made the note and put your tablet aside.

When you looked up, Jack was shaking his head.

"You joining us, or what?" Gabriel asked, his box of pizza already open.

You grabbed a beer and pulled up a chair. "Some of us have work to do."

"Just look busy. When the boss comes in, he'll never notice," Jack said.

Gabriel shot Jack a dirty look.

You laughed and took your pizza.

You had more casual outfits now. Nothing fancy, but at least you could now go out in things other than uniforms and sweats. You put on a black turtleneck and jeans and met Joon in the mess hall. He waved and you wondered if maybe he was a Talon spy. You weren't overtly hunting them like Lacroix, but sending a honeytrap after Commander Reyes' assistant was theoretically a smart tactical choice. You did have access to lots of classified information.

You realized then, that maybe you weren't normal any more and you should probably relax. You walked over to Joon, reminding yourself that you were a single female and people would ask you to dinner based on that criteria alone.

"You look good," Joon said, giving you a once over. "I don't think I've ever seen you in civvies."

"Thanks," you said. He looked nice enough, button down green shirt, pressed khaki trousers. You got in line.

"I do like the food here. I did my service in Colchester. The food was absolute shit."
"Yeah," you thought of the 9th Circle. "I was in the middle of nowhere. We usually ended up making our own meals if given the chance. That or field rations."

"Rough," he said. "You served in a lot combat zones?"

"Not really," The chatter was generic. You could have done it half awake. Joon got a bowl of beef stew and you took a stack of pancakes. Because they had real syrup here. Lao had turned you onto it while you were in Canada. Real maple syrup was the 8th Wonder of the World.

You ate, mostly listening to Joon talk. It wasn't hard. But out of the corner of your eye, you saw a familiar cowboy sit down at the table behind Joon. He grinned at you.

You raised a brow. Really?

"I know this nice place downtown if you're ever up for a night out," Joon said.

You pondered it for a moment. Joon was...nice. But you didn't really enjoy talking to him and you couldn't quite picture having sex with him. "I don't think that's a good idea," you said finally. "You're attractive and good company, but I'm not in a good position to date right now."

To his credit, Joon just smiled. "That's a shame. You're lovely and mysterious. That's pretty irresistible." He paused. "Is there someone else I didn't account for?" You struggled not to think about Gabriel's arm around your shoulders or Jack wiping blood off your mouth.

"No," you said a little too forcefully. "Work is just kicking my ass."

"Ah," Joon said. "It's one of those "if you tell you me, you'll have to kill me" deals. Got it."

That was a better answer than you had. So you smiled noncommittally, ate your pancakes, and then went back to the office.

Gabriel was at his desk looking over your Hanoi proposals. He looked up, frowning. "Aren't you off-duty?"

"Wanted to go over the numbers again. Something felt off." You plopped down at your desk, and pulled up your dossiers on the Petras family.

The door opened and Jesse poked his head in. "You looked cute together."

"What?" Why did he feel the need to announce this? Especially since you weren't together.

"You and your date. He asked you on a third date, right? You know what that means-"

"Some of us are trying to work, McCree," Gabriel said. "Go have tea with Ana if you want to gossip like an old woman."

Jesse just grinned at you. Which was ridiculous because he knew you'd turned Joon down. "You going to with him to the ball?"

"What ball?"
"You didn't tell her about the ball?" Jesse asked Gabriel. "Oh that's right, you don't go." You'd forgotten how well Jesse could do Blackwatch petty.

Gabriel just pursed his lips.

"He probably planned to ask on the third date," Jesse said. "Zurich hosts this fancy title something something Celebratory Honorable Appreciation of Overwatch Ball at the Kongresshaus. We don't usually attend overtly, because Blackwatch is a big secret, but since they offer tickets the general public, we can get in on the lower levels and mingle. A lot of the rank and file wear their uniforms and the public eats it up. There's a hotel attached and the afterparty gets real wild."

"Oh." You looked down at your paperwork. There was a ball? You were part of a top-secret, need-to-know unit, and you didn't even know what was going on in the town outside. Compartmentalized intelligence indeed.

"It's two weeks out. You should go, even if he doesn't ask," Jesse said. He flashed Gabriel a smirk and shut the door.

You sat there, deeply disturbed by your lack of situational awareness.

Gabriel cleared his throat. "That idiot is wrong by the way. I am going, just not as Jack's official date. I thought you knew about it. It starts on Friday and ends late Saturday morning. Genji is staying in to hold down the fort, if you wanted to go."

"Good to know," you said, and laid out the Petras dossiers.

"What the hell was that about, Jesse?" You demanded when you finally cornered him in his room.

"Are you really that dense, Lucky?" Jesse shook his head, the sharpness in his voice surprised you. "Or is it just denial?"

You crossed your arms. "I am that dense. I didn't even know there was a ball till you said something. So enlighten me."

Jesse sat back in his chair, hat in his lap. He brushed his hair back. "Sit down, Lucky. It's about time somebody said something. Might as well be me."

You sat down. Jesse rarely snapped at you.

"OK," you said, bracing yourself.

"It's been obvious, as the nose on your face, that you got it bad for the Commander."

You felt heat spread across your face. It wasn't something you'd ever acknowledged, because it couldn't end well. But you weren't in denial about your feelings; you were very aware of them. You just put them in a box, set them aside, and did what you had to do. "I never act-"

"You didn't have to do a thing. It was always there. And it's been just as obvious, from the get-go, the Commander has a soft spot for you."
"Was I really that obvious? Like everyone in Blackwatch or just..."

"To the people that see you every day. It's real obvious to me and Genji. Ana too. The Commander was less subtle, which is partially why people thought you were sleeping together."

"And so it was all obvious to Jack then."

"I know you hadn't noticed, because you're too busy sticking your head in the sand, but Morrison doesn't mind," Jesse said. "At first I thought it was bad news that he kept hanging around. Like he was waiting for you to screw up." Jesse put his hat on the table. "But I was wrong about that." Jesse reached down and grabbed two beers. He slid one across the table to you.

You grabbed it. "Why do you say that?"

"He's a good actor, but he ain't that good." Jesse smirked. "Come on, you know damn well Morrison fakes his way through people. We've both seen it enough to know when he's being genuine."

Jesse wasn't wrong. "He doesn't care because I haven't and won't do anything."

Jesse laughed. "He cares. Should've seen the look he gave me when I brought up your date. Think it was probably your Paris trip that changed things. That and he's always checking out your ass in training." You nearly choked to death on your beer, because you definitely had not noticed that. So there it was, in front of you, the option you hadn't acknowledged: It wasn't just fighting that aroused Gabriel. He liked manhandling you.

"I... They're together, Jesse. That's not something I want to mess with." You'd seen the light in Gabriel's eyes when Jack walked into the room. The exhaustion faded from Jack's face when he had Gabriel beside him.

"I ain't telling you what to do, Lucky. That's your call. Just letting you know, the feelings seem mutual. The Commander is real aware of rank. He ain't gonna do nothing to pressure you. Morrison's the same."

You remembered how careful Shin had been with you that first night. Jack and Gabriel were even more conscientious of the wider power gap. "OK."

"Take it. Leave it. You have that choice. But it's about damn time you acknowledged it instead of dancing around it."

"So wait, why did you keep flinging my "date" in- Oh." Jesse was an instigator. He liked needling Jack and Gabriel. Blackwatch petty to the rescue.

"Man's gotta get his kicks somehow." Jesse grinned. "And riling up your commanding officers with something they can't punish you for, that's pretty satisfying."

"So you're going?"

"Who do you think's escorting Captain Amari?"
"So are you going?" Jack asked, leaning over your shoulder. He was dressed down again in a tight black turtleneck and black fatigues. You were painfully aware of his presence in your space. It had been easier not acknowledging your attraction to him, just passing it off as playful friendship. Now it was almost overwhelming.

"I guess," you said. "I have to find something to wear." That wasn't entirely true. You had gone into town and placed an order already.

"Are you feeling OK?" Jack asked. "You've been so quiet all week."

"Just tired."

"Gabe working you too hard?" He sounded genuinely concerned.

"Nah, just trying to tie up the loose ends on this op. Though I guess my sparring partner could stop bruising me up before the dance."

Jack had the grace to look sheepish. "If you wanted me to go easy on you, all you had to do was ask."

"I was talking about Genji," you said, picking up your tablet, only being a little petty. "Gabriel won't be back for another hour. He's getting fitted for a new suit."

"I know," Jack said. "I came by to convince you come, if you weren't already."

"I've attended formal occasions with you before. They are overrated."

Jack laughed. "You get to dress up in whatever you like and you're not my bodyguard this time. Just pick up a regular ticket from support services. We'll get you upstairs to the ballroom."

"Thanks."

"McCree said you had a date. You can bring him too," Jack said so casually, it almost didn't sound like fishing.

"Jesse's an idiot," you said, turning back to your paperwork. You could feel his gaze on the back of your neck. It might have been petty not to explain the situation, but you were too frustrated to want to go into that right now. Besides, you were Blackwatch. Petty was your game.

"You don't have to go, if you don't want to."

You sat in front of Captain Amari's desk.

"Jesse...said some things."

Captain Amari looked up from her paperwork. "About?"

"Gabriel and Jack. And me." You didn't feel comfortable saying it out loud. "Am I...has it been-?"

"There has never been a need to talk about it, because your behavior has been professional,"
Captain Amari said. "If that wasn't the case, we would have dealt with this much sooner. I trust Gabriel and Jack haven't made you uncomfortable?"

"They haven't behaved unethically," you said, which was different from making you uncomfortable. "I...if something happened, discretely, would that cause problems?"

"I'm your direct superior, Lucky. As long as everything is between consenting adults, discrete should be fine." She paused. "Honestly, I was expecting this to come to a head much earlier."

"What?"

"You weren't the only one who was obvious, Lucky. Why do you think I'm your CO and not Gabriel?"

Your brain flashed back to that first day, Gabriel sitting in your room.

"...Because I'm a gullible idiot."

You opted for a little black cocktail dress that fell mid-thigh. It was sexy, versatile, and you could fit your tanto against you back. You wore black stockings to cover your scarred leg. You'd found a terribly expensive pair of wrist-length black lace gloves. Red heels and a matching clutch completed the outfit, giving just enough color that you didn't look like a widow.

You kept a spare set of basic fingertips in the clutch with a tube of red lipstick. It was blades tonight. You'd already been to one formal occasion with Jack. You'd rather be armed than sorry.

You were traveling with Captain Amari and Jesse. Jack and Gabriel would already be at the function giving speeches and doing official things.

Captain Amari wore a deep cut blue jumpsuit in Overwatch blue with a white sash, white heels, gold hoop earrings, and several thin gold chains that formed a cascade down her chest. Jesse was back in his black suit and bolo tie, hat in place, firmly keeping with the cowboy theme.

They were a handsome couple.

Jesse whistled at you. "You clean up nice, Lucky."

"Are you catcalling another woman in front of me?" Captain Amari asked.

"No ma'am," Jesse beamed. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Captain Amari gave him a look you'd never seen before. Part amusement, part warmth, and all pleasure.

It wasn't meant for you and you studied your shoes. Well, if nothing happened tonight, at least someone else was having fun.
You sat at a high table in the bar on the second floor, sipping a whiskey on the rocks. Captain Amari had gone ahead to the ballroom with Jesse as her plus one. You were waiting on Gabriel or Jack and needed a drink or three to fortify yourself.

"Hey there." A brunette man in the Overwatch dress uniform leaned against the table.
"You alone pretty lady?"

"I'm waiting for my friends," you said flatly.

"Aww don't be that way. I'm Cooper, this is Jones-" he gestured at a stocky-looking blonde man who'd sidled up alongside him. "Thought you looked lonely. We're in Overwatch, you know. Kind of a big deal."

You just stared. You liked the lace gloves and really didn't want to ruin them. Because there were too many people here and you were just now realizing how antisocial you'd become.

"Jones, I think the lady's impressed," Cooper said to his friend.

"I'm not."

"Now don't be like that. We're risking our lives for the greater good all the time. Why don't you show some appreciation?"

You took another drink of your whiskey. You could throw it in his face. You could take off your glove and slap him with it. You could just punch him. You imagined starting a bar fight at the Overwatch Ball. It could be epic and add to your personal legend, but you'd probably just get arrested and ruin your nice new clothes.

"I'm not interested. Please leave me alone." You put your glass down.

"You're a rude bitch," Cooper said, resting his hand over yours. "But all the hot ones are." His fingers began to travel up your arm.

You punched him with your right hand. He went down, blood gushing from his nose. You glove was undamaged, thankfully. "I was polite. I even said "please." Now I'm done. Fuck off." You'd use your left next and then he wouldn't be getting back up.

"You-" Cooper staggered to his feet. "You can't-"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" You knew that voice too well. You forced your fists down as a set of hands pulled you back.

"She-"

"You OK, Lucky?" Jack asked, his hands resting on your bare shoulders.

"I don't care who the fuck you are, you don't lay hands on my people," Gabriel was in front of you now.

"Oh God, Commander Reyes-" Cooper looked around frantically. "I didn't know she was your girl-"
"Shit, Cooper, that's Lucky Strike. She's with Morrison-!" Jones backed up. "We're sorry, we didn't know!" The two men took off running, pushing through the crowd.

Tension coiled in your hands, you were so close to ruining your gloves. You didn't need to hide behind their names. You could do your own dirty work.

"I was handling that," you said sharply.

"It is my privilege to look after my people." Gabriel turned around, and your mouth went dry. He'd gone all out: white shirt, red bowtie, a matching red brocade double-breasted waist coat under a black tailcoat, crisp pleated trousers, and sharp leather shoes. He'd trimmed his beard and you were pretty sure he'd styled his curls. Gabriel took your hand in his, rubbing the knuckles. "We would have been here sooner but everyone and their mother wants to talk to Jack."

"Besides, those are pretty gloves," Jack said, his breath warm in your ear. "We'd hate to see them ruined." His hands hadn't moved from your shoulders. "You look good, darling. You even match Gabriel."

"It wasn't intentional," you said, still salty about their interference.

Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was the adrenaline, but you stared boldly at Gabriel, taking in his polished appearance. The cut of his jacket emphasized his broad shoulders, and while he'd always been attractive, the formalwear lent him a devastating elegance. He just smiled smugly at you, looking absolutely sinful. Your anger began to ebb, even as you grasped at it for support. He didn't get to just show up looking sexy and steal your fight.

"You like?" Gabriel purred.

"You look nice," you said, begrudgingly.

"You look beautiful," he said, obviously too pleased with himself to care that you were being petty.

You turned around, and Jack was so very close. He had been bold, going with an almost identical ensemble, only in a shade of cream with a blue waistcoat to match his eyes. It should have washed him out, instead it gave his skin a warmer, almost rosy cast.

"Gabriel picked it out," Jack murmured. "What do you think?"

"You're always too pretty," you told him, nerves still shot.

Jack raised his chin, his grin even cockier than before. "Where's your date, Lucky?"

"Didn't bring one," you said, trying not to grit your teeth.

"That's a pity," Jack said, sounding anything but disappointed.

Gabriel muttered something about "that damn ingrate."

"So do you want to join us?" Jack asked, his face inches from yours. There was a hunger etched on his face you'd seen many times before but never this close. How could you have missed it before?

"I'd hate to impose," you said baring your teeth, because you were too wound up to play nice and you had the sneaking suspicion Jack was goading you because he liked it when you were
feral. You'd had some time to look back on your interactions. Jack came off as a boy scout, but he really liked pushing people's buttons. And worse, he could be subtle about it.

Like the time he'd given you cognac and casually slipped out that he and Gabriel had fucked on your desk. You still weren't sure if he was being catty, or fishing, or instigating. That was the past. You just knew he wasn't to be taken at face value.

"Relax," Gabriel said, a hand stroking the back of your neck. "We have to play civilized now. But they comped Jack the penthouse suite for the weekend as a sign of appreciation. Supposed to be fancy. I have a team sweeping it right now. We can unwind there after we've socialized."

The implication was there. The invitation was open.

Suddenly the room was very warm. You took a couple of shuddering breaths. You were now all worked up to fight and instead you were stuck between Gabriel and Jack with the offer of something else. You weren't sure if the whiskey was a bad idea or if you needed a whole bottle for survival. Your blood was still hot. You didn't trust yourself.

"I need a moment," you said, bowing your head.

"Take your time," Gabriel said, rubbing circles on your back.

"You can fire them Monday, in person," Jack said softly.

You lifted your head. "Isn't that some kind of abuse of power?"

"Yeah, but so is forcing your attentions on someone, while trying to use Overwatch status as leverage. I'm shit-canning them, either way," Jack said. "Doesn't matter who does it."

That made you feel marginally better. Gabriel's hands were firm against your waist. "I think I'll need another drink," you said.

"They have nice champagne upstairs," Jack said.

"I want whiskey," you said, because you needed to get yourself under control before you went upstairs. And maybe because you were petty.

"Go get her a whiskey, Jack," Gabriel said. "But don't overindulge, Lucky. We can't have fun if you're sloppy drunk."

Jack raised a brow at Gabriel. You had no idea what Gabriel's expression was, but Jack turned and headed to bar. You stood there watching him, Gabriel holding you by the waist.

"So you finally figured it out," he said. He spoke softly, but you could hear him clearly over the crowd.

"I had help." It was easier to do it like this, not looking at him.

"We were getting pretty obvious," Gabriel said with a laugh.

"I'm a gullible idiot." At least when it came to them. "There was a lot of self recrimination."

"That explains what's been eating you all week."
"I didn't know what to do," you said, crossing your arms tightly.

"You don't have to do anything," he said gently. "If you're not comfortable with this, then there's no expectation." He was so very warm against your back. "I don't want to do anything you don't want."


"It doesn't have to be." His hand rested on the back of your neck, lightly kneading.

You really wanted to believe that.

Jack was back. He set the glass of whiskey on the table and patted your cheek. "You've never backed down from us before," he said, the pads of his fingers rough against your skin. "Why the hell would you start now?"

Jack was scary good at pushing your buttons. You threw back the whiskey and mustered a wry smile.

"Let's get through the ball, and then we'll talk about it upstairs."

It was like a Disney movie, only with more old people and no singing candlesticks. You could feel the eyes on you as you walked in between Gabriel and Jack. They weren't touching you now; no need to start more rumors. But they hovered. You had your polite, vaguely disinterested expression pasted firmly in place.

There were a lot of people here. It would be hard to track an assassin. The press was thick enough that it'd be real easy to just sidle up to someone, cut, and walk away. You'd be halfway out the door before anyone noticed anything was wrong. If you were really unethical, poison would be super effective.

It was easier to think about tradecraft than your feelings. Yeah, you definitely weren't normal any more. But you could pretend. You snagged a flute of champagne of a passing waiter's tray.

"Thank you," Gabriel said, plucking it from you fingers and downing it in one gulp.

"That was my prop," you said. "I was going to hold it and blend in."

"You walked in next to Jack and me, looking ready to kill. You're not blending in now," Gabriel said.

Your face felt warm. You were going to blame the whiskey. "That was my "bored" face, not my "kill" face," you said trying for a polite smile.

"You'll fool the masses, but you're not fooling me," Gabriel said.

"Oh, Reinhardt, you look dashing," you said brightly, turning away as Reinhardt approached in what had to be a custom tuxedo.

"Lucky Lady!" He boomed, because Reinhardt didn't have an indoor voice. "You look
lovely!” He beamed at you, and your sourness diminished just a little. “Would you like to dance?”

You glanced out on the dance floor. There was a live orchestra and you caught sight of Jesse stepping carefully with Captain Amari, his head bowed as he leaned in to whisper to her.

“I uh...terrible dancer,” you said, because smugglers didn't get lessons in ballroom dance and because you did not need Reinhardt breaking your toes tonight. You needed those to run away.

“Nonsense! Let me show you how it's done.” He tugged your wrist. "Join me?” He was a hopeful puppy, all enthusiasm and honest emotion.

“All right,” you said, and looked back to see Gabriel frowning at Reinhardt.

"Don't worry, Gabriel," he said. "I'll bring her back to you in one piece!” He placed your arm in his, guiding you onto the floor. "Thank you for humoring an old man, Lucky.”

"You're only as old as you feel,” you said, because Reinhardt liked platitudes.

"Then you have made me very young indeed.” He laughed and placed one arm all the way around your waist. The other hand carefully took your left, folding the fingers between his. "Ah, I must be careful,” he said. "Torbjörn said you have unpleasant surprises under your gloves. He always does such good work.”

The height difference was going to make this awkward. "I'm very pleased with them," you said.

"Are you ready?"

"Sure,” you said, eyes darting down to your feet.

Reinhardt began to move, surprisingly light-footed and graceful. You would have moved your legs, except, your feet weren't quite touching the ground any more. You blinked, and Reinhardt grinned down at you. "I do not wish to step on any toes.”

"Uh, thanks,” you said. He didn't move fast. Your skirt didn't fly up. Your legs didn't kick out. So it wasn't readily apparent that you were airborne.

"See, you don't have to know how to dance. You just come out and whirl. It is good fun.”

You laughed, some of the tension bleeding out of your body. "Thank you, Reinhardt.”

"It is good that you came. You work too much,” he said. "You should get out in the field more. Nothing like a good honest battle to clear the mind.”

You weren't sure how that wasn't work. "I don't do fair fights, Reinhardt. I'd lose.” He spun around with you, never bumping another person.

"Well, it is good that you came out tonight, Lucky Lady. Are you coming to the afterparty? There will be beer. There will be karaoke. I will sing the hymns of Hasselhoff. It will be glorious!”

"I...don't know,” you said.

"Ah, maybe you have other plans,” he said slyly and you wondered how much he knew.

"Maybe I do,” you said.
"There's that devious smile." Reinhardt set you back on the ground, bowing at the end of the song. "You should ask Torbjörn to dance. He will decline, but it will make his wife laugh."

"That is actually a good idea," you said. "Thanks."

"It is a really funny idea," he agreed. "He's over there. Let us go.

You held Reinhardt's arm, and caught sight of Jack smiling flatly and nodding at a group of suits. Gabriel was speaking with Angela, but he raised a brow as you headed off with Reinhardt. You shrugged and smiled.

Reinhardt was exceptionally useful in the crowd. First, everyone got out of his way without much effort on your part. Secondly, he could spot Swedish dwarves pretty quickly.

"Torbjörn! You look so diminutive," Reinhardt bellowed. "And there's your lovely Lucia."

Torby was also in a tuxedo which fit him rather well. It could have been custom made or he shopped at a place for very sophisticated, very round children. It was probably the former, but you let that latter idea linger for a moment.

"Reinhardt," Torby grumbled. "Lucky."

"You look very nice," you told him. His wife was stunning, blonde, and taller than him. It was a little shocking to see him with someone who wasn't another angry dwarf. You'd pictured his spouse as him, just without the facial hair. "Hello, Lucky isn't my name, but that's what everyone calls me anyway. Your husband made my prostheses. It's a pleasure to meet you." You extended your right hand.

She shook your hand warmly. "Yes, he has mentioned you before. I would like your chili recipe."

You shot Torby an amused look. "Sure. You just can't give it to my boss."

Torby snorted at that. "Don't let it go to your head."

"Of course not," you said. "I just came over to ask you to dance. Reinhardt said you were really good."

Torby bristled. "Go away."

"Oh darling, you never told me you were so popular," Lucia said cheerfully. "Should I be worried? Is that why you spend so much time at work? Are all these younger women pestering you?" She winked at you.

"I'll send you that recipe," you said.

"Now will you come dance with me, before some other girl tries to steal you away?" Lucia asked innocently.

Torby took her hand, but turned around to glower at you and Reinhardt, drawing a finger across his throat. It was actually a wee bit intimidating.

"That went beautifully!" Reinhardt clapped you on the back, and you nearly fell over.

"Yeah, great," you said, wobbly. A hand on your shoulder steadied you. You turned to find Jack looking a little frazzled.
"May I have this dance?"

Reinhardt looked between you and Jack and chuckled. "Go enjoy the party!"

"Trying to escape someone?" You said, taking his hand.

"I've gotten three phone numbers, two marriage proposals, and my ass grabbed in the last ten minutes, Lucky. Please dance with me." His firm political smile was starting to fray.

"That is so romantic," you said, enjoying the slip in his façade.

Jack wrapped a hand around your waist, his fingers brushing your hip. "I'll show you romantic later," he said, pulling you close. "This is self-preservation."

Jack was a passable dancer moving with coordination, but not grace. Not that you could complain. You stepped on his toes a lot. He didn't seem to mind. His hands were warm, and he watched you with a strange almost secretive look. "Gabriel was right."

"Don't let him hear that. We'll never hear the end of it."

Jack grinned at that. "He was right about you looking especially beautiful tonight."

"Stealing your boyfriend's line isn't romantic," you said, trying to be composed.

"Doesn't mean it isn't true," he said, too pleased with himself. "I'm glad you're here."

"To save you? All part of the job, sir."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "Is that why you're here then? Because of the job?"

"Of course, sir. An Assassin-Butler's work is never done," you said soberly.

He relaxed. "You're terrible. But I liked that outfit. I liked seeing you in my colors." He stroked your waist, fingers lingering a little too long. "Here comes Ana. We're probably going to have to switch out. I can't dance with anyone for too long without causing...talk."

Captain Amari gave you a polite nod. Then she and Jack paired off while Jesse took your arm. "Heard you started a fight." He looked you up and down. "You look fine."

"Jack and Gabriel stepped in."

"Jack and Gabriel stepped in," he gave you an inquisitive look. "I could've handled it. They're just busybodies," you said, letting Jesse lead. "You're not bad. Have you been taking lessons?"

A blush crept across Jesse's cheeks. "I didn't want to embarrass Ana."

"You look good together," you told him.

The blush grew deeper. "Lucky, I ain't here to talk about me. Everything OK with the commanders?"

"We're going to talk about it after the party."

"Darling, I've seen the looks they've been sending your way. I don't know if talking is what they're thinking about." Jesse smirked.

You fought the urge to facepalm. It would smear your makeup. "I don't know what's going
on. Apparently someone has the penthouse suite and I'm invited to go admire the etchings. Or some other euphemism."

Jesse whistled. "Classy."

"Having a threesome with your bosses is "classy?" I'm really curious about what this word means in your culture, Jesse."

"You don't have to go. Ana and I will take you straight home if you want. No pressure. No obligations. If that's what you want."

"I'm going to talk. After that, it's anyone's guess."

Jesse nodded. "Fair enough, buttercup. I wish you all the luck." He patted your back.

"May I cut in?" Gabriel smoothly placed an arm around your waist.

"That's between you and the lady." Jesse released you with a wink.

"Dance with me?" Gabriel already had you in his arms. Sneaky bastard.

"I'm not very good," you said.

"I'll lead." He was graceful, flowing in a way that you and Jack hadn't managed. "Is the party to your liking?"

"Too many people. Too many opportunities for things to go wrong." That sounded like you were talking about something else. "But other than that, yes."

Gabriel laughed and twirled you. "I like the fancy clothes."

"Yeah. You look better than "nice" in that suit, Gabriel."

His laughter came out as a low rumble. You could feel it in your chest. "So you did notice?" He dipped you low, forcing you to clutch his forearms. You were pretty sure this song did not have dipping.

"Of course I noticed. I'm gullible, not blind."

Chapter End Notes

I'm the worst. I know. Shoujo tropes. What was I thinking?
Chapter 11

You casually wandered out after midnight, after making your appearance at the afterparty. Jack had left first. Then Gabriel. Leaving together would be suspicious. Now you contemplated the elevator hall.

You could just go home. Forget this happened. OK, no you couldn't. And it wasn't fair if you left without talking to them. But you did think about running away.

Sex would be easiest. Just sex. Get them out of your system and go back to work like nothing happened. You could do that, right?

And anything more...well, it all had the potential to blow up in your face and wreck everything you'd worked so hard for. Gabriel wasn't Shin. People wouldn't turn a blind eye if they knew. And Jack? You didn't even know what Jack wanted, let alone where you fit.

Well, you wouldn't find out by standing in the hallway being a chicken. You hit the up button and nearly jumped out of your shoes when someone coughed behind you.

"You need a keycard to get up there." Gabriel held up the card. You stepped into the elevator with him, heart pounding. He rubbed your back. "You OK?"

"Nervous," you admitted.

"Nothing to be nervous about," he said. "You're holding all the cards."

The elevator door opened and Gabriel led the way. You went through the leather-paneled hall and he opened a door to a large sitting room. The couch was bigger and wider than your bed. Jack was in the middle of pouring flutes of champagne.

"Fancy digs," you said, because it looked like a place you would rob, not a place you would stay.

"Don't have anything like this back home," Jack said. He offered you a glass and you took it gratefully.

"Three bedrooms, two baths, an enclosed balcony, a hot tub on the balcony, fully-stocked kitchen, multiple televisions, and discrete Blackwatch guards for the weekend," Gabriel rattled off. "Strictly incommunicado for anything less than Code Blue. This is the first vacation Jack's taken in...awhile."

"Oh." You downed the champagne and it was delicious. Your hands weren't shaking, which was good. You sat down on the couch and sunk in. Gabriel sat beside you.

"Are you hungry?" Jack asked. "There are snack trays in the fridge."

"Snack trays" isn't a fair description. They're fancier than beer nuts and pretzels," Gabriel told you.

"May I have more champagne, please?"
Jack poured it, studying your face.

You savored this one, the bubbles pleasantly tingly, the flavor light. "Nice stuff."

"Being Strike Commander apparently has a perk or two," Jack said. He sat down on the other side of you, keeping some space between you. He loosened his bowtie, letting it hang over his neck.

You sipped your second glass till it was gone. You could feel Gabriel's eyes on your hands and Jack was paying painfully close attention to the floor.

"How did this even happen?" You finally blurted out.

"I think you know," Gabriel said. "About me at least. As I told the others, I'm a sucker for grand gestures, and you and me have been through a lot. It doesn't hurt that you're pretty."

You sighed. "Yeah, OK. Right back at you." You rubbed your forehead. "Jack: I don't even know where to start."

"It never bothered me that Gabe liked you. I would have gone along with it for him. But Paris was the game-changer. Still not sure if Gabe planned it that way or not." Jack laughed softly. "Though if I want to be really honest, I started noticing you after you broke my nose."

"I broke it?" Your voice went high.

"Gabe snapped it back in place. Accelerated healing took care of the rest." He shrugged. "You were never taken in by the Strike Commander Morrison and all his bullshit. I'm not saying I'm faking it, but I can't be a paragon of virtue all the time. You didn't do that shit in Paris for the Strike Commander, you did it for your friend Jack. I got that message loud and clear. Especially after your talk with Ainsley."

"You heard that?" That devious son of a bitch. He'd spent the entire trip trying to get you to talk about what you'd said to Ainsley. And he'd overheard the whole conversation?

"I was expecting her to try to slip into my room, of course I was still awake." He laughed. "So imagine my surprise when you intercepted her and talked her into quitting all while making it sound like it was her idea."

"I was getting rid of a Petras pawn," you said.

"After the firefight, back in the hotel-" His eyes met yours. "You weren't teasing your commanding officer. You were teasing me. You see me," he said. "And while I know you don't trust me like you do Gabe, you haven't run away yet." He grinned, his eyes sparkling in the lowlight. "And I'm going to be honest, I like watching you fight."

"I'm terrible," you said, because you very clearly remembered that last night in Paris, your hand on his cheek, his body so close to yours.

"Maybe in hand-to-hand, but you're an ambush fighter. You laid out those cyborgs beautifully."

You bowed your head, because yeah, you got that. Watching Jack shoot had been impressive. "God, we're fucked up."

"Never denied it," Gabriel said. "So here we are. That's how it happened. What happens
next, that's up to you."

"I don't want to ruin things," you said.

"So we start small. Take this weekend. Try some things out. No pressure," Jack said.

You gave him a look, because Jack was always pushing the envelope. "You guys are in a committed relationship and I've got baggage the size of a small elephant."

"Only a small one," Gabriel agreed. "You fit with us, chica. All that time alone together and we haven't killed each other? That night on the mats, if I hadn't gotten so rough...I thought maybe we could have tried then."

You blinked. Well, it was good to know that the sexual tension hadn't been your imagination. "Jack?"

"You got baggage," Jack said. "We all do. Gabriel has a wardrobe with Narnia in it. My issues are only slightly smaller. Your point?"

"Start small. Take this weekend," you repeated. "OK." You nodded. "OK. That seems...reasonable."

Gabriel leaned over, his fingers stroking your cheek. "You can stop at any time. Just say the word."

"I uh...bathroom first," you said. "Which way?"

Jack pointed and you grabbed your clutch and walked in. You shut the door and looked yourself in the mirror. The really big full-length mirror-walls and hey you could fit like six people in the shower.

You had a lot of little things to do. Your birth control implant was current. No worries there. Your hair was mussed. You swapped out prostheses, not wanting to have blades popping out in the bedroom. You took your tanto off. Then you carefully reapplied your lipstick. You still looked spooked, but pretty. It took a couple breaths, but you managed to get yourself looking reasonably calm. It looked like there were toothbrushes and bathrobes, which was good because you hadn't brought anything besides your purse.

You were stalling. You placed your purse and tanto on the counter and opened the bathroom door. When you came out, Jack and Gabriel were still lounging on the couch, the television on. It was some nature program about lions, which was great because you were kind of expecting porn.

"Come here," Gabriel murmured. "You want me to rub your back?"

"I...That'd be nice," you said, because you hadn't let him do that since that one time before Paris. Because you didn't trust your reactions.

You perched on the edge of the couch. Gabriel's hands gently began pressing against your back, working out the knots. "That feels nice," you said, turning your head to look at Gabriel.

He kissed you then, hands on your hips, mouth pressed firmly to yours. His tongue flicked into your mouth. You opened for him, tasting champagne on his tongue. He sighed in pleasure. You squeezed your thighs together, a soft whine in the back of your throat.
Gabriel released you, and wiped your lipstick off his mouth with the back of his hand. "Been wanting to do that all night." He loosened his bowtie and unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt. He pulled you into his lap. "You've been here before," he said. "Nothing to worry about."

Jack leaned over, his fingers tangling in your hair. He kissed harder, nipping your lower lip. "Can I kiss your neck, or is that too much?"

You nodded and his mouth was on your throat, sucking and licking while your squirmed in Gabriel's lap.

"He's good with his mouth, isn't he?" Gabriel asked. He placed a kiss on your shoulder. "Do you want to find out how good?"

Jack exhaled sharply. He slid to his knees in front of you, a pink blush coloring his cheeks. "May I?" He nuzzled your thigh, not moving the hem of your dress.

The sight of Jack on his knees made you shiver. You nodded.

"What's that?" Jack asked. "You have to tell me what you want."

"I-I-" You stuttered because Gabriel's mouth was on your neck, his hands cupping your breasts. He squeezed gently. "I want to feel your mouth on me," you managed to get out. Gabriel had your knees over his thighs. He spread his legs to make room for Jack, and open you up to him.

Jack hiked your skirt up around your hips. "Oh, pretty," he said, stroking your black lace panties. He ran his finger across your crotch, making you jerk. Laughing, he spread your thighs, and pulled the fabric to the side. He took a long slow lick along your slit, his stopping to suck on your clit.

"Oh God," you moaned.

"What's he doing?" Gabriel asked, his tongue flicking the curve of your ear.

Jack licked a finger and slowly slid it inside you. "She's already wet, Gabe." There was an edge to his voice and he leaned in, his tongue pressing on your clit while he began to finger you.

"He's licking my pussy," you whimpered. "And he's got a finger inside me."

"Two," Jack said as he put another in. You could hear it now, his fingers slick with your juices as he slid them in and out of you. "You taste so good." He pulled his fingers out and suddenly his tongue was wiggling inside of you, his fingers rubbing your clit.

You were panting now, sitting in Gabriel's lap, legs spread wide while Jack ate you out. You gripped his hair, grinding against his face. He laughed softly, the rumble vibrating against your skin. His fingers curled against your inner walls while his tongue swirled around your clit.

You were making little sounds in the back of your throat, hips jerking as you rode his fingers.

"That's it," Gabriel said. He lightly squeezed your breasts, rolling them in his hands. "Isn't he pretty on his knees?"

You nodded, breaths coming in short bursts.
"He's getting you ready for me," Gabriel purred in your ear. His hands rubbed your thighs, making you twitch.

"You enjoying yourself?" Jack grinned up at you smugly. "You want me to keep going?"

"Please, Jack." You almost didn't recognize your voice.

Jack sped up, his fingers hitting your sweet spot while he worked his tongue against you. The friction wound you up, his fingers thicker than your own and filling you. Your legs tensed and you squirmed as Jack pushed you closer to the edge.

"Come for us," Gabriel murmured. "I want to lick your cum off Jack's lips."

Jack pushed another finger inside and you arched, slapping both hands over your mouth as you the orgasm hit.

"We want to hear you," Gabriel said. "We're not in the barracks. You can be as loud as you want." You couldn't answer, but you moved your hands, soft cries escaping your throat as Jack fingered you through your spasms.

"She clamping down on me and she's tight, Gabe," Jack groaned. He sucked on your clit, while you thrashed, all of it overstimulation now that you'd just come.

"Jack, stop! It's too much!" You pressed your hands against his head, hips shaking.

Jack chuckled, pulling his fingers out. His eyes locked on yours and he sucked each one clean, his mouth smeared with your juices. "Just so you know, I like too much," he said. He stood and leaned over, kissing Gabriel over your shoulders.

You looked up, Gabriel's hands gripped Jack's hair as he licked Jack's lips.

They broke apart breathing heavily.

"You do taste good," Gabriel said, leaning over for a quick kiss. "And now you're all wet for me. You ready?"

You eyes flicked to Jack. "Are you OK with this?"

"And more," he said. "Go on Lucky. He's being so patient when all he wants is to have you ride his cock."

You shivered despite Gabriel's heat against your body.

"Let's get this dress off you. I'd hate to ruin it," Gabriel said, unzipping you. You got off his lap and slid the dress off. Jack took it from you and draped it over a table. Then he settled on the back of the sofa.

"Very pretty." Jack said as you turned around, still in your gloves, shoes, stockings, and underwear. Your panties were soaked and you peeled them off, tossing them aside.

"Oh hermosa," Gabriel sighed. He unzipped his fly and pulled a condom out of his jacket pocket. "Want to help me?"

You knelt on the couch, eyes widening as he freed his cock. You already had an idea of the dimensions, but seeing it in the flesh was another thing. He was long and uncircumcised, but it was the width that you couldn't look away from; you hadn't taken anything that thick before. You
took him in your hand, the skin hot and velvety. You placed a kiss on the tip, before peeling back the foreskin and swirling your tongue around the head.

Gabriel groaned, his fingers twining in your hair. "I meant help putting the condom on, Lucky."

"So you want me to stop?"

"I'll have your mouth later. I want you riding me," he said roughly. He tore open the foil packet and rolled it on. "Come on."

You straddled his lap, lining the head up. Gabriel's hands gripped the cushions. His gaze stayed on your face, sweat beading on his upper lip.

"You teasing me?"

"No." Your voice was weak. Your thighs trembled as you inched down, taking it slow. "I'm adjusting. You're big." You slid down, breathing deeply as he filled you with a delicious ache. You lowered yourself to the hilt, putting your weight on your knees.

Gabriel groaned, head thrown back, arms spread across the couch. "How the hell are you still so tight?"

He stretched you almost too much. You leaned forward, burying your face in the crook of his neck. He was so warm, even through the suit.

"Can I move? Or do you need a moment?" His arms slid down your back and rested around your waist.

"Sorry, it's just been a really long time." There hadn't been anyone since Shin. He inhaled sharply. Apparently, he understood exactly what you meant. You felt his fingers trace your back, and you sighed softly, kissing the side of his jaw. "Sorry, I'm-"

"Stop apologizing."

You sat back, and nodded at him. Then you raised your hips, and dropped yourself onto him again, a soft whine escaping your throat. Gabriel's jaw clenched, but eyes stayed locked on your face.

"How's it feel, hermosa?"

"Really full." He rolled his hips upward, and you squeezed your eyes shut, riding him. "Gabriel," you pled, though you weren't sure what you were asking for.

"Look at you taking me. So pretty in my lap." He unhooked your bra and tossed it onto the ground. "You fit me so well." His beard grazed your cheek as he kissed your brow.

You wrapped your arms around his neck and starting grinding against him harder.

"That's a good girl," he soothed. "You're taking me straight to the hilt." He drove up into you, slow deep thrusts that filled you and then left you painfully empty when you raised your hips.

"Please-" Your hips jerked, and you clenched around him, whimpering as you rode his thrusts.

Gabriel sucked one of your nipples and then switched to the other, making your toes curl.
"You're so wet, baby. Going to mess up my pants." His strokes quickened and you did your best to move with it. His hands cupped your ass, taking control of the rhythm. "And I don't fucking care, just keep going."

You held on, moving your hips with his.

Gabriel rested his forehead against yours. His eyes were inky with emotion. You wanted to look away, but he held you there. The intensity made you shudder. "Don't. I want to see your face when you come for me. I want to hear it all." He reached down, one hand stroking your already sensitive clit.

"Damnit Gabriel!"

"Look how wet you are for me. You've been mine from the start, haven't you?" He nipped your neck, and you cried out. Of course, he was right. You'd been his since he'd carried you out of that freezing abyss. You clung to him, panting. "This is where you belong, Lucky."

"On the end of your dick?" You tried for flippant, but it only came out as breathless.

"If you like," he said, unperturbed by your deflection. "But I meant, right here with me." He kept rubbing small circles around your clit. You jerked backward, and you would have fallen, except for his arm around your waist. His hips snapped upward, faster and faster. You clutched his shoulders, thighs shaking as the tension built in your core.

"I can't-"

"You can," he said, fingers speeding up, practically vibrating against your clit. "That's it. Take it all, hermosa, hold it as long as you can, and just let it go," he ordered. It was the tone, when he spoke like that, you didn't argue, you couldn't.

"Gabriel," you moaned, as you came, head thrown back, body shaking. You squeezed your eyes shut, clenching around him. Gabriel sighed, your name on his lips as he followed you over the edge.

You clung to him, sweaty, warm, and filled with too much emotion. You kept your face in the crook of his neck, trying to recover some semblance of composure. He held you, whispering gently in Spanish. You took several shuddering breaths, blinking rapidly. It had all been too much. Too much feeling. Too much confusion. You weren't use to that. Even with Shin, you'd kept it light. No promises. No open heartfelt declarations. You suspect he played along only so he wouldn't spook you.

"Hey there." Jack crouched in front of you, bright eyes shining with excitement. "You OK, Lucky?"

You nodded weakly. A twinge of guilt shot through you; you'd forgotten he was there.

He leaned in and kissed your forehead. "That was beautiful." His fingers traced your jaw. You kissed them, an apology for ignoring him. Let's get you up."

You winced and climbed off Gabriel. Gabriel kissed your cheek and you curled up on the couch, eyes closed.

"Tired already?" Jack asked.

You shook your head.
"Too much?"

"Yeah," you said. "I...Yeah."

"But you did so well," Jack purred. "You looked so good riding him." Jack's compliments were light and playful. They weren't heavy and meaningful like the words Gabriel had spoken during sex. Gabriel hadn't said anything wrong. You just couldn't handle that much so quickly.


"Stop apologizing," Gabriel said, but there was no bite in his voice. He sat beside you, pants fastened, shirt unbuttoned. You were mostly naked, your garter belt still on, but your stockings were starting to fray. Even though he'd been gentle, you ached from Gabriel's cock.

"I think Jack's been neglected," you said, when you trusted yourself to form whole sentences. "I'm fine. I just...needed a moment."

They sat on either side of you, carefully not touching you.

"You sure?" Gabriel asked, his hand hovering over your cheek.

You kissed his palm. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Did I-?"

"Too much...feeling," you said after a moment. "I'm...rusty." You shrugged.

"So is rough sex a bad idea?" Jack asked.

"The opposite, I think." You gave a lopsided smile. "You need a moment with Gabriel?"

He leaned in and kissed your swollen lips. "No. What do you want to do? Do you want us both to take you at the same time?"

"I...I'll have to work up to that," you said, heat flaring between your legs.

"We've got lube and time," Jack chuckled. "You want to choke on Gabe's cock while I fuck you from behind?"

"Jesus Jack, you have a filthy mouth."

"Are you complaining?" Jack removed his jacket, and began to unbutton his shirt.

You rolled your eyes. "I don't know why I'm surprised."

"What about here?" Gabriel asked, his cock pressing against your ass.

"I uh...I haven't." Wait, how was he hard again so fast?

Gabriel growled. "You've never had a cock in your sweet little ass?"

"We were working up to it, but I never-"
"We can take of that for you," Jack said. "Though I think Gabriel wants to go first."

There was an open hunger in Gabriel's eyes as he stroked your face. "I would love to be the one to show you how good it can feel," he said voice low and strained. "If you'll let me. We'll work up to it together,"

"OK," you said, because it was all so overwhelming and when Gabriel looked at you like that, you wanted to do whatever he asked. "But Jack-"

"You can just say that you want me. I don't mind." Jack smirked at you, shedding his shirt and looking more like a cocky NCO than a military commander. You openly admired his broad muscled chest, scars and all. "Like what you see?"

"You know you're pretty, why the hell are you even asking?"

"He likes hearing you say it," Gabriel chuckled.

"Come on." Jack pulled you up, by the wrist and you went, legs still wobbly. "I have our stuff in the master bedroom." He paused. "Do you have safe words?"


"Do you have a nonverbal?" He asked.

"Tapping out. Jack...what are you planning?" He opened the door, and you rolled your eyes. The bedroom was huge, the bed big enough for another six people. The room was done in tasteful blues and creams, and it didn't surprise you that Jack picked this room.

"It just seemed wise to get that out of the way. We didn't want to spring it on you, right away. Obviously, you'd be more relaxed after a couple of orgasms and a round of vanilla sex." He kissed you again, his tongue flicking into your mouth. When he finally let you up for air, you had to blink away spots. "Get on the bed. Start on all fours."

"Should I be calling you "sir" too?" You asked dryly.

Jack gave you a dark smile. "Not tonight. But when that happens, you won't have to ask. You'll know."

Your pussy clenched at that. Jack had been almost submissive this far. It shouldn't surprise you that he could switch in and out of those roles just as quickly as he swapped public personas.

"Get on the bed, Lucky. I won't ask again."

You exhaled slowly. "Green," you muttered and climbed on the edge of the bed. You got on your hands and knees, turning your head to watch Jack open up a duffel bag. Gabriel crouched beside him.

You closed your eyes, not thinking about why you were more worried about Gabriel's declarations of affection than Jack's kinks. Because that would be fucked up. And while you weren't normal any more, you weren't fucked up, were you?

Jack climbed onto the bed beside you, naked. He wasn't as broad as Gabriel, but he was solid muscle. He did have pretty pink nipples, and his cock was long, circumcised, and not quite as thick as Gabriel's. He stroked it a few times, smirking at you through half-lidded eyes.
"Will throat-fucking you trigger any reactions?" He asked.

"I...don't know," you said. "I don't think so. I...can choke. Just don't squeeze my neck."

Jack nodded. "Open up."

You parted your lips, and he pushed in slowly. "That's it. Been thinking about you sucking me off for weeks." You forced yourself to relax. Each stroke went deeper, and soon you were gagging. He pulled out, patting your cheek. "Can you take that? Or is too much?"

Your eyes watered. "I can do it for a little while."

"Tap when it becomes too much," he said and began thrusting and you bobbed your head at the same slow rhythm, licking the underside of the shaft. "That's it." He moaned jerking his hips.

Something cold pressed against your ass and you stiffened.

"Relax," Gabriel said. "It'll be easier."

You shuddered and felt one of his thick fingers, coated in lube, prod open your anus.

Jack gripped your hair. "Look at me. That's it, baby."

You whined as Gabriel added another finger, your back passage burning.

Jack pulled out, his dick slick and hard. "How's it feel?"

"Stretched," you grunted.

"Not yet, but you will be," Jack grinned. He reached over and grabbed a condom off the night stand.

Gabriel's fingers pulled out and you relaxed.

"Spread your cheeks," Jack said. You had to reposition yourself, ass in the air, face against the mattress, as you spread yourself for Gabriel. More cool viscous gel dribbled into your hole. Then something firm, solid, and far thicker than a finger pushed inside you. You gasped, eyes wide as Gabriel pushed it past your tight ring of muscle. "That's it, stay open."

You held on, whimpering into the mattress. You knew what it was now. You'd done this much before. Gabriel had just put a plug inside you.

"Oh hermosa, you took it so well. But you're going to have more trouble with my cock."

He bit your thigh and you buried your face in the mattress. You felt Jack's hands on your wrists.

"Hold still." He placed a leather cuff on each wrist and when you wiggled them, you found you had about four inches of give. Your pussy clenched, sensitized by the toy in your ass.

"Roll over," Jack said.

You rolled onto your back, the plug shifting. It kept you stretched and you bit your lip, trying to keep your breathing steady.

"Color?"

"Green," you said automatically. You couldn't see the plug, but you felt it, the pressure
growing more insistent the longer you lay there.

Your hands were trapped under your body.

Jack sighed, stroking your stomach. "You look so pretty like this. Maybe next time I'll put you in a collar and gag."

"Figures you'd be into that kind of thing," you muttered.

"And you're not?" Jack asked, his fingers slipping lower. "Because your cunt is soaked." He slid a finger in and you bit back a moan. The plug made everything feel extra snug. "Listen to that." He pumped his finger in and out of your slick hole, the obscene slurping echoing the bedroom. "Such a dirty little slut." He pulled his finger out and pressed it against your lips. "Lick it clean."

You swirled your tongue around his finger, tasting your tang. Jack was a bit of a shit, wasn't he? Your expression must have been a little too telling, because Gabriel laughed.

"I still haven't punished you for disobeying me in Paris," Jack said. He pushed your legs up, almost bending you in half. Then he smacked your ass with the flat of his hand. A flash of pain melted into pleasure as your pussy twitched, the plug shifting inside you.

"Damnit Jack," you panted.

"That's not an apology," Jack said and brought his hand down again at a different angle. You whined, the plug jolting inside you again from this strike. "You were my subordinate. I should have done this back then and then fucked you till you were begging for forgiveness." Your treacherous pussy was sopping wet now and you bit your lip. He gave you another measured slap in a different spot and your leg jerked.

Jack caught it, laughing. "Were you trying to kick me?"

"No," you panted. "But you would have deserved it."

"It's like you want me to punish you," Jack said, dropping your leg. He crawled on top of you. "What am I going to do with you, Lucky?"

"You talk too much."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "Keep digging."

You blew out a frustrated breath. "You want me to be sorry for saving you?"

Jack pushed his hair out his eyes. He studied your face. "No, I want you to be sorry for being stubborn."

You glared at him. "I did a good job and that's what matters."

"So are you telling me you deserve a reward?" Jack asked, rolling your nipples between his fingers.

"I-"

Jack smiled knowingly at you. "You'll get both then. Because even if you were a naughty girl, you did do a good job. And you looked cute while doing it." He parted your thighs, balancing your knees over his shoulders. You saw him working the condom on and then he placed his head
against your entrance. You stiffened as he pushed in with one smooth thrust. The plug bobbed inside you and you gritted you teeth, gasping as Jack hit your cervix.

"That plug makes you even tighter. And-" he ground against you and you bucked your hips. "I've bottomed out." He gave another thrust and you whimpered. "Not so defiant now, are you?" Jack rolled his hips and you squeeazed your eyes shut, unable to muffle your cries. "Oh, you sound so needy." He pushed against you, his hips driving against your ass. The angle made it feel like he was pounding the plug deeper into you.

You thrashed underneath him, you breathing growing more and more ragged.

"You're making the cutest face," he leaned in gripping your chin and kissed you hard. "What's the matter, Lucky? Can't take it?"

"Fuck you, Jack," you hissed and clenched around his cock.

"That's precisely what I'm doing," he growled.

"You're such a bastard." The frustration of being tied up drove you to needle him. That, and he looked good angry, muscles tensing, blush spreading across his chest. His face was fierce, teeth bared like he was about to tear you apart.

He kept his hold on your chin. "Keep pushing baby, see where it gets you."

"Are you just going to play stupid power games or are you going to fuck me?"

Jack laughed darkly and shifted his angle of thrust. The world went white and you threw your head back barely containing a moan. "Good enough for you?"

"Not even close," you said, breathing hard.

Jack sunk his teeth into your shoulder. It was fire and shock at first, but the heat radiated outward, making you groan.

"I don't know what they taught you in boy scouts. All we're missing is a speech about unity and giving it your all. Add a vibrator and maybe I'll get off." You ran your mouth, adrenaline outpacing good sense.

"You think you can outlast me?" Each word was punctuated by a hard stroke. "I'm a super soldier. I can go for hours. Keep it up and I'll break you." His hand rested on your throat and you froze.

"Yellow," you said, eyes darting down to his hand.

He stroked your neck, and leaned in and kissed your throat very softly. "Stop pushing me," he said, voice dropping an octave. "You're making it hard for me to think straight. I'm too worked up and too dominant to keep playing nice. Dial it back or I'll have to go cool myself down."

"Oh," you said, recognizing his actual limit. "I'm sorry, sir."

Jack gave you a rueful look. "Was that so hard? No wait, don't answer that." He brushed his blonde hair out of his face and kissed the spot between your ear and neck. "Give me a reason not to punish you." It was almost a plea. You'd almost pushed him too far. The thought aroused you more than it should have. OK, you were fucked up.
"Please, sir. Between the plug and your cock, I'm on edge. Before tonight, I haven't had sex for over a year and now you're overwhelming me. I'm trying, sir, but it's almost too much."

Jack's face went blank. "So you haven't had sex since...before coming to Switzerland?"

"Yes, sir."
A slow smile spread across his face, like he just now realized you hadn't been fucking other guys. "I see. You want me to go easier on you, baby?"

"Yes sir," you whined as he gave a quick jerk of his hips. "Please sir."

"You beg so prettily," he sighed and leaned in to kiss you. You opened your mouth sucking on his bottom lip while slipped his tongue inside. He began to move his hips and you moaned into his mouth. Breaking the kiss, Jack began to drive harder into you.

"Fuck! That hurts, sir." You closed your eyes, each thrust hitting your cervix too hard. "Please-"

Jack shifted his hips and then he was hitting your g-spot and you shuddered "Better?"

"Yes sir, thank you sir," you exhaled softly, the tension starting to build again.

"Good girl," he groaned and snapped his hips forward.

You arched your back as he slammed into you. A strangled cry escaped your throat, and he didn't slow down. You rode it out, panting. You shouldn't have been this hot, bound and trapped against Jack's body at his questionable mercy, both your ass and pussy filled.

"You're going to feel so good between us," Jack groaned. "You think this is intense? Wait till Gabe starts plowing your ass. It's going to make that sweet little pussy even tighter than now. We're both going to fuck you senseless. I don't know if you're going to be able to handle that. All I know is I can't wait to find out."

You thrashed under him, and he smiled down at you placing two fingers on your clit. "Scream for me."

He rubbed your clit, his cock pounding against your sensitive walls. You wailed as he fucked you through the orgasm. His fingers still working you. You clenched, your pussy spasming around his thickness.

"Jack, please-" you sobbed as he kept stroking your abused nub. "I can't- too much."

"I told you, Lucky. I like too much," he chuckled and just kept going.

You lay boneless on the bed, your thighs soaked, your ass and pussy aching. The plug was still inside you. Jack untied you, gently massaging your stiff wrists. You stared at him blearily.

"Drink," Gabriel put a water bottle to your mouth and you took it, throat raw. He stroked your neck. "I'll get you an emitter. Didn't think you'd need one on the first night."

You sighed. "I can't move and I can't feel my legs."
Jack didn't look the least bit sorry. "You wanted to do things the hard way." He paused. "You didn't forget your safe word, did you?"

"Fuck you, Jack," you said, sleepily.

"I did and will do it again in a heartbeat," he said, sounding unbearably smug.

You closed your eyes. Gabriel pulled you against him. He was still hard.

"Sorry, I'm spent." The heat of his body felt good.

"I know," he said. "I just want to hold you."

"Oh."

Jack laid on is side next to you. "I can't think of anyone beside Gabriel who's pushed me that far so quickly." He stroked your cheek. "You did it so well though. It's like you were made to take me." He kissed your nose, delight written all over his face.

"I'm going to poison your tea," you told him.

"And someone obviously hasn't learned her lesson," Jack chuckled. He combed his fingers through your hair. "I'm so glad you came here tonight." He kissed your forehead, taking your gloved hands in his. He was so giddy. Damn SEP endurance. There was a high chance you wouldn't survive this. "Thank you." You shouldn't be surprised that he was so cuddly after fucking you senseless. You probably would have liked it more if you weren't so tired.

Gabriel spooned you. Jack nuzzled your neck.

"Go to sleep. We'll be right here when you wake up." Gabriel rubbed your back and you sighed, letting yourself drift off into a well-deserved rest.

The bed shifted and you awoke, eyes firmly shut. The sound patterns were wrong. Your surroundings didn't feel right either. You didn't jump. You heard the terribly familiar hum of a biotic emitter. You slowly opened one eye halfway, surveying the room around you.

Fancy hotel room. Massive bed. A naked Gabriel bending a just as naked Jack over the bed, fingers in his mouth, while he slowly ground his hips against him.

You took in the sight of them, Jack flushed a pretty pink color, Gabriel smirking while he fisted Jack's cock. Jack's hair was disheveled, wet with sweat. He panted, eyes half closed. You guessed Gabriel had been teasing him for awhile.

The thought made you wet. Your body ached, and you winced, realizing you still had the plug in.

Jack moaned quietly around Gabriel's fingers.

"You got to be quiet, Jack, or you'll wake her up," Gabriel said softly, releasing Jack's cock. "And then I'll have to punish you."
Jack squirmed, eyes squeezed shut as he tried to hold it in. You shifted a little to get a better view, pretending to twitch in your sleep.

Jack froze.

You went limp, sighing softly.

Gabriel chuckled and you had to stifle a groan as you watched him push inside Jack. Jack gripped the sheets, knuckles white, and he bit his lower lip, face screwed up in concentration. Gabriel's fingers gripped the back of Jack's neck and he leaned forward, kissing the younger man.

Your mouth was dry. Probably because all the moisture went elsewhere.

Gabriel very slowly rocked his hips. Jack sighed softly, eyes still squeezed shut.

"You can stop pretending, Lucky," Gabriel said.

Jack's eyes flew open and his gaze met yours. Excitement shone in his eyes.

You didn't need to ask how Gabriel knew. He'd seen you sleeping enough times in the office to have picked up the pattern. You propped yourself up with a pillow. "Well, I didn't want to interrupt."

Gabriel smiled, giving Jack long languid strokes. "We would have invited you, but you were worn out. Figured we'd give you a break." He paused. "And we weren't sure if you wanted to be awakened...playfully."

Jack moaned as Gabriel just kept up his slow pace.

"Depends what you had in mind," you said, because you now knew better than to give Jack carte blanche on anything.

"Nothing heavy," Gabriel said. "One of us sucking on your nipples or tongue-fucking your sweet pussy."

You swallowed. "I don't think that would be a problem."

"Good." Gabriel smiled lazily at you. "How you feeling?"

"A little sore."

"There's water on the headboard. Why don't you get a snack, get cleaned up, and come back here? Jack's not going anywhere any time soon." You were pretty sure Gabriel didn't actually want you to go do all those things just yet. But he'd said it to frustrate Jack.

"Damnit Gabe." Jack rested his head on the bed.

You took the water, sipping it. "Can I just watch?" You tried not to sound too eager.

Gabriel gripped Jack's hair and gave a hard deep thrust. "If you like," he said. He seemed pleased, using more force to keep Jack pinned to the bed. "Why don't you touch yourself?" His face was relaxed, but you could see the excitement in his eyes.

You looked down at your gloves.

"You can take them off," Gabriel said, his voice gentle. "They're nothing to be ashamed
He kissed the nape of Jack's neck, eyes on you. "Or you can leave them on. Whatever you're most comfortable with."

They were going to get ruined if you weren't careful this weekend. You peeled them off and set them on the headboard. You held your left fist in your right hand, feeling more naked than before.

You sat legs apart, knees bent, feet flat on the bed, Jack watching you with undisguised lust, Gabriel looking on with almost predatory satisfaction.

"Just stroke yourself," Gabriel said. "Go slow." He pulled back on Jack's hair, forcing him to watch as you started rubbing slow circles around your clit with your right hand. You placed your left on the bed for stability, slipping your metal fingers under the pillow.

Jack sighed, smiling up at you, his eyes hazy. "You're so beautiful spread open like that."

Gabriel matched your rhythm, speeding up when you did, Jack gasping as the strength behind his thrusts.

"Why don't you play with your tits too?" Gabriel asked, his voice breathy.

You sighed, knowing you'd have to expose your prostheses. You began to rub yourself with your left hand, metal fingers now visible. Your right hand went up to your breasts, rolling them. You exhaled slowly, noting that while bruises had formed on your thighs and hips, they were already starting to fade.

"So was it Jack that woke you?" Gabriel asked, eyes bright.

"It was too quiet," you said after a moment.

"Ah." Gabriel stopped moving. He slapped Jack's ass, pushing him toward you. Jack crawled across the bed, eyes on your face. You stopped moving, taking in the sight of all that hard muscle slinking cautiously toward you. He smiled up at you knowingly, roles shifted again. Slipping between your legs, he paused to kiss your scarred calf, shreds of stocking clinging to it. He kissed his way up, tongue flicking out, till his head was against your stomach.

Jack tugged on your left wrist and brought your hand up to his lips. He started at the tips of your metal fingers, tongue curling around the prostheses. He sucked, and for a moment you thought you could feel the heat of him pulsing along your missing nerves. Then he pulled them out and moved up, his lips stopping on what flesh was left of your fingers. He kissed each knuckle, cradling your maimed hand in his.

"Please don't hide," he said.

You rubbed your forehead with your right hand, too much emotion rising in your chest and choking out the air. He rose, pulling you tightly against him, tucking your head under his chin. "Do you need a moment?" he asked.

You let out a shuddering breath. "Just how many masks do you wear, Jack?"

"As many as I need," he said, brushing your hair out of your face.

The bed dipped as Gabriel sat beside you, his warm hands rubbing your back. "Too much?"
"I feel like I'm ruining the mood," you muttered.

"I owe you some aftercare," Jack said. "That's all."

"He worked you over pretty good," Gabriel said.

That they understood your predilection for balancing the scales, spoke volumes about how fucked up all of you were. Owing debts was a vulnerability you couldn't afford.

"I'm OK," you said after a moment. "I'd much rather go back to watching you two." You patted Jack's cheek with your metal fingers. He kissed them again.

"If that's what you want," Gabriel slid around you and grabbed Jack around the waist, kissing him with bruising force. Both men were hard, erections bobbing. Jack moaned into Gabriel's mouth.

You squeezed your legs together. The throbbing in your ass was getting more intense.

Gabriel pushed Jack onto all fours. Jack crawled forward, resting his head on your lap.

"Pass the lube," Gabriel said.

You found a tube on the headboard, and handed it him, watching as he spread Jack's cheeks, squeezing them, and then drizzled it inside. Gabriel poured some on his hands and worked it over his thick cock.

"It'll be so good when he does this for you," Jack said, rubbing his cheek on your thigh. "He fills you up so full and you don't know where you end he begins."

Your breath hitched.

Gabriel put the lube aside and looked you straight in the eye. Then he began to ease himself into Jack, his pupils wide, jaw clenched. "Spread your legs. Let him kiss your pussy."

Jack moaned against your lower lips, the vibrations making your pulse speed up.

"Damnit Gabe, every time, I feel so stuffed," Jack panted. He began to lap at your slit.

"You want to let her see me fuck you open?"

"Please," Jack sighed. He looked up at you. "It's so good, Lucky. Promise."

He wasn't trying to get you off; it was just sweet teasing. You liked watching his pink tongue flick against you. He licked in time with Gabriel's slow thrusts, pausing to let you both know how much he liked it.

You stroked his hair and he rubbed against you like a cat. Fucking Jack and his fucking psychological chameleon tendencies.

Gabriel rolled his hips and Jack let out a low keening sound. "Please Gabriel."

Gabriel leaned over and kissed you. "Should I edge him for you? Or do you want to see how pretty he is when he comes?"

"Please," Jack begged, breaths coming in short staccato bursts.
You had vague recollections of Jack finally losing control and pounding you while he came, but by then you were a little too dazed to appreciate it.

"I want to watch him. But you don't have to rush."

Jack groaned.

Gabriel smiled and pulled Jack upright, his hands gripping Jack's hips. They were both on their knees. Jack's cock was swollen and red.

"Do you want to help?" Gabriel asked.

You leaned forward, taking Jack in your hand. You licked the tip, watching as his eyes rolled back. You didn't deep throat it, especially since Gabriel was now pushing Jack hard, but you jerked and sucked, and watching Jack pant and moan, sweat dripping down his skin.

You sped up, moving in time with Gabriel's thrusts. Jack began to keen and Gabriel sunk his teeth into Jack's shoulder. You felt his cock twitch, and then he came, spurting thick salty fluid down your throat. There was more than you expected, but you swallowed, even as you heard Gabriel curse, his hips moving faster as he finished.

You released Jack's cock, giving the head a little kiss.

Jack dropped onto all fours, breathing heavy. It was Gabriel that leaned over, his fingers tangling in your hair while he forced his tongue in your mouth.

"She drank you down, Jack," Gabriel purred. He petted the back of Jack's neck. "How'd you like having him in the middle? Next time we can both fuck him."

You found you rather liked that idea.

Jack grinned up at you. He drew in a couple deep breaths, his face still flushed. "Now it's your turn."

Gabriel helped you remove the plug. It was such a relief to have it out. You winced as he poured more cool lube inside you. He used his fingers, stretching you again and you closed your eyes, forcing yourself to breathe slowly.

"I think you're ready," Gabriel said his voice thick with excitement. "Do you want to try?" He nipped your ear.

"How are we doing this?"

"Sit on my lap, facing away. I won't move. You can set the pace."

Gabriel sat on the edge of bed, legs spread. His thick cock pressed against your puckered hole and he spread your cheeks, prodding gently.
You began to lower yourself, inch by burning inch. You were pretty sure it wasn't going to work. Gabriel felt much bigger than the plug. Even with the lube, it burned and the stretch was almost too intense to be pleasurable. It got easier past the halfway point. He'd slicked you up well enough that you managed to sit on his lap, his cock all the way inside your ass.

He wrapped his arms around you, his hard chest pressed against your back. Gabriel ran insanely warm but it was comforting as you sat there, trying to adjust to his girth.

"You feel so good," Gabriel sighed, his beard brushing against the skin of your neck.

You closed your eyes, trying to focus on anything but how much Gabriel filled you. If he moved you weren't sure you'd be able to breathe.

"Jack." Gabriel said, and you opened your eyes to see Jack sinking down to his knees. He licked your slit and you felt Gabriel's cock twitch inside you. Your breathing grew shallow.

"Your pussy's soaking wet," Jack said, rubbing his face against your thigh. "Do you want me to get you off before I fill you up?"

"Please," you whispered.

"You OK?"

"It feels like he's splitting me in half."

A low rumble vibrated along your back. Gabriel kissed your shoulder. "Don't want me to move yet?"

"You're going to wreck me if you do."

Gabriel drew in a sharp breath. His thighs tensed and you stiffened. "If you keep talking like that, I might just do that."

Jack smiled and slid a finger inside your pussy. "Are we going to be able to get my cock inside you now? You just get tighter after you come. It makes me want to fuck you for hours." He stroked your clit gently. It didn't take very long for Jack to coax an orgasm out of you, intensified by the fact Gabriel's cock pulsed hot inside you.

"I'm going to stand up. Just hold still."

You shrieked as Gabriel rose, Jack moving with him. He lifted you with ease, your knees splayed over his elbows. The sensation of floating with Gabriel's cock inside you had you gasping.

Jack was already wearing a condom. He placed the head against your pussy lips and began to push. You squirmed against Gabriel's body, trapped between them. Gabriel held your legs up, giving Jack better access.

"Oh, baby, look at you," Jack groaned, resting his forehead against yours. "You're clenching so tightly around me. I can feel Gabe stretching you out. I can only imagine how it feels for you." He shivered. "Relax, I'm almost in."

The pressure verged on too much. But you clung to Jack, whining as he worked himself in to the hilt.
Gabriel groaned. "Damnit Jack." He nipped your neck. "I can feel you inside her."

"If it's Jack's fault, why are you biting me?" The words came out strangled.

"Can't reach Jack," Gabriel said, sounding amused. "Something's in the way."

"You're the worst." Laughing made you wiggle in an inconvenient way, but Gabriel didn't seem to mind at all. Panting you rested your head against Jack's collarbone, your holes so full of them.

"Jack, you start." Gabriel's voice was rough. He was getting impatient.

Jack began to shift, and you could feel every twitch and pulse of his cock as he dragged it out of you. Then he pushed back inside and you were too full to breathe. You dug your nails into his shoulders, and he hissed.

"Gotta be careful of your strength," Gabriel said in your ear. "Or we'll have to tie you up."

"Sorry," you gasped, kissing Jack's shoulder.

"It's OK," Jack said. "I bruised you up pretty good earlier." He rocked his hips and you tried to arch away, only there was nowhere to go. Gabriel had you firmly locked in place. Curled between them, you could only tense and try to control your breathing. You couldn't even silence your moans. There was no space to hide. You were open to them and it was too late to do anything about it.

Nerves taut, you reflexively pushed yourself back against Gabriel, only driving yourself deeper onto his cock. He groaned, burying his face in your hair.

"You're driving me crazy." He kissed the back of your neck. "Can't wait till you're ready for me to fuck you, hermosa. We'll take good care of you."

Jack continued with his slow shallow strokes, your thighs trembling against Gabriel's arms. You were gasping now, shaking with each thrust. Jack pushed all the way back inside and your head lolled back, pressed against Gabriel's shoulder. You were just getting used to it, when Gabriel rolled his hips and you jerked forward into Jack.

Jack caught you against him, his smile cocks sure. "I thought you were tough, Lucky. Is this all it takes to undo you? If we'd known that, we would have held you down and fucked you like this a long time ago."

Gabriel began to thrust at a slow rhythm, and you bit Jack's shoulder, unable to voice an appropriately cutting comeback.


"Damnit, Jack," you clung to him with your right arm. You kept your left at your side, fingers splayed with painful tension. You didn't trust your control.

The pressure didn't ease, but you were getting used to it. Through the friction and the fullness you could swear you felt your blood pulsing in time with theirs. Jack had been right, you were losing sense of where you ended and they began. It was just one all-consuming feedback loop. You cursed, sweat trickling down your face. Gabriel burned hot at your back, and his cock filling you, each stroke feeling like you were at your limit. Jack with his filthy mouth kept teasing
you, while he kept the rhythm: Jack. Gabriel. Jack. Gabriel. You were never empty and the pressure kept climbing, each of them pushing you higher and higher.

There was no talking now, just the sound of them slipping in and out of you, their strained gasps and heavy breathing. Your breaths came in short hiccups, almost like sobs. Jack kissed your neck and then his fingers moved down to circle your clit. They moved faster and it didn't matter if you could take it or not, you were drawn too tightly between them, the pressure winding tighter and tighter till it hit the breaking point and you shattered. The shockwaves rippled outward, dragging Gabriel and Jack deeper inside you.

Your face twisted with desperation, eyes fluttering, jaw taut and aching. You let out a strangled wail. Your voice broke in your throat and Jack held you to his chest, Gabriel pressed tightly against your back. You felt Jack come first, deep inside you while he moaned into Gabriel's mouth. Gabriel's hips stuttered, short hard thrusts that had you sinking your teeth into Jack's shoulder, but you felt him come too, his fingers digging into your thighs, his cock buried inside you.

You dangled there, unsure if you were breathing or just thinking about it. Jack lifted you off Gabriel and laid you on the bed. When you'd opened your eyes, Gabriel was kissing your stomach and Jack curved around your side, not touching you.

"You OK?" Jack asked.

You nodded, because you weren't sure you could form words.

"That was exquisite." Gabriel kissed you. "Thank you, corazon."

"Intense," you agreed, your voice raspy.

"You need another nap?" Jack laughed.

"Some of us aren't nymphomaniac super soldiers," you muttered, already drifting.

You heard Gabriel laugh and felt his warmth encompass you.

For all their talk, when you woke up, they were both out. Gabriel had thrown an arm around your waist and Jack was snuggled up against his back. You winced, noting that they'd left the biotic emitter running for you. You very carefully slid out from under Gabriel's arm and stumbled to your feet.

Jack snored lightly. It was actually kind of endearing. The lines between Gabriel's brow softened. They both looked younger when asleep, their worries temporarily forgotten. Quietly, because you'd been paying attention when Genji gave stealth lessons, you crept out of the room. The master bedroom had an adjoining bathroom, but running the water would probably wake them up.

You made it to the guest bathroom, limping. It was a good thing they were asleep. You did not need to hear about it from Jack.

You grabbed a towel from the basket walked into the marble shower. Frosted glass panels
set the boundaries and there were four adjustable heads and plenty of space. It was really too big for one person, but you turned on the water, reached for the soap, and then sat down.

Closing your eyes, you leaned against the wall, legs splayed. You began cleaning yourself up and taking an account of the damage. There were bruises all on your arms, thighs, and hips. You had bite marks and hickeys all over. You were sore, but less than you expected. The hot water felt good, and you refused to feel guilty right then. The dull ache between your thighs wasn't too bad and you touched yourself to check for damage. If there'd been blood or tearing the emitter had healed you up. You didn't think so, they had both been very careful with you.

You weren't going to think about "what it all meant." You just needed to scrub the sweat off.

One of the panels shifted and your head snapped up.

Gabriel stood nude in the entryway, his face neutral as he took in the sight of you, curled up on the shower floor. Your eyes traveled up his legs, the man had amazing thighs, his cock was flaccid, and his muscled torso was lightly furred with dark curls. You admired his abs and then the planes of his chest, he had great shoulders and- His face was still very handsome, even when he was frowning.

"This is a lot less pathetic than it looks," you said. "It's more comfortable than standing right now. That's all."

He didn't move.

You held up the shower gel and washcloth. "I was so sticky and gross, I needed to get cleaned up."

Gabriel relaxed slightly and walked in, shutting the door behind him. He crouched down in front of you and kissed you hard.

"Hey," you said, when he released you.

"Wondered where you went," he said gruffly.

"Thought I snuck out?"

He combed his fingers through your wet hair. "It crossed my mind."

"I'm too tired to panic. It'll come, don't worry," you assured him.

Gabriel chuckled. "Then I guess I'll just have to keep fucking you till you're too exhausted to run." His cock twitched and you sighed.

"Are you guys always like this? Is this an SEP thing?"

"Some of it," Gabriel said. "The stamina comes from SEP, sure. But it's mostly that we have a free weekend and a pretty lady to impress."

"Who? I'll cut her," you said with a grin.

Gabriel didn't answer, he just traced his fingers along your legs. Your scarred leg would probably always look patchwork, unless you could afford the gene-modded custom-grown grafts. Honestly, your leg didn't bother you. You'd earned those scars and it was functional. Your
fingers... you were still adapting. The prostheses were useful and you maintained them religiously. But you didn't like the look of them on your hands. The sight of metal on flesh was too jarring. You did not want to be a cyborg in the making. They still didn't feel quite right either. They would probably never feel like your fingers, just tools attached to your hand. You didn't complain though. They were good prostheses and it seemed minor compared to Genji's condition.

"Does it hurt?" Gabriel asked, still staring at your leg. You'd kept it covered, if only so people wouldn't ask uncomfortable questions. There'd never been an occasion to show it to Gabriel after the bandages came off.

"No." You kissed his cheek. "You want me to wash your back?"

Gabriel laughed softly at that. "From the floor?"

"Maybe," you said.

"Maybe after I've fucked you against the wall," he said. "I like the acoustics in here. It'd be hot."

Your eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"I won't if you don't want me to," he said. "I'll warn you, I'm feeling a little rough, Lucky. I was holding back earlier, because Jack couldn't."

"I noticed," you said, shaking your head. You leaned back against the wall, legs flat on the ground. "The floor is really uncomfortable. I doubt the wall will be better."

Gabriel tilted his head back, eyes closed. Rivulets ran down his chest, and you admired the tone of his body. He was totally doing this on purpose. You flicked soap onto him.

"Really?" He opened one eye.

"Rinse off with me, and let's go somewhere less dangerous." You could just imagine slipping, falling, and having to get medical treatment while horny. Explaining how it happened while horny and frustrated would be the best part.

Gabriel pulled you to your feet and took the washcloth out of your hand. He spun you around and began scrubbing your back.

"I really want to use the hot tub at some point," you said. "For relaxing, not sex," you clarified, and Gabriel pressed against you, already hard again.

"We can do both," Gabriel said and began to clean himself off. "How do you want it, Lucky? You're going to get rug burn if I fuck you on the floor. Maybe bent over the couch? Laid out on the table?"

"What do you have against beds?" You took the washcloth out of his hands and lathered it up. You made a twirly motion with your fingers and he turned around obligingly.

"You're one to talk. I just like the idea of having you in every room of this place at least once. Preferably twice," he said as you scrubbed his back, your fingers tracing the scars along his back. You recognized burns, bullet wounds, and several slash marks. Some of them you'd have to guess at. You kissed the area between his shoulder blades and then squeezed his ass. It was so round and firm, you couldn't resist.
"Keep that up, and I'll have you against the wall now."

You laughed turned the water off. "All right, all right." You began to dry off, but Gabriel grabbed your wrist and pulled you out of the bathroom. He practically threw you onto the couch. You landed on your back, towel still in hand.

"You'll want to get rid of that," he growled.

You draped it over your front. "But I'm getting cold," you said grinning up at him.

He stalked over to you and tore the towel away. You were about to laugh, when he dropped to his knees and slid his tongue along your slit.

"Gabriel!" You hissed.

"Be quiet or you'll wake, Jack. And then we'll both fuck you stupid," Gabriel growled. Then he buried his face in your pussy, his beard scratching the sensitive skin while his tongue pressed against your clit.

You sighed softly as his hands gripped your thighs, holding them apart. You slid your fingers through his wet hair, tugging lightly.

He groaned, sliding two fingers inside you. "You're always so wet for me."

"You did just drag me out of the shower."

"So you like being manhandled?"

"I think it's more the who than the what." You stroked his face and he paused to kiss your palm. Gabriel sucked on your clit, twisting his fingers inside you. You splayed out on the couch and sighed as Gabriel pulled his fingers out. He sucked them clean and stood over you.

"Turn over." You obeyed, putting your weight on your knees and resting your arms on the top of the couch cushions, ass in the air. You heard Gabriel walk away and turned your head to see him grabbing a condom off the table.

"It's uh...safe. You don't have-"

Gabriel held his hand up. "Don't tempt me, Lucky." He paused. "That's a discussion we'll have after we talk about things."

You shifted uneasily.

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. "You trust me?"

"Yeah." You rubbed the back of your neck. "I uh...yeah."

"Jack and I are both clean, if that's what you're concerned about."

"No." It was the reminder of other things that had you squirrely.

Gabriel moved, and suddenly you were pinned against the couch, his cock pressed against your thigh. "I can see you thinking too much, Lucky. Going to change that." His mouth slid down your neck and your heart sped up.

You felt him press his head against your pussy lips and then he pushed in hard. You fell
forward against the top of the couch, gripping the back with both hands. He filled you too quickly and you let out a choked moan. You didn't have time to brace yourself because he was already rapidly pounding you into the cushions. His girth almost too much.

"Gabriel!" You clawed at the couch.

"Scream my name all you want," he growled. "But I'm not going to stop unless you're using your safe word."

You moaned as Jack tilted your chin up, your body limp, Gabriel still pinning you against the couch.

"You really have Gabe worked up." Jack kissed you hungrily. "You remember your safe word?"

You nodded, throat raw from begging. Gabriel had slowed down, his hips moving at a leisurely pace. It still felt like his cock was hollowing you out.

"You're taking him so well," Jack said. "Think you can fit one more?"

You sank into the hot tub, sighing as the hot water soothed your aches. Jack climbed in beside you, draping one arm around your shoulder.

"You can go to sleep if you like. I won't let you drown."

"Mmm," you sighed. "Hungry."

"Of course you are," Jack said. "I'll order room service. What do you want?"

"Cake," you said.

"Of course you do," Gabriel said. "Make sure you get her some real food."

"Steak," you agreed.

"She's won't be up long enough to eat," Jack flicked your ear.

"Awake," you said, sliding neck deep into the water.

Gabriel leaned over to kiss you, and you laughed and pushed him away.

"Ache."

"Is there a reason you're rhyming?" Gabriel sighed.

"Take a break," you hummed and waited for Jack to order food.
"Good job, Gabe." Jack patted your head. "Looks like you really did fuck her senseless."

"Mistake," you said, and dunked him under the water.

Chapter End Notes

Uhh...yes. That happened. Sorry about the lack of plot. I think?
True to his word, Gabriel didn't give you time to think. The entire weekend was sex, sleeping, more sex, and food. And Jack? Jack surprised you. There was a level of comfort to touching Gabriel. You assumed because he'd carried you out of the snow. Jack loved touch even outside sexual contact. If he wasn't playing with Gabriel's hair, he was rubbing your shoulders. He'd rest his head on your legs and try to get you to massage his scalp. He really liked it when you washed his back. It was all terribly endearing.

You left first, because it wouldn't do for all three of you to be seen exiting the hotel together. Jack had loaned you some sweats, though the pants were ridiculously big on you. You caught a taxi back, brain still hazy from the weekend. Your formal wear was in a bag, gloves included. The sleeve of the hoodie was long enough to cover your fingers.

Jesse was waiting for you when you got back to your room.

"You good?"

"Got a lot to think about," you admitted, tossing your bag onto the desk. "It was...good. Really good. But I don't know if it's sustainable."

Jesse nodded. "Ain't no shame in being happy for the now."

You found another pair of leather gloves and pulled them on. You'd wash Jack's clothes before you returned them. The thought of seeing him again made your mouth dry.

"How about you? How'd it go?"

Jesse gave you a shy smile. "A gentleman doesn't tell."

"You're not a gentleman, Jesse."

He just shrugged. "Still not telling."

You checked your terminal, and then rubbed your eyes. You were only gone two days, and someone sent Ziv on a mission? He shouldn't be leaving HQ. You checked the orders. He'd requested to go? What the hell was going on?

"Genji, why's Ziv in fucking Shanghai?"

"Lacroix needed a specialist for the mission. Ziv and Winston were the only ones cleared for for Shit Spiders. Winston was needed here this weekend." Genji didn't sound worried, but then he never did. "He has completed basic training, served in the IDF, and it is not supposed to be a combat mission."

You checked the briefing. Lacroix had been tracking a Talon asset known only as Bái Shé
or White Snake. S/he was a hacker and an assassin. The brief credited her with sixteen known military data breaches, countless corporate ones, and at least two murders. Lacroix was attending a trade fair in Shanghai under the guise of being the CFO of a Parisian startup. Ziv was his R&D guy, there to pitch the usefulness of a new quantum method of solar energy storage. You skimmed that part. It was entirely above your education.

The real reason they were there was because Lucheng Interstellar was having a big reveal, something about revolutionizing communications networks. Again, you skimmed the tech and found the summary: new type of quantum satellite relay encryption. The analysts were convinced Bái Shé would be there, though no one could pinpoint exactly why.

That sat wrong. You weren't sure Winston's relationship with Lucheng, just like you weren't exactly sure why Genji worked most of the Shimada missions, but you knew there was a connection. Why send Ziv? Shanghai was a hard city to operate in; Overwatch had minimal authority and little support. Sure it was routine visit, but you'd vetoed missions with better planning that this. After all this, you trusted Lacroix, but Ziv was the linchpin in your cybersecurity. More importantly, he was Rivka's grandson and your responsibility. You'd brought him into Blackwatch. And Lacroix had a big fat target sign painted on his back. It didn't matter if he was undercover, Talon had massive bounties on him. Ziv could easily become collateral damage.

You looked into the Bái Shé dossier. It'd be too easy if s/he was Anh Nguyen. But Nguyen was in New York for some UN summit. Bái Shé cropped up on the radar six months ago and had been wreaking havoc since then. Ziv reported that s/he'd had been piggybacking off the UN sat-coms to try and breach the Overwatch network. That kind of power, tech, or access couldn't be ignored.

It made sense for Ziv to help Lacroix on this.

And yet, you couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. East Asia wasn't friendly Overwatch territory. And Lacroix hadn't taken a full team, probably because of the ball. Plus the op was weak at best. You took the file down to Captain Amari's office.

When you knocked, Jesse opened the door. He raised a brow and stepped back. "Everything OK?"

You laid the files on the desk. "Have you seen this?"

Captain Amari picked them up and frowned, brushing crumbs off her desk.

"Why take Ziv out for field work on such a flimsy rationale?"

"Did you have a good weekend?" She asked, sipping her tea.

"...It was great." You looked at the floor. "Still processing, ma'am. But Ziv-"

Captain Amari studied the brief. "Gérard is usually very careful." She frowned. "He has been overworked lately. The attempt on Amélie's life has him stretched too thin. I was hoping they would be at the ball this year. She's a ballerina and they are a pleasure to watch."

You swallowed. "Requesting permission to go back them up. I don't like it, ma'am."

"Have you settled things with Jack and Gabe?" She asked.

"I...no. But I'm not trying to avoid a confrontation, ma'am. My gut says this is off."

You
swallowed, momentarily wondering if your subconscious had panicked you and Ziv and Lacroix were fine. No, Lacroix was usually more careful than this.

    Captain Amari nodded. "All right. You can go to Shanghai. Take backup. I don't like that it's just the two of them either. Jesse, do you want to take this one?"

    "If it's a hacker, maybe you shouldn't take Genji," Jesse said. "And you might want to watch your fingers."

    You looked down at your gloved hands. "I'll keep that in mind."

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Torby gave you a customized sap glove, discrete slits in the fingertips, omnium reinforced knuckles, and most importantly, omnium plates in the palm, cushioned with pads of crash gel - the stuff they padded atmospheric reentry transports with. He glared at you the entire time, even though you'd already sent his wife your chili recipe.

    You curled a fist, the material still a little stiff. This was for combat, or intense emotional situations. You had the feeling you'd need it soon either way.

    "Thank you," you told him.

    "Angela's putting the finishing touches on the next prototype attachment," he said. He smirked at you. "We took all your feedback into account. We're looking forward to your next analysis."

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Winston apprised you of the situation on the shuttle ride over. You thought about going in with a cover identity - fly from Seoul to Pudong International, dodge the Ministry of State Security, check into the hotel as a member of another startup. But Winston's report changed all that. Lacroix and Ziv were an hour overdue on check in. They'd never made it to the conference today. They hadn't returned to the hotel.

    And a safehouse on the Huangpu River was burning.

    Damn, you should've brought a full team, but no time for that now. You and Jesse were going in blind, starting in Pudong, on the eastern side of the river, where Talon had torched the house. No bodies had been recovered, and the fire response teams had been quick - that area had too high a population concentration to let buildings burn.

    No police had been dispatched; this told you that Talon had people on payroll in the local government and most certainly in the police department. No surprise, graft was a must when operating in Shanghai. You'd written an entire how-to manual on greasing palms to get shit done here.

    While Winston weeded through civilian comm-traffic, trying to find reports of gunshots, you and Jesse suited up. Your new chestpiece had a wide omnium-reinforced standing collar that
covered half your face. Someone had taken your neckshot comments to heart.

"This ain't gonna be a stealth mission, Lucky."

"I've bailed Lacroix out before." For such a polite guy, he sure had a way of making enemies.

"We had more backup then." Jesse lit his cigar. "If it's hot, I'm going to take point. You're going to cover me." You were a good shot, but you tended to avoid prolonged firefights.

"And if we can avoid being seen, I'm better at quiet kills."

Jesse nodded. "Fair."

Jesse was the better combat strategist. You might plan ops, but Jesse worked them regularly. Ranked or not, you would follow him. And he didn't say a thing about who you were sleeping with and if that affected his decisions. For that, you were grateful.

"Take this." Jesse handed you a grappling hook. You strapped it onto your belt. "You got grenades?"

"Frag and flashbang." EMPs would not be good for your fingers.

Jesse nodded. "I know you don't like fair fights, so it looks like we're getting into a real unfair one."

You shook your head. "Extraction plan?"

"Ship'll wait, cloaked. We'll need to get somewhere high."

You didn't like that, if only because you didn't know what kind of condition Ziv and Lacroix were in. But it wasn't like you had a choice. And you had to move fast. The Chinese government would not tolerate an undeclared foreign ship hovering over one of their major metropolitan areas.

There was no landing. The sun was setting when you and Jesse rappelled down, dropping onto a rooftop.

"Wukong: This is callsign Gunslinger. Vampire and I have landed. Commencing Operation: Shanghai Noon. Objective: retrieving operatives Cross and Light."

You stared at Jesse, resolving never to let him name anything ever again. Sure, Shit Spiders was a stupid name, but you technically didn't pick it. And you were high as fuck. What was his excuse?

"Coming in clear," Winston said. "Picking up a crude radio wave SOS around the new Lucheng branch office. It's still under construction, and empty but."

You were only a few miles from the safehouse.

"We have a visual." You had no trouble seeing the half-finished Lucheng logo, on the skyscraper, its sides covered with bamboo scaffolding. "Fastest egress?"

"Grappling hooks."

You'd done the training. You'd passed too. But there was a difference between using the
Zurich obstacle course and playing Spiderman in Shanghai. Jesse went first, shooting the hydraulic hook into the molding of the next building over. He tugged testing the strength of the hold, secured the line around his harness, and was off.

The hook just took you about seven yards, not too far, not too fast, but if you fell... It was a long way down.

It took you three tries to get a good placement, and you came in too hard, hitting your knee on the side of the building. But you didn't fall to your death, and you certainly didn't look down. Jesse snickered and helped you angle the next shot. By the fourth time, you were getting the hang of not crashing.

You both crouched on the edge of the building next to the Lucheng construction site.

"There." Jesse pointed at a flash of light. "Wukong: Spotted shooters. Anything you can tell us about the situation?"

"Cameras showed about two dozen armored operatives entering the building from multiple spots along the base, in squads of four. White masks. Urban warfare gear. They've been in there for twenty minutes. No one has exited."

You blew out a breath. "Wukong: Any word from our people?"

"Negative, but the signal is still live."

They really wanted Lacroix. You had to respect him for that.

"Don't take any stupid risks." Jesse didn't look at you as he lined up his shot. You were going in from the top, and it would be wise to use the scaffolding for ambushes. "We grab them. We retreat. Understood?"

"Of course. We're not heroes, we're Blackwatch." You stood, aiming for the scaffolding. Your hook landed properly, locked, and you let it drag you into the night.

You landed on the scaffolding, and Jesse perched on the I-beam above you. The bamboo looked rickety, but it held well. The crossbar framework was suited for climbing, even if it did look like it would drop you to your death or snap under a good wind.

"You're boosting the signal," Winston crackled in your ear. "Fifty meter radius."

"Cross and Light, are you on this channel?" Jesse asked. "This is Gunslinger."

There was a faint crackle.

"Change frequencies."

"Cross and Light, repeat. This is Gunslinger."

This floor was clear. Nothing but beams. You dropped a level. It looked like Talon hadn't made it this far yet. The wind was cold and loud. The slight swaying of the building was disconcerting.

You went down two more, the next one had concrete supports. You'd have to sweep more carefully.

"Slow down, Vampire."
Heavy boots stomped around the dust, and you flattened yourself against the beam. There were two, which meant there were two more you hadn’t seen.

"Hostiles," you whispered into your earpiece.

"Maintain cover," Jesse ordered.

You crouched there.

"No sign of them."

"Target was wounded. He can't have made it far. Check out there."

You dropped a level, but now you had to be more careful. The next floor had two more, possibly the other half of the squad overhead.

"How hard can it be to find a man in an empty building?"

You wondered if Lacroix was using the scaffolding to get around. There’d be guards at the bottom, but he could handle a few of those. You frowned, waiting for one of the Talon mercenaries to stop searching, but they continued their sweep.

"Status Vampire?"

"Passed four on my way down. No sign of Cross and Light."

Where would you hide? Besides where you were right now. You kept an eye out for tarps and substructures. The next floor was empty.

A scream sounded from overhead.

"I'm jamming them, get the other two if you can, Vampire."

You used the hook, taking two levels up in one shot. You unhooked your carbine from your back and climbed into the building.

"Hostiles encountered! Repeat-" One crouched, by the staircase, his back to you. The carbine would be too loud. You drew your tanto and put it through his throat. You set him down gently and picked up his earpiece. There was nothing but static. You looked around for the second one.

"I have one," you said.

"Just got the third," Jesse said. "Keep moving."

You studied the gear. The armor was reinforced in the chest. Joints and neck were exposed. The mask had the usual comm augment and armoring.

You tucked the earpiece in your collar. "Don't think they heard us." You climbed back out onto the scaffolding, because even if the winds were scary, they'd have more trouble ambushing you out here.

"Vampire: The signal's strengthened. You're closest."

"Understood Wukong." You climbed in the next level, listening for boots. You swept the floor, finding nothing.
The next floor was a little different. There were bricks lined up against one of the concrete substructures. You padded over, the shadows starting to make visuals difficult.

You crouched beside the pile. Streaks of rust stuck out from underneath.

"Ziv, Lacroix. You in there?" You lifted a brick. Just another brick behind it. Then you lifted that one. "It's me."

The next brick moved on its own.

"Ben-zona, Lucky. What the hell took you so long?" Ziv snapped, his hair frizzy and brick dust smudging his cheeks. "Thought we were going the way of Fortunato."

"Was that a luck joke?" You shook your head.

"Why don't you try reading books instead of burning them?"

"Why don't you shut up and help me tear down this wall." You paused. Your relief was short-lived. "Lacroix?"

"He's out. I managed to stop the bleeding, but- I'm not a doctor."

"According to your grandmother, you should've been," you told him, helping to disassemble the shelter.

"Yes, I should've. That way I wouldn't be hiding under bricks, trying not to get executed by terrorists. Can we talk about my poor life choices later?"

"Gunslinger: Light and Cross acquired. Cross is down. Need assist."

Ziv wrinkled his nose at you. "Seriously?"

"I did not come up with the names." You crouched over Lacroix. He was very pale, but breathing. Ziv had torn up his shirt, binding his left arm and right thigh.

"Can you lift him?"

"I got him this far," Ziv groused. "Fucking Frenchy wanted me to leave him behind. Like I'm giving him to Talon. Does he know how Blackwatch operates? We're petty as fuck. I'd throw him out the window first. Collect the bounty myself."

You grinned, even as you heard boots hitting the metal a floor below you. Shit.

"Gunslinger, we have incoming. Cross is immobile. Need evac."

Jesse dropped from the scaffolding, and rolled in.

"I can't carry him," you said, unhooking a grenade. You guys go, I'll catch up."

Jesse gave you a hard look. " Ain't never seen someone so scared of talking about feelings."

"Ain't scared," you scowled and stalked to the stairwell. You hurled the grenade as the first one turned the corner, bouncing it off the wall, It sailed into their midst.

You drew your carbine. The building seemed to shake as the explosive went off. Jesse shook his head and lifted Lacroix in a fireman's carry. Ziv limped behind him, his ankle swollen.
You raised your gun, rounding the corner and finishing the one who wasn't quite dead.

You brought up the rear, staying at the stairs, waiting for the next batch. The stolen comm crackled to life.

"Hostiles on higher floors. Teams Zed, November, and Violin, converge. Calling reinforcements. Do not let the target slip the net."

"Got three teams incoming."

You followed your people up, till you were on the unfinished uppermost beams. Your transport wouldn't be able to land. Someone was going to have to climb up first, and that someone was Jesse. Jesse set Lacroix down, even as the ropes dropped.

"I can't climb that," Ziv said.

Jesse slipped off his harness and tossed it Ziv. "Get this on him. I'll get up there and reel him in. Pilot might be able to help me."

You covered the stairs, listening as Teams Zed and Violin grew closer.

"You got a sidearm, Ziv?" You asked.

"Lacroix's."

"Try not to shoot me."

"Try not to get in my way."

"Incoming." You rolled your grenade down the stairs, knowing that they were probably expecting it. The flashbang was first, just to soften them up. You waited for the swearing to start, rounded the corner, and tossed the frag grenade. You plugged your ears.

"Get moving, Vampire!"

You didn't stick around to watch. You headed up the stairs. Ziv shook his head at you. You took off your harness and gave it to him. "Secure yourself."

"Lucky-"

The panic in his voice had you turning, gun raised.

A woman in cracked white armor staggered up the still smoldering stairs, raising her pistol at Ziv. You snarled, spun, and threw him behind you. Her bullets slamming into your back, striking your armor. Your entire upper left quadrant went numb, then began to burn. You hissed and returned fire.

She raised her left arm, it was fully metal.

Fucking cyborgs. You'd have to do this the right way.

She tossed her gun aside and rushed you, electricity crackling along her metal arm. She was too close and threw your left hand out to intercept.

Your prostheses went haywire. Blades clanged against her metal wrist. Your augments felt like they were on fire. You couldn't control your fingers, but you could keep your arm up and
use your hand to block her.

    Behind you Ziv began to shoot.

    Her mask shattered and you kicked her back, all feeling in your left arm lost.

    "Get up there!" You shouted at Ziv, before turning to the cyborg. You kicked her to the ground, boots driving into her shoulder. You drew your tanto, ready to finish the job, and froze.

    Her hair was too short, circuits running along the left side of her face, barely covering the burn marks. Even behind the scarring, you knew that slim build and golden skin. You knew that broken face from a lifetime ago.

    "Lao?"

    She stared at you without recognition, eyes empty.

    The other team would be here soon and you were all out of useful grenades. Your left arm twitched uncontrollably, smelling like fried electrics and burnt meat.

    You couldn't carry her. You couldn't secure her safely, so you couldn't bring her with you. And right then, you knew you weren't going to stab her through the throat.

    "Lao. Lao Yue, it's me. It's Lucky."

    She just blinked rapidly, her mouth working, but no words coming out.

    "If you're in there, I'll be back for you, and we'll sort this out. You hear me? I'll find you." You touched your knife to her forehead, sheathed it, and grabbed the ropes with your right hand. Ziv was already onboard and he helped Jesse haul you up.

    You watched her grow smaller and smaller as you ascended. She didn't move from the ground, and you lost track of her as you climbed back into the transport.

    "What the hell was that?" Ziv shouted as soon as Jesse shut the bay doors. He got behind you, checking your back.

    "I'm wearing armor, you idiot," you growled at him. "And you're not allowed out on missions ever again. Your grandma would pickle my head if anything happened to you."

    "I'm a full agent!" He shouted. "My grandmother is dead, Lucky. You don't need to end up like her!"

    You grabbed him by the collar with your good arm. "If I can't keep my people alive, what's the goddamn point, Mihret?!" Desperation bled into your rage. Your skin was too tight, and you'd left Lao behind. Again. You hadn't even suspected you should be looking for her all this time.

    "Ease up, Lucky. You're bleeding all over the floor." Jesse pushed your hand off Ziv's collar.

    You looked at your left arm. Blood flowed down your elbow. One of Lao's bullets had hit you. That didn't worry you so much as the pain in your finger stubs. You rubbed your face, smearing soot and sweat.

    "Let me help you get cleaned up. Can't have you going back to HQ looking like that." Jesse sighed. He helped you with the armor straps. "Those are gonna leave a mark," he said.
"Don't let Gabriel see that," you said.

"Don't put me in the middle of it," he snapped.

"Sorry. I meant- not asking you to cover. Just if Jack's there, give it to him instead," you said, sitting down. "He'll handle it."

Jesse nodded then. "Let's get this arm bandaged. Looks like it went straight through the flesh. That's good- what's wrong with your left hand?" He put pressure on your arm.

Your blades were out. "She hit me with something electric."

"Guess it's better that we didn't have Genji." Ziv handed Jesse a bandage. He cleaned up the wound on your bicep, sealed it with medical gel, and wrapped it. "Drugs?"

"No," you said. "Got to fix this." You peeled off your sap glove, blood and bits of skin coming with it. That electric shock had been powerful enough to burn. It melted some of your augment circuits. You began prying them off, hoping there was no nerve damage. You had more in your kit bag and you put them on, then reattached your prostheses.

Your blades retracted and you could move each one just fine. Whatever Lao had used had only fried the electronics and left you with second degree burns.

Ziv set up an emitter, watching you silently.

"Lacroix?" You asked.

"Stable. Can't do anything for him here. We could try stopping at another field hospital, but we don't have the security to protect him. He'll make it to Zurich." Jesse lit another cigar. "You get that last one?"

He had eyes like a fucking hawk. He knew you spared her.

"Fucking hell, Jesse. That last cyborg was Lao, from my unit in the fucking 9th Circle. She didn't recognize me."

Jesse narrowed his eyes. "You sure?"

"Staked my life on it, didn't I?" You ran your fingers through your hair. "Wanted to bring her with us. But-" You waved your left arm. "Couldn't secure her. I'm not killing her before I get answers."

Because you didn't believe Lao betrayed you. If she had, well, then you'd do what you had to do.

You sat there in silence while Jesse went to talk to the pilot.

"Lucky?" Ziv stared at the floor.

"Yeah?" He hadn't taken care of his ankle yet. "You should ice that."

"Ben-zona, let me finish. Thank you for coming after me." He put his head between his knees. He was coming off the adrenaline then and probably had to puke. That was the worst. "And for taking those shots. I owe you."

"You're welcome," you said, because that was only polite thing to do. You shouldn't have
gone off on him. You weren't Gabriel, after all, but you now understood that burden. Fucking hell. So this was what it was like to be on the other side. No wonder Gabriel was always so grumpy. "Nothing to repay, Ziv. The only debts you owe me come from cards and covering for your ass with the Commander."

"Whatever you feel you owe Savta doesn't apply to me."

"Of course it does," you said. "She'd want me to protect you. You can't possibly think I'd do it for your sake. You're fucking obnoxious."

Motherfucking Ziv and Jesse. One of them drugged your electrolyte solution, but you were pretty sure both of them were in on it. You leaned against the seat restraints, boneless. You couldn't feel your left arm, but that was OK because you could see it and it was still there.

"I hate you," you said to Jesse.

"You keep saying that, but I don't think you know what it means." He laughed at you. "Relax, Lucky. We know you're a badass. That gunshot wound is going to hurt something fierce and your back's a mess." Jesse patted your head. "You'd do the same for me."

"I'd let you suffer." The world spun. "And I'd ask first!"

"Sure you would," Ziv said. "And if we declined, you'd drug us anyway."

You hung your head, not because you were ashamed that they were right, but because your neck didn't want to support itself.

"Not the same. I'm no danger to myself and you don't have to hide from the commander. You know how hard this is going to make it?"

Jesse frowned. "I thought you weren't scared of talking about things?"

"That is almost true. That is also not the reason why I will be hiding. I got shot again, Jesse. You saw him the last time. He's going to be livid." You bobbed your head. "Doesn't matter if it was Ziv's fault. Actually, that's what I'll say. Yes. You can run from Gabriel with your gimpy ankle. It'll give me a head start. Good luck."

Ziv looked at you sideways. "You leave me out of your weird love triangle with Reyes."

"Fuck! Does everybody know? Jesse, you told me not everyone knew!"

"Wait, I was joking," Ziv said looking between you and Jesse. "You know what, I don't need to know. That's all above my pay grade."

"Probably safer that way," Jesse said, shaking his head. "You'll want to stop talking, Lucky."

"Hate you all." You hated them all. Even Lacroix, and he was just lying there.
Fortunately, the drugs were wearing off by the time you landed. You unhooked yourself, wondering if running was an option. The medics were on first, carting Lacroix off. Jesse watched you like he expected you to bolt, trip, and land on your face. Ziv had spent most of the return trip focused hard on his tablet, either writing up a report or playing a game.

Running and hiding was silly. You knew that. Now that the adrenaline was gone, and the drugs were mostly out of your system, you could think straight. You grabbed your bag, one-handed. You'd go to the infirmary. And after that, you'd deal with the fallout.

Captain Amari stepped onto the shuttle, blocking your exit. She nodded at Ziv. "Go to the infirmary," she said. "Thank you for the prompt report. Dismissed, Agent Mihret."

"Ma'am." Ziv saluted and limped off.

"Jesse?" She studied him.

"I'm fine, Ana." He grinned at her. "Sorry, I didn't bring you any mooncakes."

Satisfied that he was unhurt, she turned to you. "You need to go to the infirmary." She paused. "I can take you, or Gabriel can. Your choice."

You wondered what Ziv had written in his report. "I better go with Gabriel. Jesse can you?" You waved at the armor.

Jesse handed Captain Amari your dinged up chest piece. Captain Amari gave it a once-over. "You can't have nice things, can you?" She traced the damage with her finger. "You should talk to Jack about Kandahar. He'll be able to give you better insight. Any other concerns, Agent?"

"Lacroix?"

"Too early to tell." She sighed. "We'll debrief later. Go get fixed up."

"Yes ma'am." You couldn't really salute, not with your one arm full and you stepped off the transport, a little light-headed.

Gabriel stood in the disembarkation hall, hands clasped in front of him. His mouth was flat and his stance rigid. He was still in his standard Blackwatch gear, hat slightly askew. Jack leaned against the wall, arms crossed, looking disinterested in that too-tight black fatigue outfit. Jack's eyes flicked between your face and your arm. They knew.

Oh, you were definitely in trouble. Jack walked over too casually and took your bag out of your hand.

"Let's go to the infirmary," he said, voice so neutral, he couldn't be anything but unhappy.

"Thanks," you said, but he'd already set out on a brisk pace.

Gabriel remained unmoved. You stopped in front of him.

"Hey."

Gabriel's eyes stayed on your face. "Infirmary," he said.

You hugged him with your good arm. One of his arms slid around your shoulders and
pressed you against his warmth all too briefly. "I-"

"Save it," he said  "We'll talk after you get a clean bill of health."

If Angela was bothered by the looming grumpy super soldiers in her infirmary, she didn't show it.

She took one look at your arm and had the bandage off to debride the wound. She cleaned it, poking and prodding the entire time. The emitter had already begun to seal it up. "The bullet went through and missed all the important spots. You were lucky."

You would've shrugged, but she had your arm in a vise grip. Angela sealed it with more gel, re-bandaged it, and moved to check your back. "Mmm, you're going to have some nasty bruises. You haven't been coughing up blood, have you?"

"No ma'am." You could feel their eyes on you.

"All right, you know the signs of internal bleeding by now. If you have any, come see me immediately."

She moved on to your finger stubs. "You're going to have to leave those off for a few days." She examined your fingers with her scanner. "No nerve damage, but the augments will irritate your burns. Let those heal first. I will give you a salve." She studied your arm. "I'm putting you on temporary medical leave and starting you on a course of nanites. They'll accelerate healing and prevent infection. You can take another emitter if you need one. Get plenty of rest, keep your wounds clean and dry. Come see me if you have any signs of infection or extra discomfort."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Leave the broken augments for Torby and me. We'll want to see a report on this. I'll get you another set calibrated later."

"Thanks," you said.

"No sparring," she said, her eyes shifting to Gabriel and Jack.

Did that mean what you thought it meant?

"Where do you want to do this?" You sat on the edge of the bed, wondering how bad it was.

"My quarters are the most discrete," Gabriel said. Jack still held your bag. The three of you exited the medical wing in silence. Your knee hurt, probably from your bad grappling landings. You'd just set up another emitter and try not to think about all the damage you'd done.
You knew where Gabriel's quarters were of course, but for the sake of not feeding the rumor mill, you'd never actually been inside. His room was more spacious than yours and he had matching furniture that made the place look almost normal: queen bed with lots of pillows and a thick green comforter, couch and a small entertainment center, as well as bookshelves. He had weapons on the table and was that sewing kit? Jack set your bag down beside the table.

"Sit," Gabriel said and took the emitter from you. He placed it by the couch and switched it on.

You sat on the couch. It was a nice couch and you were going to mess it up with all the blood and dirt you still had on your fatigues.
Jack sat down beside resting his elbows on his knees. He turned toward you. "Pain OK?"

"Yeah," you said. "Angela gave me some time-release stuff. Won't make me as loopy as the emergency shit in the shuttle."

Jack leaned over and kissed your shoulder. "You're supposed to come back uninjured," he said tightly in your ear. The roughness of his voice made your stomach do flip flops.

"I'm not a super soldier," you said, looking up at Gabriel.

"We are very aware of that," Jack said.

Gabriel crouched down in front of you, his hands rested on your cheeks. "Tell us if you don't want this. Don't run halfway across the world and get shot up."

"That's not what I was doing!"

"You definitely went halfway across the world and got shot up," Jack said.

"It wasn't about you," you said. "I got back, saw the mission, freaked out because who let Ziv out the lab, and yeah, I'm glad I did because something was obviously wrong. Was I going to give you guys space? Yes. But going to China is overkill, even for me."

"What made you think we wanted space?" Jack asked.

"I...don't assume," you said. "Because I don't know how this works. And maybe I needed some space too, to figure things out."

Gabriel dropped his hands. "Have you figured things out?"

Relationships left you with a kind of breathless manic insanity that made you dumber and more erratic. You were on drugs and had been shot. You didn't know what you wanted, except to go to sleep and maybe cuddle Gabriel because he had insane body heat and you liked it when Jack was there too because it felt right.

"This weekend was...really really good," you said, because you didn't know how else to describe it. "I uh...am terrified of screwing up."

"That's how I feel every day," Jack said. "And you know I've fucked up big time. You explained it to me with everything but diagrams." He sighed. "You know you have this awful way of laying things out very clearly and politely and that just makes me feel worse."

"Sorry," you said, not feeling very sorry because well, Jack needed things laid out with diagrams.
"No, I listen better that way," he admitted.

"So explain this "arrangement" to me," you said.

Gabriel raised a brow at you. "That sounds sordid."

"What is this? What are the ground rules?" You asked, because you needed an anchor, a limit, a boundary to shape it.

Gabriel rubbed his forehead. "You hate rules."

"No, I hate bad rules," you said. "I just...I don't know how to do this. Help." You gripped Gabriel's hands. "Shin and I didn't talk about a whole lot of stuff. We just...were. I didn't realize we were in a real relationship till I found my clothes in his drawers."

"And you panicked?" Gabriel asked.

"...a little." Shin had just played it off like it was no big deal. You were there anyway and it was convenient. Nothing to worry about. You didn't put a label on it, even if you slept in his room almost every night and didn't look at another man, woman, or omnic. "But I didn't quit."

"This isn't just sex," Gabriel said bluntly.

"Glad it wasn't just me thinking that." You remembered how he had held you that first time and how Jack had kissed your metal fingers. You would follow Gabriel into Hell, sex or not. And Jack? You'd probably drag him out of Hell, because he was making stupid decisions or being noble. Same difference.

"No one else," Jack said, a hand resting on the back of your neck

You made a choked snorting sound. "Little chance of that. This is already complicated enough."

"Tell us if we make you uncomfortable. Don't just...run off," Jack said. "We're pushy. It won't get better if you just retreat."

"I'll say when I need space," you said, even though part of you wondered how much you'd have to fight for it.

"This stays separate from work," Gabriel said ruefully, because everyone present understood it wasn't that simple. "That enough to get you started?"

"I think," you said. "...If we're having sex, is everyone supposed to be there or-?"

"Relax," Gabriel said. "We all have hectic schedules. If you and Jack have some alone time, I'm not going to begrudge you that. I'll just expect you to make it up to me later. Same goes for me and Jack or you and me. It's fine."

"Look, you're over thinking it," Jack said. "We already spend a lot of time together. Things don't have to change, except for the sex part. We are having sex and cuddling. That makes everything better."

You were slightly less terrified that you were going to fuck everything up in the worst way possible. Jack could do a pep talk when it suited him. "OK. So it's friends with-" You stopped, because Gabriel had said right off the bat it wasn't just sex. And Jack had said it was exclusive.
"Really good friends with exclusive sex. That isn't just sex." You buried your face in your hands.

Jack laughed beside you. "It's trust. I trust you. Gabe trusts you. Do you trust us? That's all you need to focus on."

That actually made a lot of sense. And he didn't even use diagrams. "Have you done this before?"

"The sex or the three-way relationship?" Gabriel asked.

"Both?" You asked, because you didn't want to come out and say you assumed they'd had all kinds mind-blowing orgies.

"Yes to the sex. Kind of to the relationship," Jack said. "There was a girl back in SEP...but it didn't work out."

"She had a strong preference for Jack and some other issues," Gabriel said. "It didn't balance well. Put us off this kind of thing for awhile."

You weren't entirely sure what that meant, but you also didn't want to ask just yet. "All right, we're sorted. Can I go shower and collapse now?"

Gabriel kissed you. It was hot and needy and you melted against him. "Why don't you shower here? You're supposed to keep that arm dry and it'll be easier if we help you."

"Uh..." You rested your head against his shoulder wracking your brain for a reason not to. There really weren't any good ones.

"Let Gabriel take care of you tonight," Jack said, kissing the back of your neck. "You...worried us both."

"OK," you said, because you had no willpower left. Gabriel helped you up. His bathroom was bigger than yours - his shower could comfortably fit two people. Three if you were trying. You shook your head. You didn't have the energy for that.

Jack leaned against the sink and watched as Gabriel helped you out of your clothes, giving special attention to your bruised back and wounded arm. He stripped and got in first, turning on the water. You climbed in, careful of the arm.

"Trash bags work well," Jack said. "Probably could have told you earlier, but this is nicer, right?"

"Shut up, Jack," Gabriel said. He lathered up a loofah and started scrubbing your back. You sighed and leaned back into him.

"I fired those two assholes today," Gabriel said. "Jack was going to let you do it, but you disappeared."

"As long as you had fun," you said. "And they're gone. I don't mind." The feeling of him against your back was soothing.

"Turn around," he murmured, and you obliged, letting him get the blood, dirt, and sweat off you.

"Thank you," you said when he was finished.
"Not done." He poured some shampoo onto his hand and gently rubbed your scalp. "You're covered in dust."

"Construction site," you said. "Ziv managed to camouflage Lacroix and himself behind a pile of bricks. Had to help dig them out."

"The boy is clever," Gabriel said. "Got a mouth on him though."

"Yeah," you agreed. "Just like his grandmother. But I don't have to take it from him." You smiled, Gabriel's fingers still running through your hair. "He's never leaving HQ again. At least till he's 30."

"You can't do that, Lucky." Gabriel kissed your shoulder. "Boy has to grow up. He won't get stronger if you coddle him. I know it's not easy to let them out of your sight. Especially in this geo-political climate. But if you tie them down, they won't improve and they'll resent you for it."

"Yeah, I know. Just feel responsible for him, y'know? I owe Rivka." You watched the water in the drain go from brownish-gray to clear. "Not going to clip his wings. Just...get him better trained. And get us another hacker."

Gabriel turned off the water. "I know exactly how you feel."

"Yeah, I know that too. It was an unpleasant realization." You kissed his hand gently. "Thank you. For the shower and for being a good teacher."

Jack had gotten two towels and he handed one to Gabriel before drying you off, his hands lingering on your hips. He gave Gabriel a quick kiss before helping you into one of Gabriel's t-shirts. It was too big, of course, but it covered you and smelled like him, an oddly comforting mix of Hoppe's No. 9, cordite, and an expensive chypre cologne.

"Why don't you stay here?" Jack began to rub your shoulders. Gabriel helped you wrap your hair with the towel.

"OK," you said. "Damn, this was a trap, wasn't it?"

"Gabe's got a big bed. We can all fit."

"I'm too tired to argue," you said. "But you are a tricky son of bitch, Jack."

"Glad you picked up on it quickly. Everyone else thinks golden boy is a fucking saint." Gabriel guided you to the bed, his towel wrapped around his waist. Jack brought the emitter over.

You picked a side and climbed in. To your surprise, Gabriel dragged you over to the middle, his hands lingering on your hips. His cock jutted against you, still covered by the towel. "I uh..." You could feel the blood rushing to your face. "I'm not up for a full session."

"Didn't think you were," Gabriel said. "Angela said "no sparring." It doesn't count if I just put my mouth on you."

"Oh." Your breath hitched as he spread your thighs. "I uh-" You bit your lip as he ran his tongue from your clit to perineum. You arched against the pillows, fingers on your good hand digging into the sheets.

Jack kissed your neck, his hands gently squeezing your breasts. "Look at him." Gabriel
laid between your legs, hands on your thighs, his eyes closed as he slid his tongue in and out of you. "He could do this all night."

"Damnit Jack!" You wanted to buck your hips, but Gabriel's hands held you against the bed.

"Relax. Nothing strenuous for you," Jack purred. "Doctor's orders." He kissed you hungrily, eyes fever bright. "You just relax and let us take care of you tonight. Don't worry," he pulled the t-shirt up, exposing your breasts to the cool air. "We'll punish you, later."

"Goddamnit, Jack, how am I supposed to get to sleep now?" You were only half-annoyed, because while you were exhausted, there was something almost magically revitalizing about sex.

"You get to sleep in; I have to be back at the office in five hours. No complaining," he said smugly.

Gabriel slid a finger inside you and your breathing went ragged. He kissed your hip, his beard glistening with your slick and you tensed while he slowly worked another finger inside.

"Gabe-" Jack growled. "Goddamn this is hot." He buried his face in your hair, tongue sliding along the shell of your ear.

"You're so predictable, Jack." Gabriel didn't even look up. "Are you up for sucking him off, Lucky? Don't feel like you have to. I'll take care of him later."

"I don't mind." Because you liked watching Jack come undone. "But I get to control the pace."

"Whatever you want," he said. He unzipped his pants, freeing his erection. "I love watching you take me. You get this dreamy look on your face like you can't get enough. Makes me want to fuck you harder- which I'm not going to do because you're injured, and in charge, and fuck!" You ran your tongue along the underside of his cock before sucking on the head.

You heard Gabriel's muffled laugh and then he was sucking on your clit, fingers moving leisurely inside you. Jack gripped the headboard, his thighs shaking as you used your good hand to stroke his shaft.

"You're killing me, Lucky."

"What's killing you is knowing you can't fuck her tonight," Gabriel said. You moaned around Jack as Gabriel scissored his fingers inside you. "Don't worry, I'm feeling it too, baby. Gotta reassure myself that you're alive and here in my bed. I just want to hold you down, fill you with my cock, and make you scream for me. But we all have to make sacrifices."

There was such a need in his voice it made you ache. You released Jack and leaned down, grabbing Gabriel's hair and dragging his head up. You kissed him, sucking his tongue into your mouth, your tang smeared across your lips.

"Oh corazon, you shouldn't tease me," he growled. "Jack, yes. Me, no."

"Wasn't trying to tease. Just...wanted to kiss you. I want you to enjoy yourself too."

"I am enjoying myself. But if you like, I'll finish in your mouth too," he said, and lowered his head back to your pussy. You squeaked as he slid a third finger inside you and began to pump harder.
You took Jack back in your mouth, working him deeper. He gave a choked groan, but didn't try to thrust. He let you decide how much you wanted. You stroked him, squeezing lightly, before raking your hand down his thigh. Jack snarled eyes narrowing, but he held still. That deserved a reward. You bobbed your head, easing his length down your throat to the hilt.

"You look so good between us," Jack said, throat thick with strain. You hollowed your cheeks, rhythm picking up. "Like that, please-"

You closed your eyes, sucking hard on Jack while Gabriel got you closer and closer. Gabriel's mouth latched onto your clit and he curled his fingers, hitting your g-spot. You tried to buck your hips, but he held you flat against the bed. You were so close, and full. His fingers weren't the same as his cock, but he hadn't forgotten how to get you off. He stretched you wonderfully, stroking faster as your legs trembled against the bed.

"Look at me," Jack begged. "Please." His fingers tangled in your hair, but he didn't try to move you.

You opened your eyes, meeting Jack's hungry gaze. You nodded gesturing for him to thrust. Jack clenched his teeth and shook his head. "No, I'll be good. Just let me see it before you swallow, please."

You swirled your tongue around the head and gripped him tighter, his shaft slick with your spit. You worked your hand faster and Jack's fingers dug into your hair and he groaned your name, cock twitching before shooting his cum into your mouth.

It was salty and stronger than you remembered. You released him and opened your mouth, letting him see the semen pooled on your tongue. Jack smiled at you through half-lidded eyes, his cheeks flushed, hair falling in his face. He rubbed his thumb across your lips.

"Gabe? Do you want-?"

Gabriel leaned up and kissed you again, his tongue flicking into your mouth. He released you, lips smeared with Jack's cum and your juices. You swallowed, unable to look away from Gabriel's satisfied expression.

"Good girl," he said.

"I'll finish her," Jack said. "Why don't you take a turn?"

You huffed in disappointment as Gabriel withdrew his fingers. They switched spots, Jack now kneeling between your legs. He gave you a shy smile before sliding his tongue inside you. Gabriel had lost the towel already. He knelt beside your head, flexing those thickly muscled thighs.

"Don't know if my jaw can take you like I did Jack." You sucked on the head, tongue stroking the foreskin.

"Don't worry about it. We'll work up to it later." He groaned and began stroking himself. "Jack, don't tease."

Jack's fingers slid inside you and the blade of his tongue flicked against your clit. Your eyes widened. Jack's fingers moved faster, slick with his saliva and your wetness. Your hips shook.

"Let him get you off," Gabriel said, voice husky. "I want to watch you cum on his face."
His pace quickened, cock pressed against your lips. "That's it, grind against him. You two look so pretty like that. Wish I could take you tonight, but I guess you'll just have to go without. Don't worry, at some point, we're going to spar again, and after you're pinned, I'm going strip you and fuck you right there."

"Do you want me to fight back?" You asked, a little breathless. "Because that actually sounds pretty hot."

"The harder you fight, the harder I'll fuck you," he promised.

Jack groaned against you and you clenched around him, pussy squeezing his fingers tightly. Jack didn't stop licking you as you came. But your cries were muffled as Gabriel slipped his cock into your mouth.

"Let her up, Jack. You're supposed to be gentle with her right now."

Jack released you, withdrawing his fingers. He licked them, eyes glazed with lust. "Sorry, Lucky. You just taste so good."

Gabriel grunted, thrusting into his hands, his cock only a few inches in your mouth. "Get ready," he said tightly. He gave himself a few more rough tugs and then his thick cum poured down your throat. He had as much as Jack and you swallowed, tongue lapping at the head of his cock.

Gabriel moved in a few short thrusts before pulling out. Jack turned your head and kissed you hungrily before letting you collapse against the bed.

You looked between them, wondering if they ever got enough sleep. Your heart pounded in your throat and Gabriel leaned down stroking your face. "You should probably get some rest now."

"Are you and Jack going to-"

"Jack needs rest too," Gabriel said dryly, and he laid on his side, facing you.

Jack pressed against your back, his hands resting around your waist. "Not tired."

"You will be when you have to deal with all those UN assholes in the morning," Gabriel said, his hand reaching out to pat Jack's head. He curled closer to you and you closed your eyes. "Both of you go to sleep."

"We're going to fuck on your desk tomorrow," Jack said in your ear. "If you're good, I'll send pictures."

Chapter End Notes

I don't mean to write so much sex. One, because sex gets a little repetitive. Two, because it takes longer for me to write than the other stuff. Write. Edit. Reread. Edit. Go "WTF was I thinking?" Edit. Reread. Repeat.

So yeah, there won't be smut in every chapter, but Chapter 11 was pretty much a nonstop sex marathon. And as I write this I'm all like "damn I need to get out more."
Also, lol, this is Overwatch. People don't stay dead; it's like a proud tradition. (But this isn't Marvel. Some people do stay dead, because I'm not *that* cheap.)
You woke up to Jack pulling on his clothes. He kissed Gabriel before leaning over and touching his forehead to yours.

"Get well soon," he said, kissing the tip of your nose.

"You just want to have more rough sex."

"That is a big motivator," Jack said, kissing you again. "I'm going to spend the morning thinking about you two in bed without me."

"Yeah, I'm going back to sleep." How the hell was he so perky?

Gabriel chuckled, rolling over to spoon you. "Have a good day, Jack. I'll be working remotely today."

"Is that what they call it nowadays?"

"Shut up. I'm trying to sleep."

"You should probably make sure she gets her next dose of painkillers. She's getting cranky."

"We didn't feed her last night. She's going to be bear when she wakes up."

"I can still hear you," you growled, and burrowed under the pillows.

Your arm hurt. And this wasn't your couch. This was a bed. You rolled over, eyes widening as you saw Gabriel, sitting shirtless on the couch, reading his tablet. He just wore his fatigue pants and you sighed, enjoying the view.

"What time is it?"

"Time for painkillers and breakfast. Otherwise known as 1200 hours. Lacroix's still alive, out of surgery, and after that we'll have to see."

You groaned. "He better be OK. I still have to yell at him for dragging Ziv off base and stuff."

Gabriel stood and set the tablet down. He brought you a bottle of water and a pill. You took it, and maybe it was the placebo effect, but your aches dulled quickly. "Ana dropped off some chicken soup from the mess hall. It's still warm. You want me to feed you?"

"I can drink it out of the bowl," you said.
"What if I want to feed you?"

"I uh...I'd like to do it myself right now." You looked down at your bandaged hand. "Need to remind myself I'm not helpless."

Gabriel nodded. "All right." He handed you the plastic container, lid off. You sipped it, savoring the heat.

"It's not as good as yours," you told him.

"I know. But I didn't want to leave you alone." You drank half of it in one go. Now you needed a spoon or something to fish out the solids. Gabriel tapped you on the nose with a plastic spoon.

"Thanks. Yeah, who knows what I would have done? Tried on your clothes? Scattered your sewing supplies? Slept through everything?" You balanced the soup container between your thighs and began picking out rice, carrots, and chicken.

"You're dangerous without supervision." He sat on the bed. "Agent Mihret wrote an interesting report. Jesse verified it."

"It was Lao," you said. "I know it. She was scarred, wearing a whole slew of cybernetics, and she was all fucked up, but I know it was her. She didn't recognize me." You paused. "I had her on the ground. I was going to end her, and it's like, fuck: that's one of mine."

Gabriel raised a brow. "That was in there too. Agent Mihret confirms that the resemblance is strong. He couldn't say either way because he didn't get a great look at her. Because he was too worried about the idiot that jumped in front of the bullets meant for him. He didn't say "worried." He said "concerned." But I can read between the lines." Gabriel said, each word becoming more clipped.

"You telling me you wouldn't stand between your agents and a bullet?"

"I'm enhanced."

"Yeah, yeah, you're going to give me a complex." You reclined against the pillows. "I was wearing armor, Gabriel. And I didn't jump in front of him, I threw him behind me. I didn't want to take bullets for that smartass. I just didn't want him to get hit."

Gabriel sighed. "You know, I've had this exact conversation before, both sides. This is all kinds of deja vu."

"You have predictable taste in friends. And some bad habits." You sighed. "I'm not going to say I learned them from you, but Captain Patel could only teach me so much. Besides, you wouldn't like me nearly as much if I wasn't occasionally stupid-brave."

"That's Jack," Gabriel said. "I prefer my women intelligent and uninjured."

"Damn, we're both out of luck."

Gabriel's jaw clenched. "This isn't a laughing matter."

"I don't care. I'm just happy to be here." You handed him your empty container and he tossed into the trash.
"Don't be flippant, not about this and not right now." He turned his head, fists balled at his side.

"I'm sorry, that came out wrong. I'm sorry I worried you. I'm sorry I wasn't fast enough to keep myself unharmed. But I'm not sorry that I kept Ziv safe and made it home mostly intact."

Gabriel exhaled slowly. "You're learning."

"I don't like upsetting you. Jack? Yeah, I like goading him; he's been playing stupid games with me for awhile. But you just get this shadow over your face, and it's awful. I'm sorry." You nestled down in the blankets. "I forget you were in charge of a bunch of people and-" And a lot of them never made it home.

"The demotion wasn't the end of the world. I have less people to worry about and fewerasses to kiss." He rested his head on the pillow beside yours. "But the people I do worry about? I worry about them more."

You didn't know what to say, so you curled up against him. "Next time I'll let them shoot Ziv."

"No you won't," Gabriel laughed, despite himself. "Talon wants him and Lacroix."

"Talon wants Lacroix. They'd kill Ziv on principle, but they don't actually want him. Nobody does. He's awful."

Gabriel stayed in the room with you, probably because he didn't trust you not to go through his closet. It was a fair suspicion. Your closet was boring. Gabriel's might have cool things, like candy, or kittens, or Narnia. He stayed on the couch, working on his tablet, looking up at you every once in awhile, watching you when he thought you weren't paying attention.

That was OK. You did it to him too. You were just sneakier about it.

It was back to voice-to-text reports for you. No "shit spiders" this time, but you gave a full account of the Shanghai op, which you were refusing to call "Shanghai Noon." You sat in Gabriel's bed, wearing his shirt, trying to manage your communications backlog. There were missions that need approved, funding proposals to review, and onboarding protocols to tweak.

You didn't mind occasionally staffing Blackwatch with criminals, so long as they were like Jesse and you. A little morally conflicted, possibly homicidal, and definitely shady, but not downright crazy or evil. It didn't matter how talented they were, if you knew right off the bat that you'd never be able to trust them, they weren't worth it. Not with Shit Spiders heating up. The amnesty agreements had steps, conditions, and protection from abuse. You weren't sure if that would fix things, but you'd worked closely with Jesse and Genji on that.

Gabriel was coming around. He'd been annoyed about that group of brilliant geneticists you'd executed a month ago, but he hadn't been on the ground or in their labs. You and Jesse had gotten real drunk after that one. Genji joined you, but you still weren't sure if he was able to get intoxicated. You'd been able to remotely upload their notes and project data; Ziv had managed to decrypt it within a week, then called you at 3AM to ask if you'd really killed them all or if you'd saved him one. Then he'd gotten drunk and called you at 5AM to ask why you didn't warn him
about how graphic the files would be. You had. He was just a drama queen.

You found the 9th Circle data about Talon's mental conditioning procedures and started reading. Drugs, severe behavioral modification techniques, electroshock therapy combined with control-chip nanite treatments, partial lobotomies, cybernetic reprogramming... There were a lot of methodologies, used in a variety of combinations. Most had severe side effects. You understood then that even if you found Lao, if she hadn't betrayed you, there was a good chance she would never recover.

You continued to read up on their biological modifications, though it was way over your head. But there was a white paper; those fuckers had written up a layman's presentation to market it. You knew there were plenty of powerful people, and governments, that wouldn't mind buying that kind of technology, ethics be damned.

Oh, you had a lot of messages.

"Where are you?" Ziv had sent it this morning.

"You dead? Or just wish you were? :) Also Ziv's looking for you." Jesse.

"What did you do to your augments!!!!!!" Torby.

"Do we need to talk?" Captain Amari.

"Find me." Imprinted was the icon of a stylized white serpent. Sender unknown.

You closed your eyes. Of course. You knew who Bái Shé was. It fucking figured. Especially with that stupid white armor. You pulled up Lao's files, the pictures you'd found after Shin's birthday. Gabriel had cleared them for your possession.

It was a trap, of course. You'd need Ziv to look at the message, do his magic. But once he did, you would send a picture of your unit to one of her old private accounts. Maybe the one with all of you posing except for Captain Patel, who stood in the middle, ramrod straight and unamused by your collective antics. You think Georgie took it, but you couldn't remember now. No, you wouldn't send her that one. Even if you looked different now, there was no point in handing Talon that. You would find another one of the group, one without you. You would send that one, the one of her and Rivka, and the one of her and Valdez kissing. And then you would hone your tanto, because even if she was a traitor, Lao had only been a baby, and you'd loved her. For that she deserved a sharp blade.

You responded to the rest of your messages, making sure to let Ziv know you were out on medical leave and to pester Gabriel instead. Torby received your report about the battle. You told Captain Amari everything was fine, but she still wanted to meet with you today.

"You're not supposed to be working," Gabriel said. "And why are you siccing Agent Mihret on me?"

"I'm not supposed to be working," you said. "I'm only doing the light stuff because I'm an amazing agent. But Ziv's a pain in the ass, so you get to deal with him." You paused. "I'm going to need clothes. Captain Amari wants to see me later."
Gabriel held up a bag. "Jack and Jesse went in your room. I think Jack's a little surprised by how...unlived in it is."

You shrugged. "I store what I have there, but I don't have a lot of stuff. I don't need a lot of stuff. I sleep on the couch in the office." The most "stuff" you had was the food in the kitchen. And that was all expendable.

A cloud passed over Gabriel's face. "You ever talk to your shrink about your family?"

"Who doesn't?" You set your tablet down and slipped out of the bed. "They've been dead a long time, Gabriel. It wasn't pretty. I dealt. And that chapter of my life is over." You'd sealed the record and there was nothing left to talk about.

"I have sisters."

"I know," you said. Three, if you remembered correctly, and several nieces and nephews.

"My mother is alive," he said. "So's my paternal grandmother."

"I know."

"I lost my father to cancer. It happened shortly after I'd joined Overwatch."

"I'm sorry," you said, even though you knew that too.

"Yeah, me too. The point is, a big sweeping loss like yours, it leaves scars. It doesn't matter if it was yesterday or ten years ago, it'll fuck you up in ways you don't realize."

"I think I'm pretty well-adjusted, considering." You rummaged through the bag and found that some clever asshole - probably Jack - hadn't brought you any underwear. But he'd managed to find your civilian clothes. Your underwear was in the underwear drawer. Honestly, that wasn't a hard concept. You pulled on a black sweater with extra long cuffs and your jeans. You couldn't wear gloves with your hand bandaged and there was no point in covering your right hand.

"Is that why you're so adrift?"

"Don't know what you're talking about, Gabriel." Because you were very focused and anchored in Blackwatch. You had a mission.

OK, you were definitely blaming Jack, because he'd brought you socks and your sock drawer was right next to your underwear drawer. You sat on the couch next to Gabriel, pulled them on, and looked down at your dusty boots.

"You want help with that?"

"Nah, I got it." You'd learned that you could get away with just using your thumb early on. The loops were loose, but your shoes were tied.

"Let me," Gabriel said and got on his knees. He untied your laces and retied them tighter.

You huffed. "Thank you, but it was fine."

"Of course," he said looking amused. "You are very well-adjusted, considering. I certainly don't think you're teetering on the edge of mental collapse."

"But?" You asked, a little irked.
Gabriel sighed and sat back on the floor, his hands flat on the ground behind him. "There was a battle outside Dili; the weather was shit, the omnis were overpowered. I was the only survivor." He didn't look at you. "Obviously, Jack and I weren't serving together then. I think he was in Lisbon. Doesn't matter." His gaze stayed on the floor. "I still catch myself making coffee the way Frank liked it or craving Yuan's weirdly delicious fish ball rice porridge. I didn't talk about it for years. Just picked up, got transferred to another unit, and kept going. That part of my life was done. I didn't plan on talking about it ever again. But I didn't mesh so well with my next few units. Didn't try to get attached or anything. I didn't really come out of it till I ended up in Kandahar, back with Jack. But that shit was still there, under all the scar tissue. Always will be. I just deal with it better now."

"You're so pushy," you said, slipping off the couch and onto the floor beside him. "And I can't argue with you when you're all honest and open like this. It's not fair."

"I don't know where you got this idea that I play fair," he said, his fingers twining around your hands.

You made it out of Gabriel's room without witnesses. Gabriel had helped you get your tanto and shoulder holster on because those were harder one-handed. Did you always used to go around armed, even off-duty? No, that was a recent development.

Sitting in Captain Amari's office, you decided it wasn't necessarily unhealthy, but maybe you lived an uncommonly dangerous life. Captain Amari poured you tea and placed some dark chocolate-dipped digestive biscuits on a plate.

"Are you sorted?" she asked, sipping from her bone china set.

"I think so." You felt slightly odd having this conversation. Captain Patel would never have approved, though you liked to think that eventually she would have liked having tea and biscuits with you.

"Are you comfortable with what Gabriel and Jack are asking of you?"

"I am a willing adult in this, yes. I am also terrified of screwing up because apparently I have repressed emotional issues. My career is also a concern, but I know I'm good at my work. I'm bad at...people."

"That's interesting, considering Agent Mihret has recommended you for every commendation you could conceivably qualify for."

You nearly choked on your tea. "He certainly has an overinflated view of the value of his life."

"Says the woman who took a bullet for him," Captain Amari said blandly.

"I keep telling everyone, I wasn't throwing myself in front of bullets, I was trying to drag him out of their trajectory. There is a distinct difference there."

Captain Amari gave you a measured look that somehow shamed you for being flippant, right before sipping her tea. "Gérard is expected to make it."
You sighed. "That's a relief. I'd hate to think we did all that work so he could die."

That got another look from her.

"Sorry, ma'am," you said and took a big swig of tea.

"I saw your report. I find it troubling that Bái Shé has already contacted you."

"Yeah, me too." You ate another biscuit. "I didn't realize she was Bái Shé at the time. Too shocked that it was her."

"Understandable."

"I'd prefer to take her alive."

"The suggestion has merit. But she is dangerous. Agent Mihret has been sifting through the analytics that led Gérard into her trap. He's reasonably certain that it came from someone up high, not the analysts."

"We're getting more of that. Gabriel showed me a copy of conflicting orders he and Jack received. It was a little thing, Jack was supposed to oversee some kind of omnic peace meeting. Gabriel was supposed to "eliminate with extreme prejudice" one of the attendees. There was only a little overlap, but you can see how that could've gone very badly."

Captain Amari nodded. "I saw that too. Normally, I would be against this sort of personal arrangement. Too much room for...exploitation," she said. "But in this case, we need to close ranks, triple-check orders, and you work well with them. But if you ever feel like your relationship with them is interfering with your work or that you can't tell them no, you come to me. We will sort it."

Well, that wasn't a ringing endorsement, but that was better than you were expecting. "Thank you, ma'am. I really do appreciate you looking out for me. You're a good CO."

"I have to keep my tea pipeline open." She didn't mention Jesse or your efforts there, because she was too classy and secretive. "Just so you know, Agent Mihret was identified. There's now a bounty on his head from Talon."

You swore.

"Nothing for you yet, but they got plenty of footage of Agent Mihret and Gérard." You wondered if Lao had been recording. She didn't seem to recognize you in the fight. But she identified you and she certainly remembered enough to message you. Your armor had that high collar that blocked half your face. There was good chance they didn't have a clear picture of you.

"I know it's some kind of trap, but...I want in on whatever Bái Shé ops there are. I've nearly finished up my part of planning Hanoi. The rest is up to Gabriel and Jesse."

"Noted. You have my recommendation. When Gérard awakens, I'm sure he will have no qualms about bringing you on board." She took another biscuit. "Ah, I was asked to approve leave for you for the Christmas weekend. You now get a week of paid vacation to use somewhere in the next two months, so it won't cut into your regular leave." Not that it mattered, because you ended up using medical leave most the time.

"I didn't put that in," you said. Because you planned to work through it, get hot chocolate and omurice with Genji, maybe Jesse, and get drunk. You didn't celebrate Christmas, but being in
Europe, you couldn't quite ignore the dominant tradition and the heavy emphasis on family and togetherness. You wondered if Genji wanted to check out some of the Krampus parades in Germany. Those looked cool.

"I am aware of that. I will say no more, except if you would like to work, I can dig my heels in and keep you here."

Must've been Jack or Gabriel, which was interesting because no one had said anything to you. "Thank you ma'am. I'll...sort it. I better go see Ziv and brainstorm about this bounty and Bái Shé message."

"You do know you're supposed to be on medical leave, right?"

"Well, my productivity has taken a hit," you said waving your bandaged hand. "So minimal paperwork. But those assholes tried to kill my hacker and then had the nerve to put a bounty on him. I'm not happy about this. And in Blackwatch, if we're not happy, we get petty."

"I wasn't aware that you ever stopped being petty, Agent."

She had you there.

Ziv sat on the conference room table while Winston paced.

"That's all I'm worth? Seriously? How much do they have on you?"

"Five times that," Winston admitted.

"I was asking Lucky, you showoff."

"Nothing." You passed your hand over your lower jaw. "I don't get caught and I had that metal collar that covered half my face."

"Yeah, you could be anybody," he admitted. "But fuck, that was Bái Shé's calling card and she totally contacted you. Couldn't get shit on the location data."

"It's Lao Yue. She was in the video with your grandmother." You rubbed your sore arm. "I'm not saying she didn't betray us, but I'm having a lot of trouble wrapping my head around that idea."

"My grandmother talked about her. Said she was "stubborn trouble, couldn't keep her hands to herself, and had extremely odd taste in men." Or was she talking about you? I might be getting you mixed up."

Winston was suddenly very interested in his tablet.

"Don't tell me it's above my pay grade. I spent all morning searching for you, and it was fucking McCree who told me to stop."

"I was sleeping, because I'm on medical leave."

"Sleeping where?"
"None of your business," you scowled.

"He has a boyfriend!" Ziv said. "You're playing with fire! You know exactly who his boyfriend is! Are you insane? I thought you were smarter than that!"

Oh, that's what he thought was going on. Huh. "This doesn't leave this room, Mihret, or I will cut your tongue out and give you to Talon myself."

Ziv uncrossed his arms. "Yeah?"

"Goes for you too Winston."

"I heard nothing."

"The boyfriend is in on it too. OK. Both of them. No one's in the dark or under duress; we've all talked about it. There's third party moderation. It's a mutual thing, and I can't believe I'm having this conversation."

You had the satisfaction of seeing Ziv's jaw drop and no words come out. He worked his mouth a few times.

"Goddamnit you've totally wrecked the betting pool."

"What?"

"I mean, they aren't common knowledge, so after Paris there was a betting pool about who you were schtupping. McCree is in first. Reyes is in second. Morrison is in third. Genji is in fourth. Unknown is in fifth. And "no one" is in sixth. Reinhardt is in the pool, since you danced with him at the ball, but no one actually thinks he could keep it a secret."

You struggled to keep your words sensible. "There's no fucking way. You're shitting me."

"Yes, I am," he said. "And you deserved it because how do you get two boyfriends and I'm still single?"

"It couldn't possibly be your winning personality," you said.

He threw his clipboard at your head.

"I want Gérard at Hanoi if possible. Jack wants in, though, that's not a good idea. Ana's in. You, Genji, and Jesse are a given. Get Mihret's combat skills up and he can come." Gabriel sat at his desk, looking at the building plans Ziv had managed to acquire.

"Not happening on our timeline. He's been focusing on medical training," you sighed. "His shooting is passable. But we need a hacker." You didn't want to take him, but you didn't have much of an option.

"Yeah, fine. He's with you then," Jesse grumbled.

"No, he's with you. You're hitting the labs with Genji. You'll need him most," Gabriel said.
"He can stay with me initially. Who knows how accurate these layouts are?" You tapped your good hand against your copy of the building plans. Your burns were still healing, so no prostheses. Technically you were supposed to be on medical leave, but it's not like Angela could see through walls and find you in the office...could she? "Do we need a dedicated demolitionist?"

"No, I'm skilled. Genji's pretty adept. Gérard is also shockingly good at explosions. That should be adequate."

"He's probably good at everything," you sighed. "Fucking French James Bond."

Jesse laughed at that.

"We need a full medical team on standby. I know you don't like cross-pollinating, but we're going to encounter heavy resistance. I don't want to wait to reach a field hospital. East Asia is too hostile." Between the Shimada, Vishkar, a variety of omnic invasions, and local governments, it was not a friendly zone.

Gabriel gave you a look.

"No, seriously. We can do them as a second wave. Get us in position, borrow someone from Overwatch to look after the medics. Reinhardt, Winston, or Torby could back them up. They'd have plausible deniability, and with the exception of Reinhardt, they're already cleared for Shit Spiders."

"No," Gabriel said. "We don't need them and they're a liability."

"Jack then, if he's coming. Put him in second wave with the medics."

Gabriel sighed. "You're going to push this, aren't you?"

"Jesse, I'm right. Tell him I'm right," you insisted.

"Ain't saying she's right, but it wouldn't hurt to have them in reserve. Have'em cooling their heels in Seoul a week or so ahead. That town's still friendly. Put in over Hanoi twenty minutes in. We don't tell them shit, except it's a combat zone. Keep'em suborbital, and use a Blackwatch pilot. If we don't need'em, they don't learn a thing and no harm done."

"Yes, to the medical team. We'll see about using Overwatch agents."

"They'll agree to it, if Lucky asks," Jesse said, putting his feet on your desk. You thought about shoving them off, but there'd been worse things on your desk lately. You had the pictures to prove it.

Gabriel glared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, we're such assholes in Blackwatch that I'm considered the diplomatic one." Which wasn't really fair, because Jesse could be very persuasive. You suspected he was mostly responsible for rehabilitating your image within Overwatch. It certainly wasn't through your clever efforts.

"I want Lacroix's input on everything. He's done more work in Vietnam than any of us," Jesse said. "Hell, he even speaks the language."

"This is just the first revision," you said. "Wait till he's off bed rest."
"He'd be happy for something to do," Jesse said.

"OK, well I need to switch over to the Bái Shé data. She's hit some Canadian company and I want Lacroix's opinion too. I'll let him know you're going to hit him up."

You gathered up your tablet and a sheaf of paperwork.

"Hey, Jack wanted to see you when you had a free moment," Gabriel said, studying another map.

"OK," you said. "I'll swing by his office after I'm done with Lacroix."

"Can you give him this from me?" He held out his hand.

You walked over, trying to see what he had. Gabriel grabbed your collar, yanked you in, and kissed you hard. You stifled a moan as his tongue flicked into your mouth.

Jesse coughed, a few times, very loudly, before Gabriel released you. He radiated smug satisfaction. You couldn't stop the stupid grin from creeping across your face.

"I can't believe you fell for that," Jesse said with a groan.

"I'll pass it on," you said.

Gabriel just smirked at the two of you.

"This is all I have on Lao Yue," you said, sending Lacroix her personnel file, your notes on her, the files Ziv recovered, and the pictures you'd found.

"Much obliged." Lacroix was sitting up now. You weren't sure how soon he'd be back in the field, but it seemed Gabriel was willing to delay the Hanoi run to get him in. "This is more than I had a week ago."

"You saw my report." You paused. "Maybe I should've killed her, but I want answers. I reread the neural reconditioning reports. I can't say for sure that's what happened, but that's my working theory."

"Why would they spare her?" He mused. "The Black Base Delta data purge seems to be main reason for the raid. Perhaps with Agent Cohn dead, they needed someone to give them a rundown of the tech situation."

"That's the only reason I can think of, if this is under duress." You'd sent three photographs to one of Lao's old accounts. There hadn't been a response yet.

When Lacroix had graciously thanked you for the rescue, you'd told him, in no uncertain terms, that he wasn't to take your hacker out without better protection. And that while he was at it, maybe he should take better protection too. He'd just laughed, all good natured charm, and told you his wife had already scolded him and she was far more terrifying than you. Amélie was currently staying on the base and Captain Amari had assigned her discrete bodyguards.

"Jesse's eager to get you onboard the next step of Shit Spiders," you said. "So don't be
surprised if he stops by."

"Of course, but I want to take care of Bái Shé first. I should be out soon," he said. "We will talk about it then."

Jack wasn't in his office.

But he'd messaged you the entry code to his quarters. You rubbed your forehead. You'd never been inside his quarters, and now he was giving you the key? You were just stopping by. It was no big deal.

You walked through casually, looking at your paperwork like you here for work. People noticed you now. This wasn't a good thing, in your book, because your work was best done discretely. You ended up on the upper level where bigshots like Lacroix and Captain Amari also roomed.

You knocked twice, just to let him know you were coming in, then input the code and opened the door.

The lights were on low. His room was much bigger than Gabriel's and done in gray and white. He had a sitting room and a separate bedroom. Being Strike Commander certainly had perks.

"Jack?"

"Be out in a moment. Make yourself comfortable."

You sat awkwardly on his couch, setting your stuff on the end table. Jack's furniture was some kind of golden wood with dark grey fabric. It was kind of a relief that everything wasn't blue and white.

"Hey." He came out of the bedroom in sweatpants and that was it. You made yourself not stare at his bare chest, though it was difficult. He was doing this on purpose. He wanted a reaction. And you weren't going to give him the satisfaction.

"Gabriel said you needed something?" You studied the pictures on the walls. They were landscapes and some ships. Nothing personal.

"It can wait. Do you want something to drink?"

"Yeah," you said. "Please." You weren't sure the last time you were alone with Jack, but it hadn't been since this...arrangement started. It made you antsy.

Jack brought you a beer and sat down beside you, already drinking his own. "Relax, Lucky. I won't bite. Even if you deserve it." You didn't trust the way he smiled when he said that. "Unless you want me to."

You did not need to imagine Jack's mouth on your shoulder, his teeth lightly grazing your skin. You swallowed a gulp of beer. "Damnit, Jack."

"Gabriel said you had something for me," he said smugly.
"Gabriel's a goddamn instigator," you said, but you put your beer on the coffee table and grabbed Jack's jaw with your good hand. You turned his face to you and kissed his roughly, your tongue slipping into his mouth the same way Gabriel had kissed you. Jack's hands gripped your forearms and he moaned into your mouth. When you opened your eyes, you were straddling his lap, sucking on his tongue.

You broke the kiss, a little breathless. "That's from Gabriel."

Jack smiled crookedly at you. "Oh?"

"This is from me." You gripped his hair, tracing your lips down his neck. He shuddered against you, and you nipped the junction of his neck and shoulder. He let out a sharp hiss, and you gentled your mouth, licking the imprint you left.

He growled and wrapped his arms around your waist, his cock pressed against you. "Like those pictures I sent?"

"Yeah. I was in a meeting with Winston, so thanks for that. Seriously, use Gabriel's desk. I actually have paperwork on mine."

Jack laughed, his mouth moving down your collarbone. You squirmed against him. "Next time we can use my desk. It's bigger. And I don't care if you mess up my paperwork." He pulled your shirt down, his mouth moving between your breasts. He ground against you and you bit your lip.

He grinned and rolled his hips, practically bouncing you on his lap. You bit him again and he kept rubbing between your thighs.

"Get those pants off and you can ride me right now," he said, voice raw with need.

"Not supposed to be "sparring," you said regretfully.

He stopped. "Ah, I forgot. Sorry." He took a deep breath and shifted so he wouldn't be pressed quite so obviously against you.

"Yeah, me too." You started to climb out of his lap, but he kissed your neck, his arms still holding you in place. Jack liked sex a lot and the novelty of having a regular female partner hadn't quite worn off yet.

"We can just make out," Jack said. "You don't have to worry about teasing or pushing me too far. I'll be good."

"Yeah, I'm not falling for that one," you said, sliding out of his lap. You sat beside him, reaching for your beer. He was too sexy for your sanity.

"Don't trust me?" He asked, sipping his beer. "Or don't trust yourself?"

You took a long slow drink and considered your reply. "It's not like that, Jack. You push. I push back. Suddenly we're using safe words and it's like "how did that escalate so quickly? Damn I don't want to stop." Best not to risk it."

"You're probably right," he said, pulling back. "Sorry."

"It's fine." You finished your beer, eyes on your lap. Jack was silent and maybe you'd said the wrong thing. It was strange to do this without Gabriel. Not that you didn't like Jack, just you
were used to Gabriel being there. You knew how to handle Gabriel and vice versa. Jack was...different.

"You done?" He sounded distant now.

"Yeah."

Jack took the empty can out of your hands, crushed it flat, and tossed it in the recycling bin. "You want another?"

"I'm OK." You sat there, feeling awkward, like the one night stand who stayed too long. "Uh...you want me to go? I don't want to hold you up if you're busy."

"I'm free for the evening." He sat with his elbows on his knees, his head tilted toward you. "You can stay. I'd like that. I don't mean to pressure you."

"It's not like I don't want to," you said, feeling slightly mortified.

"I know. I'm pushy. You can always say "no." It's not about me." He sighed. "And I'm not giving you the cold shoulder. I just needed a minute to cool down. I'm good now." He gave you a reassuring grin. "It's safe to come back."

"Oh." You leaned against him. He was pleasantly warm and he put an arm around you. "How was your day?"

"Ugh, don't make me think about it. Tell me about yours instead."

"Long - maybe not as long as yours, but long enough for an unenhanced human."

"Tell me about it." He sounded interested, which was kind of nice.

"We started tracking down who exactly put the bounty on Ziv, because I'm going to go kill them personally. Ziv is doing the research, I'll just handle the fun part. Torby had to yell at me about really fucking up that set of augments, which is stupid because that's Angela's territory, but you know how he is. Reviewing Genji's super secret dossiers and debating the best way to discretely take care of an entire family. I'm leaning toward something creative. Gabriel's being difficult about planning the Shit Spider op. Part of me wanted to smack him, but Jesse was there and I'm keeping work and this separate. Except as I'm getting ready to go talk to Lacroix, Gabriel's all "I have something for Jack" and kisses me in front of Jesse. So there goes half my brainpower. Then I delivered my compiled Bái Shé/Lao Yue data for Lacroix, and he's being coy about his plans, but that's fine because I was still reeling from Gabriel's surprise attack. And then I came over to drink your beer and be awkward."

"Aren't you supposed to be on medical leave?" Jack raised a brow at you.

"I'm injured, not unconscious. I can still do things. Maybe not jump out of planes or type, but I should be able to equip my augments in the next day or two. The burns are healing nicely. Gunshot wound is good, but Angela keeps giving me the "no sparring" euphemism, and I think she's just trying torture me. Or you guys. Did you guys piss her off?"

Jack shrugged. "Possibly." There was a story there.

"Also, Ziv and Winston are kind of aware of...us." Because you weren't sure what to call it and maybe you didn't want to call it anything yet.
Jack shrugged again. "We're all consenting adults. I'm not ashamed." He paused. "But is this going to make your life harder?"

"Not them knowing. Obviously if it becomes common knowledge, that'd be different. But I trust them and pretty much everyone in Shit Spiders."

"Yeah, I think most everyone in Shit Spiders already knows."

You sighed. You were afraid of that.

"If McCree knows, Ana and Genji know. If Ana knows, Gérard has picked up on it already, and butter won't melt in his mouth. Torby might be the only one not in the know and he doesn't care." Jack rubbed the back of your neck.

"OK." You sat there a moment. You tried to think of things Jack liked, besides sex. "You want me to rub your back?"

"God, yes," he said and turned around.

You worked his shoulders, kneading the knots you'd seen Gabriel focus on before. It was still strange to be here alone with him. Not unpleasant, just new ground.

"I have a question. You don't have to answer." You ran your fingers down a long scar above his kidneys. "Captain Amari told me to ask you about Gabriel and Kandahar." Your hands traveled down his spine.

Jack was quiet for a moment. "I see. Ana disposed of your armor before Gabriel could see it this time. I didn't think that was accidental. But I wasn't going to ask."

"After the Code White Alps mission... Well, I wasn't expecting that reaction."

"It's not really about Kandahar, per se. That's the only part she was there for," Jack sighed. "How much do you know about Gabriel's service?"

"I know a little about Dili."

Jack blew out a breath. "Yeah." He looked over his shoulder at you. "It took him years to tell me about that."

"It was recent. He was using it as lever to get me to do more therapy," you said.

"Talking about it has helped," Jack said. "Kandahar was that turning point for him. We were fighting omnis. I covered a retreat for our demolitionists, pretty standard stuff. But one of the bastions wasn't actually finished. It got me in the back, my armor took a dozen rounds in under five seconds, easy."

You stopped pressing on his back, looking now for signs of scarring. He had more than his fair share of bullet wounds, gashes, burns, and were those really big teethmarks?

"Gabriel lost his shit. Charged out and practically tore it apart with his bare hands. OK, I'm exaggerating, but only a little. Then he was on me, ripping my armor off. He'd called in medics and while I was hurting, I'm a super soldier. It sucked, but my armor had done the trick. I couldn't really understand why he was overreacting. He sent me to the infirmary and I was pretty sore about it. Then when I had a clean bill of health, he...well, I knew something was wrong."
You stroked Jack's hair.

"Kandahar was when we insisted he get help." Jack sighed. "But the trauma stems from Dili. He had a friend, Frank Hsieh. Frank was SEP too, and probably the most laidback guy I've ever met. He was big, just huge, but calm and pleasant as could be. SEP pumped us full of so many chemicals and hormones, but Frank never had the emotional control issues that so many of us did. He ate noodles and listened to us rage. Sometimes he shared the noodles. They were spicy." Jack sighed. "Frank acted as the shield, trying to cover Gabe and the rest of the unit when the omnics ambushed them. He had some impressive armor. Not quite like Reinhardt's, but still pretty hefty."

You rested your forehead against Jack's back because you already knew how this story ended.

"They fought off the initial ambush, but Frank went down. His armor had stopped the bullets, maybe a heavy armament or two, but the impact had left him with severe internal bleeding. He died before they could get it off him. And then a few hours later, the omnics came back, and they wiped out the rest of Gabe's unit."

You sat there, trying not to picture any of your thoughts. The words were enough. "I think I need that second drink."

"Yeah, me too." Jack turned around to face you. "I think, whatever spurred him to tell you this, might have him really worried about you."

You didn't really want to tell Jack, but it only seemed fair. "He thinks losing my hometown...and family, in one fell swoop, probably left me with some issues that I need to deal with. I'm sure it has, but I think overall, I'm OK. Well-adjusted even. I've had years to get over it."

You couldn't read Jack's expression.

"It sucks, and I mourned, but then it was all survive and don't get blown up or starve. Then I joined Overwatch and...well." You shrugged, because while you knew you weren't normal any more, your only known trigger was getting strangled. And that was a pretty reasonable one.

"What are you doing for Christmas?" Jack asked. He held your hands in his, his grip on your bandaged hand gentle.

"Probably making dinner with Genji. It's not a holiday I really celebrate." You were smart enough to leave out the "getting drunk" part. Because that's what you had done last year, new to Blackwatch and mourning your people. Genji and Jesse had been with you, and Jesse had gotten pretty trashed too. You didn't like thinking about it. This year, Jesse was going with Captain Amari and Fareeha to some kind of local festival.

"Gabe and I going to visit my family. Do you want to come? It's only four days and you have the leave."

"I don't think that's a good idea," you said immediately. Because Jack came from the heartland of America, a place of farms, and community, and lots of mayonnaise-based dishes. Everyone in church on Sunday. His family had a farm. There was corn everywhere.

Jack blinked at you. "Too much?"

"It's a sweet gesture. I appreciate it. But what are you going to tell them?"
"What do you want me to tell them?"

"I have no idea," you said truthfully. "Being described as the Blackwatch agent with no family to see at Christmas seems pretty pathetic though."

"I would never-"

"I know. I'm being flippant. Sorry."

"They won't make a big deal about it. It's really informal. We eat a nice meal, open presents, watch holiday movies..."

And you hadn't gotten anyone anything for Christmas. Because you didn't celebrate it. Because you were the sad Blackwatch orphan who planned to spend December 24-26 drunk. And now you knew why Captain Amari offered to let you work through Christmas. She had to have known one of them would spring something like this, because they were decent thoughtful people and they wouldn't want you to feel left out, and it was really kind, but fucking hell you weren't emotionally-equipped to deal with your friends' families. Ziv and Fareeha were the exceptions, and really they shouldn't even be here in Zurich.

Huh. Maybe Gabriel was right about you needing more therapy. That insightful bastard.

You realized Jack had stopped talking. You blinked as he tilted your chin up so you had to look into those terribly hypnotic blue eyes.

"Hey." His voice was gentle.

"Yo." The word came out very small. Damnit.

"You don't have to do anything you feel uncomfortable with. I'm sorry. I just want you to know you're welcome to come. I'd like it."

"I'll think about it," you said, and resolved to beg Captain Amari to put you to work.

Chapter End Notes

Love the feedback, it makes the work day go smoother, so thank you very much.

Have written way too much fluff and stuff for the past week. Need to get back on the plot, and violence, and stuff. *goes back to writing fluff*
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Sorry if you got two chapter updates. Double-posted this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You had your second beer and then made your excuses because you had to get some rest. Jack didn't invite you to stay, but you could see that he wanted to, if only to convince you to go to Indiana for Christmas.

That was a date, you realized belatedly, as you snuck out of the officers' quarters. It was an ambush date. You'd been expecting Gabriel to just show up and make it less...strange. But no, it was just you, and Jack, and a ton of misfires. No sex. No dinner. And an invitation to visit Jack's family for Christmas. What the hell kind of first date was that?

You checked your tablet.

"Hope you're having fun, but not too much fun." Gabriel, otherwise known as He-Who-Set-You-Up.

"My bounty has gone up! It's now half of Winston's!" Ziv was a fucking idiot.

"I want to meet." That stylized white snake glimmered on your tablet.

You nodded assent at the screen, as if somehow, she could see you.

"Absolutely not," Lacroix said, when you brought it up two days later. You'd had Ziv try to trace the message, but with no luck. Then you started your preparations.

"I'm in better shape than you, sir." You were just down an arm. He was still bedridden.

"It's obviously a trap."

"Yeah, so was Shanghai." Ah, Blackwatch pettiness; rarely helpful, but so satisfying.

Lacroix actually rolled his eyes at you. That bastard.

"She is dangerous."

"Yeah, me too. And I kicked her ass back in Canada when we were rookies. I kicked it in Shanghai with her shiny upgrades. I'll do it again." You sat beside him, contemplating drugging his IV.
"It won't just be her."

"It won't just be me." You were going to get Jesse and Genji for this one. Maybe Captain Amari.

"You are not thinking logically."

"Guilty," you agreed. "That's why I'm asking your help planning it. I'll be the bait. I'm not even sure I'm good bait, because nobody gives a shit about me." You'd already been fitted for another set of that high collar armor and you were considering some kind of visor or mask, for anonymity.

Lacroix crossed his arms. "Get Gabriel to approve it, and I will."

Oh, that tricky bastard.

"Absolutely not." Gabriel sat at his desk and didn't even look up at you. Jack was sitting on the couch, pretending to read.

"She reached out to me. I want answers. Lacroix can plan the op."

"We don't run missions because you want answers, agent."

You narrowed your eyes. If that's how he wanted to play it. Fine. "Here is a summary of the damages she has caused in the last month, sir." You sent him the file. The update included more espionage, another murder, and a multibillion credit ransomware of the power grid episode in Oslo.

"It is just a meeting. I won't even try to kill anyone first. Agent Lacroix is the highest value target she is interested in. He is still on bed rest. Winston is the next highest, but he is essential to the lab. Agent Mihret is also considered high-value now, but he has minimal combat experience. I am not high-value, I have experience, and she sought me out. As I am not a priority Talon target, it is unlikely they will mount a full assault to attack me. If I have a support team, we risk very little. I will follow Senior Agent Lacroix's lead on this. Dr. Ziegler has approved of my return to active duty as of today. I have been fitted with upgraded augments, an improved sap glove, and new armor with better ballistic shielding and enhanced shock absorption, sir." That was meant to be reassuring, but it sounded petty.

"No." Gabriel looked at you. "I don't know what Angela's on, but that arm isn't healed." It was sore, and you had agreed to more physical therapy, but it was useable.

"It's a meeting, sir."

"Just stop saying "sir" when you mean "you asshole," Jack said. "You're making it worse."

You resisted the urge to glare at him and clasped your hands behind your back.

"Gabe, she's going to call you out onto the mat next."

"Jack, don't tell me to handle my people," Gabriel said harshly, and you wished Jack would
stop trying to "help."
"I'm just warning you." You could hear the amusement in Jack's voice. "Lucky, take a
walk. Go see if they have any of that gingerbread in the mess."

"Is that an order, sir?" You asked, trying not to make it sound like "you asshole," but not
succeeding.

"It's a suggestion, baby."

You exhaled, nodding. If this didn't work, you would go to Captain Amari. Because you
were doing this, one way or another.

When you came back with three gingerbread cookies, Jack was sitting on Gabriel's desk.
Their clothes were straight. Nothing was broken. There were no papers on the floor. Apparently
they'd discussed it like adults. Huh.

"Sit down," Jack said.

You did, and you held onto the cookies because you were petty.

Gabriel gave you a hard look. "I will approve the mission, but Jack and I are coming as
observers."

You tried to keep the incredulous look off your face. Because that was just stupid. "You
are both high-value targets. That's overkill."

"If it's just a meeting, I'll get to see how you handle things. If it's a fight, you have some of
the best backup in the world. What are you worried about?" Jack asked.

You closed your eyes and wondered if this was a bribe toward Christmas, because Jack
wasn't to be taken at face value ever. You'd started shopping. You could afford nice presents for
them, but now you were contemplating just giving them each a lump of coal. Yes, a lump of coal
each, and you'd set them on fire.

"Those are the conditions. Lacroix can work us in. Now give me a damn cookie," Gabriel
growled.

You handed him one and he snatched it out of your hand. You handed one to Jack too.
But you didn't kiss them or express any personal sentiments. Because that vow to keep work and
this arrangement separate? You three were already crashing and burning.

Lacroix, to his credit, didn't bat an eye. He just took one look at your uncomfortable
expression and laughed.

You replied to Bái Shé. "When and where?"

The reply was almost instantaneous. "Cambridge. Two days."

You showed it to Lacroix.

"I can work with that," he said.
"You and Genji are welcome to come with us," Jesse said. You were on his couch throwing knives at his dartboard. The darts were long gone.

"You know how Genji is about crowds."

"I know how you are about crowds. You'd do it for Fareeha though." Jesse sipped his whiskey. "So you aren't going to Indiana?"

"How the fuck do you know about that?" You threw the knife hard; it struck the cork, reverberating loudly.

"Educated guess. They went to LA last year."

You laid your head against the wall. "It's too much too fast," you said. "I don't even know how to talk about our "arrangement." Like, this is my significant other and my other significant other? This is my significant other and his significant other? These are my slightly significant others? Haha, kidding, I'm a friend with extra benefits? Meet his parents? Fuck." You threw back a mouthful of whiskey. "And Gabriel's been extra...overbearing since Shanghai. Also, the other day, when Jack wanted to see me, that was a surprise date. I thought it was work but then, no, he gave me the code to his room and we talked and shit. Mostly talked. I was on strict a "no sex" advisory from Angela." You took another drink. "And then I realized that Gabriel was right, don't you fucking dare repeat that, and I need more therapy. Fuck."

Jesse, to his credit, just poured you more whiskey. "So this op?"

"I know. I don't want to run ops with them. It's not that I don't trust them, I just...I'm comfortable with you and Genji. They're the super big guns. I'm subtle, and sneaky, and discrete. They, like, blow up buildings. Make a bridge or three go boom. Cause a fucking avalanche."

"That was Talon," Jesse laughed. "And I'll be there. And I blow shit up too."

"Yeah, I know." You sighed. "It's different."

Jesse looked slightly offended.

"It is different, Jesse. We're black ops. They're celebrity heroes."

There was a knock at the door. You ignored it and tossed the knife into the dartboard. You didn't hit the center, but it was close enough.

"OK, stop that for moment while I see who's there." Jesse got up crossing your path. He opened the door and Gabriel stood there, looking grumpy as usual.

"Boss," Jesse said and you couldn't place the tone.

"Lucky in there?" Gabriel could see you on the couch. Jesse stepped back, because even if he was your friend, he wasn't getting in the middle of this.

"Yeah," you said.

"Got some stuff to go over."
"Right now?" You asked, because even if you were tipsy, but you weren't stupid.

"It can wait," Gabriel said politely. Which was novel. He'd been growling at you for the past day.

"No, it's fine." You set your glass on the table. "Thanks, Jesse."

"Anytime."

You waved over your shoulder, walking beside Gabriel. You walked in silence, heading toward the office.

"My quarters?" He asked.

You stopped. "Jack there?"

"You want him there?"

"Doesn't matter. Was just wondering."

Gabriel nodded and opened his door. You went in -no Jack - and sat on the couch. Gabriel took off his hoodie and hat, setting them on the table.

"I haven't seen much of you," Gabriel said sitting down.

"Been going over the op," you said. Because you left for it tomorrow. "Also, went to therapy." You didn't look at him, because you weren't going to tell him he was right about that.

"You're mad about the op."

"A little," you said. "Nothing to do about it now. I just needed space to cool down."

"Heard you had an interesting evening with Jack."

You shrugged. "I wasn't expecting...that."

"Which part?"

"The whole thing. I thought it was work-related." You rubbed your forehead. "And then he invited me to Indiana for Christmas. Like how are you going to explain this to your parents? And he's all "however you want me to" and I'm just like "...I don't know." I have no idea."

Gabriel uncrossed his arms. "Do you normally drink with Jesse?"

"Maybe a couple times a month. Sometimes Genji's there. And sometimes I fall asleep on his couch."

"I know." Gabriel leaned over and kissed you. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't jealous."

"You have nothing to worry about," you scoffed.

"I don't care. I want you here with me, not on another man's couch," he said. "I'm not telling you what to do. I'm just saying, you can drink here with me too."

"Well on this specific occasion, I was complaining about you." You tilted your chin up, daring him to be petty.
"I figured. I...overreacted. I'm sorry."

You slumped against the couch. "Yeah, me too."

"We have to keep our spats out of work," Gabriel sighed. "Gérard is having a field day with this."

"Your fault," you said.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Jack's too. I know this was his idea."

"Yeah."

Gabriel reclined beside you, resting his head in your lap. "I'm probably having the most difficulty keeping work and...us...separate. Jack is very good at compartmentalization. And while you know how to push my buttons, you rarely cross any hard lines."

You picked at his curls before giving in and rubbing his scalp. "Yeah. I noticed."

"You're all heart."

"One of us has to be sensible about this." And even if you were aggravated with him, Gabriel was...comfortable. You understood your space with him. Touch and sex were natural extensions of your shared affection. He didn't make you nearly as nervous as Jack. Which was something you were trying not to show.

"So not going to lie, Indiana sucks." Gabriel chuckled. "His family is OK if you score them individually then calculate the average. They have enough land you can hide out if it gets to be too much. The little brother's a shit. His dad doesn't approve of me, or the fact his son likes dick. His mother is a homemaker in her own strange reality but she seems to like me well enough. I don't mind his sisters. But when he's there, you get to see a side of him you don't see anywhere else."

"You think I should come." Because of course he did.

"If only so I don't have to deal with them by myself."

"So persuasive," you said. "How could I resist that argument?"

Gabriel ran his thumb over your lower lip. "It would mean a lot to Jack."

"I-" You sighed. "I don't know."


Each title made you cringe a little more.

"Please stop." You buried your face in your hands. "I think I'll stay here in Zurich and take Fareeha to that Yule festival. Christmas caroling sounds great. Do they even do that here? Because I'll be real embarrassed if I'm the only one making up lyrics for that Twelve Days of Christmas song."

"Huh. You weren't joking about panicking. What did Sato call you?"
"Nothing. We never talked about it," you said. "I think he wanted to. But we were being covert. And he didn't want to...freak me out. Yeah. I know. Residual issues from...things that I talked to the shrink about and whatever."

"It doesn't mean you loved him any less."

"I never told him that either," you said through clenched teeth.

"He knew. You don't hide it very well," Gabriel said, patting your head.

"Damnit, Gabriel."

"Come here. Let me hold you tonight. No rough stuff. You have to be in good shape for tomorrow." He got up and pulled you toward the bed, and you let yourself be persuaded.

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On the transport to Cambridge, it was Jack that strapped you into your armor. He did it neatly and professionally, no lingering hands or groping. But you were very conscious of his eyes on you the entire time.

"She's probably going to jam the headset. Jesse's your sniper. Gabriel will be nearby if you need close range support. I'll be at mid-range." Jack was dressed down without his overcoat, opting for a hoodie to cover his armor. It was, surprisingly, gray.

You wore a gray overcoat on top of your armor. It didn't look out of place in the winter. The gray wide-brimmed, low-crowned hat wasn't flattering, but it helped hide your face. Gabriel wrapped a dark green scarf around your neck. You looked down at it. The pattern looked almost like fish scales, very intricately done.

"Early Christmas present," he said. "I made it myself."

"That is completely unfair," you said, unsure of why he would give it to you now. Did you look cold?

"You're welcome," he said, with a smirk.

Jack chuckled. "He'll probably get you something else, just fair warning."

None of it was fair, and you took a taxi to your destination. She’d named a cafe near the university.

You brought more printouts of Lao's photographs, excluding the ones with you. You wore your tanto in your belt and your gun against your side. Your sap glove had extra insulation to resist another electrical attack.

A girl in white with a reflective visor sat on inside the cafe. You scanned the area for obvious attackers, but saw none.

"Vampire, this is Gunslinger, I have eyes on your target."

"Gunslinger, this is Darklord, how the hell did you get Gérard to let you name things? We sound like a fucking D&D party."
"Darklord this is...Goldenrod. Stop complaining."

You could hear Jesse laughing. "Spotted. Am approaching."

You walked into the building, noting that it was empty. No barista greeted you. No other customers sat at the tables.

"Vampire, take a step back from the glass, you are in prime sniping real estate."

You complied, studying the girl in white. Lao was too thin, still on the cusp of adulthood. She had high cheekbones and a narrow chin, but her weight loss made her bones jut out sharply. Her eyes darted around too quickly, but that was how she'd always been. The circuits on her face were dark, and they looked uncomfortable against the burn scars. She kept her metal arm covered.

"Lao." You didn't sit.

"Lucky." Her voice was harsh, raspy, nothing like it used to be. You knew that voices could break from screaming. You could easily imagine how that happened. Her head had been shaved, the hair growing back as a downy fluff that only made her look younger. But it was her, no mistake. She removed the visor, crushing it between her metal fingers. "I can't...I don't have much time. I just killed the camera. It's a trap."

"I figured." You unhooked your carbine. "How many?"

"A dozen armored units, my handler, four snipers." She shuddered, metal fingers squeezing the table. "It's Lacroix they want."

"You catch that?"


"You need to get out of there, Vampire." Jesse voice crackled over your earpiece.

"Lacroix's not coming," you said.

"Then you need to leave." There were dark circles around Lao's eyes. Her cheeks were too gaunt, lips cracked and dry. They weren't taking very good care of your baby hacker.

"What happened to you, Lao?" You set the printouts on her table and stepped back, letting her take in the memories.

"I can't- I don't. The pictures helped. It was smart of you not to send one of yourself. I'm not trustworthy."

"I know." You wanted to reach out and comfort her, but you kept your hand on your gun.

"It's not me. But it doesn't matter. Kill me if you have to. Kill me while I remember. I didn't recognize you last time. I can't guarantee I will recognize you next time."

"Hush. We'll figure this out," you said gently.

"Vampire, armored squadron sighted. Take cover," Jesse said.

"I want to help you, Lao."

"I know." She closed her eyes. "I'm sorry. They wanted...Rivka. She went down
shooting. I don't remember the rest."

"What's your handler look like?" Because you suspected she couldn't give you his name. "Tell me what you can."

Lao's eyes flashed. "Black suit. Middle-aged Ukrainian man. Brown beard. He is dangerous."

You backed away from the window. "Can you tell me anything about your conditioning?"

"It...hurts. I can't hold back much longer. I-" She screamed, voice raw, and flipped the table. "Get out!" She hunched over her arm tensed. "Serpent Protocol Loading. Lucky I-" Her head snapped up, shoulders shaking. "Initiating Taipan Mode."

"Going to fight me, kid? Because you were always shit at it."

"You need to move," Gabriel's voice growled over the headset. "Gunslinger's taken out three snipers. Got six soldiers in powersuits heading in your direction."

Lao leapt at you, arm gleaming under the LED lights.

You whipped your carbine off your back and shot her square in the chest. She dropped out of the air, her armor absorbing the impact. You grabbed the omnic-restraints off your belt, and kicked her onto her back. No bleeding: they'd given her good armor. You put her arms behind her back and cuffed her, knowing they wouldn't hold her very long. You couldn't take her and fight off the powersuits. So you would leave her behind again.

"Sorry about the rough stuff. Give me a head start, if you can. I'll find you again, I promise."

You walked behind the counter and found the barista. He was unconscious on the floor. You grabbed him and dragged him out the back, your left arm aching.

"I'm clear. Got a civvy. He's out cold."

"Leave him in the alley," Gabriel said.

You dropped the man beside a dumpster, scanning the narrow alleyways for a good sniper's nest. There was the glint of metal across the way, and you angled yourself around a corner.

"Fourth sniper spotted. Roof of the building on the southeast side - perched between chimneys."

"Just stick to the shadows, Vampire. I'll take care of him. Darklord, are you intercepting those heavies?"

"We don't have to engage, as long as Vampire moves her ass."

You climbed the fire escape of the building next door, staying in cover.

"Fourth sniper is down," Jesse said. "Oh, interesting. Your girl is loose. And she's going after those armored units."

You tensed. "Shit-"

"They're trying to take her down with minimal damage. Keep walking, Vampire," Gabriel
said. "She's too valuable for them to kill."

You nodded, even though they couldn't see you. "Gunslinger, you spotted the handler?"

"Nah, that description was too vague. Wait, got a guy who didn't scatter. He's keeping an eye on the fight. He matches, bowler hat, solid build. Northside."

You went north, back to the side of the building where Lao had engaged the armored troops. You scanned the streets, catching sight of a man in a black bowler. He walked away slowly, and you dropped back down into the adjacent alleyway and followed, keeping to the shadows.

You tucked your carbine against your back, and drew your pistol. The controller moved at a steady pace, and you followed him down tree-lined streets, trying very hard not to think of Lao fighting alone.

"Deactivate Taipan mode." The man had a cultured voice and an eastern European accent. "Give it a moment and she should be docile. Don't damage her."

Yeah, this was the right guy. You needed him alive. Lao said he was dangerous. You believed her.

"Bái Shé has disengaged," Jesse said. "She's peacefully going with the armored units." The whole thing had taken less than ten minutes.

"Eyes on Vampire?" Gabriel asked.

"She's getting ready to engage the controller," Jesse said.

The handler had his back to you, and you watched him tense. If he didn't know you were there, he suspected it. You had to be fast. It wouldn't do for him to push his panic button or summon the armored units.

You lunged, going low and aiming for his waist. His fist whipped over your head, and you took him to the ground. You dug your knee into his back, focusing on keeping him down.

"You'll regret that," he snarled, and you hit him, bouncing his forehead off the cobblestones. He went limp, but you pressed your middle finger to the back of his neck, injecting him with sedative, just to be thorough.

"Controller acquired," you said. "Going to need pickup." You sat back on your heels and took the bastard's hat. It felt expensive and you found that obnoxious and infuriating. You smashed it with your left hand, because you couldn't crush his skull yet.

The flight back was oddly quiet. You figured Jack was probably disappointed by the lack of explosions, but your missions were subtle things: assassination, thievery, occasionally a kidnapping. You weren't a fucking hero and you'd never pretended to be one. You kept stealing glances at your prisoner, having already gone through his pockets. The objects of interest were nasty little gun, some kind of electroshock weapon that made your fingers twitch when you passed them a few inches over it, and an encrypted digital pocket organizer. Ziv could decrypt it for you.
The handler had an ID that said he was Dr. Danylo Chumak. Ziv was running the profile for a work up. You had him stashed in a holding cell.

The four of you sat in Gabriel's office, doing the post-mission workup.

"That went smoothly," Jack said. He sat on Gabriel's desk, grinning at you.

"Told you having you all along would be overkill." You'd gotten rid of the big floppy hat and your armor. But the scarf stayed, your fingers tracing the soft knit.

"A lot of things could have gone wrong," Gabriel said. "You could have been cornered by those armored units. Jesse might have missed a sniper. Báì Shé could've just as easily turned on you."

You shrugged. "I can take her."

"You'd hold back. You're soft on her. Leaving her alive will have consequences." Gabriel took his beanie off.

You bit your tongue, because you knew he was right.

"Hey, I thought our orders were just to meet. No one mentioned killing anyone today," Jesse said.

Gabriel nodded curtly. "You just need to be aware that your actions will always have consequences. You might look back on today and wish you'd taken care of her this afternoon."

"I know." You didn't feel any better about leaving Lao with Talon, but you hadn't been ready for a massive firefight in Cambridge. Sure, the four of you could've killed everything twice over, but that was a heavily populated area and it would've caused a lot of casualties and political blowback. That's not how you did things here. No, it was better to take it slow. Be smart. You couldn't afford to fuck up this time. Lao was in there. You just weren't sure how much was left and how to get her back.

"Who's interrogating Chumak?"

"Lacroix can work that out. We're still running background. Genji and Agent Mihret are digging. Lucky, Jesse, write your reports then take the rest of the day off. I'll let you know if there are any updates."

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"Who's doing the interrogation?" You sat in Lacroix's hospital room. Your paperwork was done, and you were still waiting for all the information Ziv could get on Chumak.

"Are you volunteering?" he asked, studying his tablet. "I did not realize you had a taste for such things."

"I don't. But I can do it." You didn't want to ask it of anyone else. "I have a stake in this." There weren't a whole lot of candidates. Jesse didn't like it. Genji might do it. But you weren't going to make Gabriel pay for your obsession.

"I see." Lacroix put down his tablet.
You held his sharp gaze. "Do you?"

"You should've put her out of her misery," Lacroix said flatly.

"Maybe." His comment didn't sting, though it was true. You already knew Lacroix's viewpoints. You didn't take his opinion personally. "But I'd rather save her. And I'm willing to do a lot for that chance. It doesn't hurt that we'd need this information anyway."

"Chumak was a valuable acquisition. You can't just go at him willy nilly with your blades. This takes skill, not luck." There was no reproach in Lacroix's voice, just unpleasant truth. There was a shrewdness to Lacroix that you would never trust. But you respected his ability to get the job done, his talent for enraging people to the point of murder, and his infuriating sangfroid.

"How would you do it?"

"You really want me to tell you?" Lacroix's smile was zen. The hair on the back of your neck stood up.

"I want to do it right."

"Of course." There was an odd light in his eyes and he went back to studying his tablet. "What a terrible power love has, wouldn't you agree?"

You didn't know what to say that.

"I have cake." Jack's message was totally manipulative, and you didn't care, you were going for it.

"Is it good cake?" You wrote back.

"Only one way to find out. My place?"

You casually walked up to his door, entered the code, and acted like you belonged. Because this was a cake op. You were on a secret mission for cake. It didn't matter that cake was so obviously the bait, you were going to take that cake.

Jack was shirtless again, and you sighed softly. Damn he was pretty, all rippling muscle and peaches and cream skin. His hair was damp and he sat on couch, two beers and two slices of chocolate cake on the table.

"Huh, I think I had a fantasy like this earlier. Nicely done." You hopped over the back of his couch and sat beside him.

"About cake and beer?"

"Mostly, yes." You leaned over and kissed him. He smelled fresh, like soap and toothpaste. Yup, definitely just out of the shower.

He grabbed your collar, pulling you against him. "You should invite me on more missions with you. I like watching you work."
"I figured you were bored. I had a conversation, snuck around, and hit a guy."

"You're sneaky," Jack said. "You shot Bái Shé, tied her up, and told her you were still friends. Then you went on to drag a civilian out of the line of fire, avoided the heavies sent to kill Gérard, and kidnapped Bái Shé's handler." He kissed you again, his thumb stroking your throat.

"You make it sound so exciting." Your eyes lingered on his hands. The skin was rough, but his scarred knuckles and blunt nails were very different from yours. You took a sip of beer. "I was just thinking if we got into a firefight, I'd need better equipment. I'm not good at straight forward gun fights."

"Too sneaky," Jack agreed. "I'll talk to Torby about getting you something more suited for battle, if you like."

"It wouldn't hurt. But I have to figure out some new strategies. Besides duck, cover, and shoot."

"Don't get hit and that's most of it." He laughed. "Not that Gabe and I can talk."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure you've been shot more times in one battle than I've been hit ever."

Your eyes traveled down his chest.

"You just wanted an excuse to ogle me."

"You're sexy. I don't need any other excuse."

"You can touch too," he purred.

You flicked his nose.

He bit your fingers, gently, then sucked them into his mouth.

Heat pooled between your legs and your breath stuttered.

Jack took your hand in his, rubbing circles on your palm. "So you mentioned fantasies earlier: cake and beer were one. What else?"

You laughed breathlessly, because you were not expecting that. "You first."

"I have a lot," he said.

"You probably have a specific one in mind," you said dryly.

"I do," he said cheerfully. "But do you want to know that or something about what Gabe likes?"

"Both," you said.

Jack's grin widened. "So greedy. I hear you're off medical restriction. Want me to show you?"

You looked at the clock. You had time.

"You know, I still haven't seen your bedroom."

Jack's smile curved into something predatory. "If I take you back there, will you stay the
"I actually have an op thing in the early morning, but I'll stay till then."

"That'll work," he said.

Jack's bedroom was messier than you expected. You were pretty sure that was a pile of Gabriel's clothes on the floor. And his Strike Commander coat stuck out of the closet. A brush sat on the bed. There were ammo packs strewn across his dresser alongside a worn stuffed dog, more than a few stitch jobs evident. It looked like some kind of hound.

"It's my younger sister's," he said when he saw you staring. A blush crept across his cheeks. "When I first left home, she gave it to me, so I wouldn't get lonely."

"Ah," you said. "He or she, looks well-loved."

"Her name's Daisy," he said, rubbing the back of his head. "I know, I know."

"What do you know?" You asked, turning to face him.

"It's silly."

"Not really," You shrugged. "Mementos are important." You carried your *tanto* with you everywhere. If Shin had given you a stuffed dog, maybe you wouldn't carry it on ops, but it would be in your room.

Jack stared at you for a second too long. "Yeah, I know." He gave you that crooked grin, and waved you over to the bed. King-sized and unmade, the bedding came in shades of light blue and gray.

The bed frame was metal, and you paused when you saw the headboard. Aesthetically, there was nothing wrong with it, a crisscross of thick metal bars made to look like basket weave. But there were large gaps in it, perfect for angling various restraints. You didn't used to notice things like that, but apparently you'd been influenced by some very bondage-oriented men.

"Too much?"

"Gives me a lot of ideas," you said.

"Good." Jack tugged on your arm while sitting on the edge of the bed. "So fantasies?"

"I said "you first." Quit trying to renege." You stood in front of him.

"I'm not. So then, you'll tell me one?" His hands stroked your hips and you wished you'd changed out of your ops wear.

"Yeah," you nodded.

"Then I'll tell you one of Gabe's?"

"Yeah," your voice dropped.

"Then you'll tell me another one?"

"That's how it works."
"I want to watch you play with yourself. Toys, fingers, the handle of my brush, I don't care. I want to watch," he said, hands resting around your waist as he looked up at you. "I know Gabe likes that too."

"I learned that one last weekend, Jack." You rolled your eyes. "I want to tie you up and tease you."

"Oh?" Jack unfastened your belt, pulled it off, and placed it on the bed. "I like that too. But eventually, I'd pay you back with interest."

"That's the other half of the fun," you said, running your fingers through his hair. You leaned in to kiss him, a little bit of stubble scratching your face. "You should probably tell me something I don't already know."

Jack laughed softly. "Gabe really wants to fuck you bareback."

"I knew that too," you said. "I told him he could. I have an implant. There's such a miniscule risk, I'm not going to bother citing the teeny tiny numbers."

"I know. I'm not worried," Jack said a little too smugly. "He's just wound real tight when it comes to you, Lucky."

"I'm not sure what you mean," you said.

"He's holding back. Doesn't want to scare you off."

You could see that and you wondered if this was a discussion you should be having with Gabriel himself. "I never thought he was vanilla. I can work with it, depending on the kink."

"Not like that, though Gabe's a pretty kinky bastard; he just needs to lose control, fuck you raw, and fill you up. He's naturally possessive and trying hard not to be."

"Oh. That's actually pretty hot," you said.

"I know," Jack said and kissed your jaw. "But he's got a real protective streak when it comes to you. You'll have to push him. If you want to make him lose it, you could probably call him papi."

"I uh...huh. Not a daddy kink person. It...yeah." You winced. Smooth. "The implications bother me."

"It's not about that. It's the power exchange, like "sir" or "master." Gabe likes fussing over his lovers, especially after he's dominated them. "Master" isn't his thing. "Sir" does it more for me than him. "Daddy" implies a certain level of trust that really turns him on. Papi is far enough away from "daddy" that maybe it won't trip your alarms. You don't have to use it," Jack said with a shrug. "I'm just letting you know."

"I'll uh...keep that in mind," you said. "I don't know if that's something I can do, but it doesn't bother me if he likes that."

"Fair enough," Jack said, pulling you into his lap. "Not asking you to do anything you're uncomfortable with. What else would you like to do?"

"I liked it when you tied me up. I wouldn't mind doing more than handcuffs." You were prepared this time when Jack groaned against you, his cock pressed against your stomach.
"I guess I can't be too rough with you if you have work in the morning," Jack said wistfully. "Let's try it your way first. There are cuffs in the drawer in the nightstand. Lube and condoms too if you need them."

You grabbed the leather cuffs. You looped the central chain of the cuffs through his headboard, then carefully fastened the cuffs around Jack's wrists.

"Comfortable?"

"No, my cock is going to tear a hole in my pants."

You pulled off your shirt and wiggled out of your pants. Kneeling over Jack in your underwear, you took the fingertips of your gloves between your teeth and pulled, dropping them on the bed.

Jack's eyes stayed on your face, his smile too knowing to be submissive.

"Lift your hips," you told him, pulling his sweatpants down. His length jutted up, already hard. "You have such a pretty cock, Jack." You leaned over, licking the head.

"Going to let me throat fuck you again, baby? Because I love watching you choke on me. You try so hard to take me down, and you can't quite yet- it's fucking hot," he growled.

You pressed down on his hips, keeping him flat against the bed while you slowly licked his shaft. Jack gritted his teeth, flashing you a feral smile. "That's it, don't be shy. I can't wait to get of this and fuck you."

You rolled his balls in your fingers and Jack grunted. You gave him a few strokes, watching his thighs tense. He started jerking his hips upward and you released him. His expression grew sharper.

You peeled your now damp panties off, and took off your bra. You had your knees on either side of his head, and began lightly rubbing your clit right over his face.

"Was this what you wanted to see, Jack?"

He tried to lick you, but you raised your hips, not giving him access.

"Tease," he groaned.

"But you wanted to see me finger myself. Don't you have a good view right there?" You slipped a single digit into your pussy, cooing softly. "I'm already wet, Jack. Do you hear that?" You slid the finger in and out, your slickness already starting to coat your thighs.

"You get so wet," Jack sighed. "It just means that greedy little cunt of yours needs to be filled.

"You really like to talk." You sat back on your heels, partially resting on Jack's bare chest. You pulled your finger out and rubbed it against Jack's lips. He nipped it lightly before sucking it. You slid another finger in, and he watched you with grim amusement. You withdrew your fingers and slid two back inside yourself.

"Come on, Lucky, let me eat you till you come. You taste so good."

"I'm going to gag you," you said. "Also do you have a nonverbal?"
Jack gave you a hard look. "I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

"What do you think you're going to gag me with?"

You rolled your eyes and grabbed your panties.

"You wouldn't," he said, a little breathless.

"Try me."

"You don't have the balls."

"Oh, you noticed?"

Jack glared at you, and you balled up your satin panties and shoved them past his lips.

You straddled him, rubbing his cockhead against you opening. You slid down an inch and he jerked his hips up, trying to get deeper inside you. You just raised your hips again, smirking at him.

His eyes were hot with outrage, and promised vengeance. You kept it up, rubbing his head against you. He struggled, but you pushed down on his hips and slowly sliding down onto his cock, panting as you took him to the hilt. He fit you so well, the stretch as good you remembered it.

You rode him, palms flat on his chest. "You look so pretty like that, Jack, tied up and furious underneath me. Do you like the feeling of my pussy without the condom?"

He gave one slow, deliberate nod, and you began to ride him, savoring the heat and fullness. You rolled your hips, head tilted back. You clench around him, the feel of his velvety cockhead, hot and slick inside you with no barrier, made you shiver.

You kept the pace gradual and deliberate, never giving Jack quite what he wanted. He bucked his hips, trying to control the rhythm. You just lifted yourself off him, more interested in teasing him than getting yourself off.

Jack's eyes were half open, he moaned around your panties, and you pulled them out. "Got something to say?"

"You'll get yours," he said, voice raw. "I was going to be nice, but now, I'm going to-"

You kissed him hard. "You're so fun to rile up."

"Just you wait, baby."

"Tsk." You clicked your tongue in disappointment, and lifted yourself off his cock. You reached for the hairbrush he'd conveniently left out. The handle was long and cylindrical. You rubbed it against your pussy lips, watching Jack's breathing speed up. "If you can't be good, I'll just take care of myself." You slid the rigid plastic in watching Jack's pupils expand. "It's not as thick as you, but it's also not as obnoxious." You began to fuck yourself slowly with the brush, breaths quickening.

You smirked at Jack's strained face, and rubbed your clit. "I'll admit, it's not as satisfying, but it'll get the job done."
"Why settle for less?" Jack said, voice low and tense. Sweat beaded on his face and his forearms bulged as he clenched against the restraints. "Why not just give yourself what you really want?"

"I want to see you squirm," you taunted.

"Karma's going to make you my bitch," he told you, breaths coming quick and hard.

"I don't think that's how the phrase goes. You closed your eyes, making sure to give Jack a good view of yourself spread open.

"I think you'll get bored of that soon enough, and come crawling back to me."

"I can do this all night, Jackie boy. How long can you take it?"

He snarled and twisted against the restraints. You heard a pop, and suddenly, you were on your back, Jack straddling your chest. He had your belt in hand, and he gathered your wrists in the other hand and tied them to his headboard.

"You're in for it now."

You tried to jerk away, but he'd secured you tightly.

"Don't worry, I won't gag you. I want to hear you beg." Jack gripped your chin, his eyes wild as he pulled the brush handle out of you. He licked it once and smirked. "I have better toys. You should have asked about those." He eyed you as you wiggled against the belt. "You have to work later, so I'll spare that tight little asshole tonight. But this? You asked for this."

Kneeling between your thighs, he pushed inside you and you shrieked, because he went in hard, fucking you into the mattress with feverish enthusiasm. He held your knees apart, his mouth traveling between your breasts, sucking your nipples while he pounded you.

"Damnit Jack," you gasped his name like a plea, and he just drove deeper, slamming into you with savage pleasure.

"That's it," he breathed. "I love how needy you sound when you say my name." He nuzzled your neck before nipping you sharply. He left bruising kisses on your skin, and you were damn sure it was on purpose, because Gabriel wasn't the only possessive one. "Tell me how it feels, baby. I want to hear you."

"You're so vain," you panted as he slowed his thrusts. "You just want to hear me talk about how you stretch me out and make me ache. I shouldn't give you the satisfaction."

Jack kept the steady pace, fingers brushing against your lips. "I've got you in my bed, tied up underneath me. That's pretty satisfying."

"You're not...refuting my point," you said as he wound his fingers through your hair.

"Give me what I want, let me take it. It all ends the same: you screaming my name while I nail you to my bed." He yanked your head back and kissed your throat, thrusting hard inside you.

His casual arrogance made you want to bite him, or at least push him harder. But you now recognized that urge. It was that same escalation that got you flipped and tied to the bed. You needed to wind it back, because you and Jack were dangerous together.
"It's not fair. I wanted to tease you more," you said, trying to keep yourself in check. "You look so good pulling at your restraints. Couldn't you let me enjoy it a little longer?"

Jack laughed softly kissing your jaw. "You're just so enticing." He gripped your hips, moving faster now. "Maybe another time. I haven't had you since last Sunday, and I want to feel your tight little pussy milking me while you scream my name. You want me to give to you raw, like this? You want me to come inside you?"

"Please Jack," you wrapped your legs around his waist, trying to pull him deeper.

He obliged you, fingers slipping down to your clit to add to the stimulation. You threw your head back, straining against your bonds. You arched beneath him and he tilted your chin up. "That's it, I like seeing you writhing underneath me."

"Harder," you panted. "Come on, Jack."

Jack groaned.

"You wanted me to beg? I'm begging," you said, eyes flashing. "I want it, Jack, Give it all to me."

"That doesn't sound like begging." Jack kissed you. "You're going to have to convince me."

He kept rocking his hips, his cockhead hitting your g-spot, his fingers stroking your clit. You shook underneath him, heat and pressure coiling inside you. Your thighs ached from the tension. Jack's touch kept you climbing, but it was too light to let you finish.

The lewd sound of his shaft sliding in and out of you, made you clamp down on him. Jack kept thrusting, eyes focused on your face, mouth open, breathing hard.

"Please Jack," your voice was shaky. "Can't you feel how wet I am for you? It's all so I can fit your big dick inside me. I want to feel you shoot your hot cum inside me. I want you to fill me up, sir."

Jack shuddered and growled, fingers hard against your nub, his strokes speeding up again. "Come for me then, agent." The sheer authority in his voice would have been enough, but then he buried himself in you to the hilt.

It was enough to finish you hard. You came panting and shaking, heat spreading from your center in waves. Jack hissed your name as you milked his cock, his hands gripping your hips with bruising force, his cum gushing out hot inside you.

You took it all, eyes squeezed shut, fingers digging into your belt, Jack's body heavy against yours.

You lay there, unsure how much time passed, mind pleasantly hazy.

Jack pulled out with a wet pop, and you bit your lip, watching his cum, mingled with your juices, ooze out.

"Fucking Hell, that's hot." Jack's eyes were wide and he brushed your hair out of your face.

"There's a lot," you said.
"And you took it all," Jack purred, his lips drawn back in a fierce smile. "That's my girl." He kissed you hungrily and you melted against him. "Gabe would have loved to see this... We'll just have to do it again."

"I have to work in the morning, Jack."

"Worn out already?"

"My arms hurt."

"Shit, sorry." You sighed as he untied you, and began to rub your wrists. The leather left angry red lines in your forearms, and Jack kissed your hands. "Want to get a shower after this?"

"Yeah, I should get cleaned up."

Jack lay on his back and pulled you to his chest. "In a minute." He rubbed your arms.

"You OK?"

"Yeah," you said. "A little blissed out, but I'm good."

"Good," he said and kissed your cheek.

"I'm lying in the wet spot."

Jack scooted over and pulled you on top of him. "Better?"

You rested your cheek against his chest. "You're adequately warm."

He laughed at that. "Well, as long as I can keep cuddling you."

"The Assassin-Butler is not your teddy bear," you said with great pomp.

"Shut up and let me hold you."

You stayed there, listening to his heart beat. He wrapped one arm around your waist, the other combed through your hair. It was a strange place to be, especially without Gabriel, but not a bad one.

"What are you thinking about?"

"You really want to know?" Your voice wavered.

"Of course," he said gently.

"I never got to eat my cake."

Chapter End Notes

...I have never written this much smut in my life. Fortunately, I do have the plot outlined. Unfortunately, the Christmas arc is huge and mostly fluff and smut with a tinge of seasonal angst. I can cut it down if you guys are like "OMG, enough of this bullshit, we want the angsty meat of the story!" Because it's really big and I didn't mean to let it go that far.
As always, comments totally make my day.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Violence & angst in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jack had awakened when you got out of bed to get dressed. He'd been groggy, kissing your chin and grinning when you tucked him back under the blankets. The fucking Strike Commander shouldn't be that cute. That was too much power in one individual. No wonder Gabriel put up with all his shit. You liked him, even though you weren't sure if you and Jack had anything in common besides Gabriel and chemistry. Gabriel said it wasn't just sex. You weren't so sure if that applied to Jack.

But you couldn't focus on that now.

You checked your tablet. Ziv had compiled quite a bit of information about Dr. Danylo Chumak. That was his real name. He was a psychiatrist specializing in behavioral modification. He had an unpleasant weakness for barely pubescent girls. He had been a governmental researcher till he touched the wrong man's daughter and had been a private sector military contractor since. Interestingly, his was not a name connected to Talon. At least, not before yesterday. Ziv was still working on the electronic organizer.

Lacroix had managed to get a wheelchair. You were slightly surprised to see him in the observer's room. Ziv and Genji were there too. Genji was your backup. Ziv had requested to sit in. You weren't sure what that said about his mental state, but you'd keep an eye on it.

"This is too important for you to improvise," Lacroix said, handing you an earpiece. "I will advise."

"Thanks," you said, because you totally wanted another voice in your head while you tortured a man.

You adjusted your gloves. You had attachments on. Chumak had been drugged. You just needed to convince him to talk.

You entered the room, very conscious of the unpleasantly bright lights and stink of bleach. "Hello Chumak," you said, voice distant and dry. "We should talk."

He sat strapped to the chair, his pupils dilated, nostrils flared. He ground his teeth and stared hard at you. He was a solid man, with slabs of muscle under a layer of fat. He had a sharp angled nose and thin lips. He might have been distinguished, in another setting. Balding with a bushy beard, he dressed nicely and got regular manicures. And there was a tell, in and of itself.

"You've drugged me, you bitch."

You just watched him struggle against the restraints.
"This is illegal!"

"Yes," you agreed. "But do I look like I care?"

"What do you want from me?"

"I want to know everything you know about Bái Shé. I want to know everything you know about neural reconditioning. I want to know everything about who you work for, and what they're doing. If you can tell me these things, to my satisfaction, well, it doesn't have to get unpleasant."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

You leaned over and patted his cheek, grateful for your gloves. "Don't lie to me, Chumak. I'm not a patient woman. And I'm certainly not like those little girls you like to diddle."

He spat. The drugs impaired motor coordination, and the saliva got stuck in his beard. You laughed, though it wasn't so much funny as gross. "Bái Shé's Serpent Protocol is clumsy. Requiring verbal cues is so inconvenient."

"Ease up. Give him room to talk," Lacroix said.

You stepped back, arms crossed.

"You- You're that friend she tried to contact. Lucky Shot," he sneered. "You're nobody. She has orders to execute you on the spot." That certainly wasn't how it went down. Did that mean Lao could circumvent some of the commands? At least for a little while? "You're just a useless cow. Now Bái Shé, she's a real achievement. I've made sure of it."

"And yet this "useless cow" took you down. Funny how that works, Chumak. Bái Shé isn't all that amazing. You abducted a traumatized teenage girl, rebuilt her badly, and can't even control her half the time. I'm so very impressed."

"You know nothing! She may be a prototype, but she is an invaluable test subject. We've improved the reconditioning process since. No, Bái Shé isn't cutting edge any more. But she's still useful in a quite a few ways." He licked his lips and you wondered if he was trying to goad you into killing him. If so, he was very convincing.

"It's hilarious that you work for Talon. Of all groups, I would've thought they'd see the futility in your work."

"Talon supports science! Not the obsolete ethics of a bunch of fools with no understanding of the world!"

"Oh, what'd they promise you?"

"Enough, I know how your drugs work, I've designed some myself! You can't make me talk, bitch."

"He's not as resistant as he thinks, look at him sweating like a pig," Lacroix said in your ear. "Keep pushing."

"So what method ended up working on her? Drugs? Hypnotism? Behavioral modification? Nanites?"

Chumak gripped the chair, shaking. "You can't make me talk, bitch."
"Hit him," Lacroix said. "Remind him who is in charge."

You backhanded him with your left hand.

He yelped, and you gripped his chin. "I asked you a question. What method ended up working?"

"Is that the best you've got?" He sneered, blood trickling down his face. You'd split his lip.

"What method, Chumak?" You slapped him again, watching him screw his face up and flinch away. "It doesn't matter if you tell us or your lab assistant does. But if you can't even get this much right, what use are you?"

"Don't engage him. Don't let him think. Just hit him again," Lacroix said, ever the demon at your ear.

You hit him again, and he spat blood. He looked at you, a little incredulous.

"I can do this all day," you said, raising your gloved hand.

"We used industrial-grade Ketamine, to keep her pliable. Behavior-modification to teach the habits. Neural leashes interfaced in her cybernetics to reinforce behaviors. It's all basic conditioning with more sophisticated execution."

"Details, doctor."

"You won't like them," he smirked.

"Maybe, but you don't care what I like."

"Good finesse and hook, but be careful how much power you give him," Lacroix said. "You'll undo all the work you put into breaking him down."

Chumak told you exactly what he'd done to Lao, in graphic detail, with the euphoria of a man who cared nothing about shame. There were a lot of ways to break people. Chumak was intimately familiar with many of them and shared his observations, a nasty smile creeping onto his face whenever he got to talk about a particularly awful act he personally committed. You clenched your left fist, grateful for the shielding of Torby's sap glove.

"So you understand that whatever Bái Shé was before, that girl's dead. You can't save her."

You only smiled, because Lacroix was right, you couldn't engage him. "Tell me about the program sponsors."

"Not worth my life," Chumak said.

"Your life isn't worth much," you told him.

"You can hit me all you want, cow. I'm not afraid of your fists."

"That's all you're going to get out of him without escalating. Choose a tool." Lacroix sounded so detached it was almost reassuring.

You picked up the bolt cutters, because you knew how those worked. You rolled them in your hands.
"Take something small," Lacroix said. "See how he handles it."

"You are right-handed, aren't you?" You said, so very calm, because you already understood what you had started. No matter what he or Lacroix said, you were going to get Lao back. And you needed every bit of data this man had, if she was ever going to live a semi-normal life.

That was no excuse for torture. You just didn't have a better way. You knew that, but cognitive dissonance was a bitch.

You cut off his right pinky, because you had to start small.

He screamed, cursed, called you names. You didn't really listen. You weren't quite in your body any more. The disassociation made it all much easier.

"You'll have to escalate. Not too far or you'll break him too soon. It seems he isn't quite as resilient as he acted." Lacroix laughed darkly.

There was no forgiveness for this, even if he had it coming. It was good that you felt numb. You had worried for awhile that you'd go berserk like Gabriel. If you thought about what he did to Lao, you still might. Best to focus on doing the job right. Your feelings didn't matter; getting the information did.

You cut off his ring finger, and reminded yourself that he wasn't going to need any of it after you were done with him.

You repeated your questions and he just cursed you.

So you whittled down his right hand to little nubbins, nothing left. Detachment the word of the day. He held out till you got to the thumb. Something about that opened the flood gates; Lacroix said it was a symbolic removal of his humanity, but you were pretty sure Chumak wasn't much of a human to begin with. You studied his ruined hand, seeing parallels where you didn't want to, but also reminding yourself that this was a different situation with clear and present danger to Lao.

Rationalization was a powerful coping mechanism.

Chumak talked. He talked more than you expected, and you sat and listened, nodding and asking the right questions, every so often taking a cue from Lacroix. There were a few Big Pharma companies you would be visiting. A Cardinal in Hungary. An MP in Denmark. A CEO in Argentina. Even a UN ambassador or three; Nguyen's name was mentioned again. No, they didn't know how much of her original personality was left. Yes, some brain damage had occurred, but that was to be expected when interfacing neurons with experimental nano-circuitry. Yes, Talon had a more polished version now, but Bái Shé was an excellent hacker and they would use her till she burned out.

He told you everything, much of it above your education, and you listened politely, trying not to stare at the severed fingers on the floor. He gave trade secrets. He gave locations. He gave you everything you asked of him.

"Please," he asked after he'd talked. "Please."

"Would you like to do the honors?" Lacroix asked.

You drew your knife and you cut Chumak's throat. You didn't stab all the way through like
you normally did. You cut a neat slit, and then you watched him die, air seeping out his neck. It wasn't quick and quiet like your stealth kills, but you hadn't meant for it to be. You sat, and you watched the life drain out of him.

When you finally stepped out of the room, Gabriel stood in the hallway, arms crossed. Your eyes darted to the observation room door.

"Yeah, I watched the whole thing," he said gruffly. "Lacroix said you requested this one."

You nodded, because you didn't trust your voice. The air out here was clearer and cleaner. Suddenly your knees felt weak.

"When he gets better, I'm going to break his face for letting you do that," Gabriel said casually.

You shook your head. "Not your call."

"It is my privilege to take care of my people. You shouldn't have done that."

"You do it all the time. This one was mine." You turned your head, because you needed to wash your hands again. Maybe drink. Then you'd go to the office and collate the data. You'd listen to the recording, and you'd fast-forward through the parts with screaming. Then, you would process what it all meant, and how you could save Lao. Because that's why you did this.

"Let's get you cleaned up. You've got something right here." He tapped your cheek.

You didn't bother trying to wipe it off. You'd only smear it.

"Who told you?" You dropped your bloody clothes on Gabriel's bathroom floor and slipped into the shower, savoring the hot water pounding down on your skin.

"...Saw you coming out of Lacroix's room," Gabriel said, his tone strange to your ears. He stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower. He filled the space and you flattened yourself against the wall to make room.

"I hated it," you said, slumping against the wall.

"I know." Gabriel sucked in a breath as he looked you over. "Jack do that?" You glanced down at your bruised wrists, and hips. Your neck was covered in hickies. You ached, but you weren't entirely sure that was from rough sex.

"Yeah, we fell asleep without an emitter." You reached for the soap and lathered up. You'd snuck a glance in the mirror. You had blood spatter on your face, but it wasn't too gory. Just an obvious sign that you'd been up to no good.

Gabriel took the loofah and began to wash your back. You sighed as he rubbed you down. "Lucky, you push too hard, and I'll have Ana pull you from the Bái Shé ops."

You shook your head. "I'm not doing that again." Unless you had to, and you were hard-pressed to think of those circumstances right now. "Please don't threaten me. I can't process it."
Gabriel helped you dry off and gave you one of his shirts. You sat on the bed, waiting for the recriminations to begin. Gabriel sat beside you.

"If you were any other agent, I would tell you that you did a good job," he said. "But you're not. I would never ask that of you. You don't have the temperament for it."

"I know. But Lao is my responsibility."

"No shame in asking for help." There was bite in Gabriel's words.

"Will you hold me then?" You asked, because you were too tired to fight.

Gabriel scooted back and you sat between his thighs, his arms around your waist. You shivered, despite Gabriel's heat.

"You didn't eat beforehand, did you?"

"Of course not." You laughed softly. "Tell me all you know or I'll bleagh!" You snickered, even though you felt no humor and all you wanted to do was sleep.

Gabriel kissed your shoulder, stroking the bruised skin. "We have enough nightmares. Why would you make more for yourself?"

You didn't start crying then, but it was a near thing.

You opened one eye. Your stomach hurt. Hunger pains for sure. You slowly unwrapped yourself, realizing you were tangled in a cocoon of blankets. Eventually, you outsmarted the maze of inanimate fabric and sat up.

Gabriel was asleep beside you, on top of the covers. His tablet was on the pillow and you guessed he'd been trying to work and keep you company.

Your stomach grumbled again. You hadn't eaten since... Well shit, you didn't remember. You probably grabbed something after the mission, but before your encounter with Jack. And then.. Oh yes. You'd tortured a man, heard a bunch of his awful secrets that you hated every second of, and then killed him. And Gabriel had witnessed it all.

You took a deep breath and flexed your fingers. Logically, that wasn't so bad. But you still had an unpleasant pressure in your chest, somewhere between panic and guilt. You stood, feeling fragile. You needed to eat, and then maybe your head would settle. Though you suspected that wasn't really the case.

Your boots were right next to the couch and your clothes were on Gabriel's bathroom floor spattered with blood. Well. You could put them back on, and go to your room, and change. You padded to the bathroom, noting a third toothbrush on the sink. Well, it wasn't yours. You didn't know how it got there. And you weren't going to think about it right now.

You pulled on your slightly bloody uniform and checked the mirror. Oh, you looked like shit. You combed your fingers through your hair, brushed your teeth with your finger, and checked your bruises. Nothing too bad. Gabriel just wasn't used to seeing the aftermath of sparring with
Jack. Sex was way gentler.

When you came out of the bathroom, Gabriel was sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Hey," you said, because you were smooth. "Thanks. How long was I out?"

"Just a few hours. I'm going to down to the office. See you there?"

"Yeah, half-day for me. I got some things to do first."

Clean clothes and food made you feel fifty percent more human. But the sense of unease had only gotten worse. You weren't up to analyzing the transcripts and you didn't really want to face Jesse yet either. Instead, you made your way to the infirmary and were relieved to find Lacroix awake and reading.

He didn't seem surprised to see you at all. He took one look at your face and gestured for you to sit.

"The first time is always the worst," he said. "Or at least the strongest shock to the system."

"I'm just going to ask if you're a psychopath. I mean, can we just skip all the formalities and get that out of the way? Because if you are, I don't think your coping methods are going to work for me."

"I am not," he said, primly.

"OK," you said, unsure if you believed him.

"It is supposed to be awful. The moment it stops being disturbing, is the moment you need to hang up your weapons."

"Yeah, I figured. Killing is normal as fuck. But torture is a stain on the soul."

"Sarcasm won't help you here, Chanceux." Lacroix watched you with those sharp brown eyes, his mouth a thin line. "Why are you asking me instead of Gabriel?"

"I don't know."

"You do; you just don't want to acknowledge it."

"Because Gabriel is a super tough warrior who crushes all potential weaknesses? Because if I let him, he'll coddle me?"

"That's half of it." Lacroix set his book down. "The other half, is because you are not like Gabriel. He is exceptional at wetwork and black ops. He is a clever strategist. But he is not a subtle man by nature; he is so strong that he does not have to be. You are not that powerful. And so you learned to be underhanded. Your thinking is all sharp angles and deep water. You are more like me; you have a good head for espionage. Be honest about your skill set. You will never don power armor and slay hordes of foes, Chanceux."
You gave him a look, because you didn't need the French version of your nickname. "You know, "Lucky" isn't my name."

"It's a good handle. There is power in names. There is meaning in rebirth. Use it."

You were now pretty certain he was heavily medicated; getting into the wheelchair must have taken more out of him than you thought. "OK. So now what?"

"Now you find a way to live with your actions." He gave one of those little half-shrugs, like he was talking about the weather or a neighbor's dog shitting on the street. "For some of us, it is simple guilt. You suffer a price, your guilt is absolved. For some of us, it is good deeds. But it is what you know going in that matters. To torture others, you must hate yourself a little. To keep your humanity, you must love something far more than yourself."

You rubbed your head. "Did Angela slip you extra painkillers? Because I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You asked for help, I'm giving it to you."

"Break it down, Lacroix."

" Effective treatments must be cathartic. Some people go to a Domina for...penance."

Some people, huh? You'd met Amélie Lacroix and now you were pretty sure you were never going to look her in the eye again.

"OK, so intense BDSM is a possibility." Unlikely though. Your sex life was already out of control. That did not seem like a good addition right now.

"Some people do good deeds. Volunteer at orphanages or save the dolphins: put some good back into the world. Some people are content if the mission is a success. Rescue Bái Shé, and maybe you won't mind the karmic price."

You shrugged. "That's the long-term goal. I don't know how that will take the edge off now."

"Go accomplish something. Run a mission. Get your adrenaline up. Sometimes your body just needs to exert itself." He picked up his book. "Or take human comfort. Find your lovers and sort yourself out. Whatever you choose, you will not be like you once were, but you'll be able to live with yourself."

Lacroix stared at his book, clearly dismissing you.

Wait a minute. He said "lovers." Plural. Damnit, Jack was right. Lacroix totally knew.

"Thank you," you said, even if you weren't sure how much you meant it.

"De rien, Chanceux," he said, not looking up.

"How do you do it?" You were facedown on the mat.
"I simply use your own weight against you," Genji said. "You charge, I redirect, you end up on your face."

"OK, let me clarify." You sighed and rolled over. "I meant, how do you deal with the awfulness of torture?"

"Ah. I only torture people who deserve it. And since the whole point of this is revenge, I'm not so picky as you."

You opened one eye. "You're after the Shimada. Why?"

"Truly, you do not know? You have access to my full personnel file. You have not read it? You should." Genji crouched beside you.

"It seemed...rude. I don't know. You're cleared and you watch my back. Your secrets are your own." It seemed like a violation of trust. Everyone in Shit Spiders already knew your sob story, and early on you wondered if it was pity, not respect that got you in. Yeah, you didn't know what Lacroix was spouting about you being spy material. You obviously were not. "You want me to read it, or you want to give your version?"

"My surname is Shimada."

"Oh." Well, now you felt super dumb and definitely not spy-like. You hadn't worked many Shimada missions or really done much with the files, but even you'd heard about Genji Shimada, the second son killed by the Shimada heir. Granted, Genji looked completely different from that laughing playboy you'd seen in dossiers. "Well, I uh...you're OK with this? Like, legit OK? Because I'll go renegotiate your contract with Gabriel right now." Or maybe not because this mat was awful comfy.

"Angela rebuilt me with this body. In exchange, I help dismantle the syndicate that destroyed me. The trade is fair enough."

"And your brother?"

"He was a symptom of the problem. He has stepped down because of it. I keep tabs on him. He is...unhappy. That's karma."

"Are you saving him for last?" You sat up. Your arms were a little stiff, and you ached from Jack's enthusiasm, but you needed to get through this post-mission guilt.

"He's my brother, Lucky."

You shrugged. "I don't have any context, sorry."

"No. I have no interest in harming my brother."

"OK," you said, and filed that thought away for later.

"You want to save your old comrade?"

"Yes."

"Then it is worth it, isn't it?"

"Worth it doesn't make it easy, Genji. I'm not even sure it's manageable."

"Things worth doing are rarely easy, Lucky." He stood, flexing his flesh hand. "Get up and
You set a tin of bourbon balls in front of Jesse at lunch.

"Does this mean you're done avoiding me?" He looked up frowning.

"Yes. Sorry." You sat down at his table in the mess.

"I ain't your dad, Lucky. You do what you want," he scowled.

"I shouldn't have done Chumak, myself. I hated it. It was awful. But if it helps me save Lao, I'll do it again. Which is also awful. I've been going around in circles about it all day."

"And you didn't want to ask the boss to do it," Jesse said opening the tin and popping a bourbon ball into his mouth. "Genji would've done it for you."

You shrugged. "Lao is personal. Maybe I'm too close. And if you repeat that-"

Jesse just laughed at you. "It's obvious you're obsessed. Ana ain't gonna take you off just yet, but you need to let up."

You sighed. "Yeah, OK. He fucking deserved it though."

"Yeah," Jesse said. "I saw the transcripts. He deserved it. But you didn't."

"Yeah," you agreed. "I talked to Lacroix about it too. That was...a mindfuck."

"Lacroix's a real piece of work, Lucky. I never want to get on his bad side and neither do you. So know your limits. You ain't gonna to be a Crusader. You certainly ain't gonna be a concert pianist. You ain't gonna be the next Marquis de Sade, and that's just fine." Jesse ate another bourbon ball. "These are real good."

"They're part of your early Christmas present."

Jesse cocked his head to the side. "I thought you didn't do Christmas."

"...I didn't. But then Gabriel gave me that scarf and it's all...I owe everyone presents. I understand presents."

"You understand bribes," Jesse said, shaking his head. "You going to Indiana?"

"...I don't know." You stole a bourbon ball. These turned out nice. "It seems like a bad idea."

"Because?" Jesse drew the word out.

"A houseful of Morrisons at Christmas. It's a fucking made-for-TV movie."

"How Lucky Saved Christmas." Jesse snickered.

"Shut up. And it would be more like "How Lucky Ruined Christmas, Chanukah, Winter Solstice, and Every Other December Holiday."
"Morrison wants you to go? Like really?"

"Seems that way." You still weren't sure why he wanted you to go. Pity or at least decency seemed to be the big motivator. Sex might be one. Friendship obviously played a part. Maybe he wanted to mess with his parents? You had no idea.

"The Commander want you to go too?"

"Yes, but to serve as a distraction from him. I'm not going to play his decoy. I owe him, but I don't owe him that much."

"And you don't know how to relate to civilians outside of cover, so yeah, I can see that." Jesse grinned at you lazily. "Maybe you, Gérard, and Genji can go sit in the conference room and practice looking evil."

"I mutilated and killed a guy this morning, Jesse. I am not someone you invite to your family's farm for fucking Christmas," you hissed.

"If that's who you wanna be, Lucky." Jesse popped another bourbon ball in his mouth. "Good bourbon balls. You make'em yourself?"

"Yes," you muttered.

"They're great. I think Ana'll like'em too. You just do you, sugarpie." He got up and took the tin. "Let me know what your plans are. Genji wants to do some weird shit for New Years."

You sat alone at the lunch table, feeling distinctly outplayed, and worse, you weren't even sure why.

Lacroix was right about the adrenaline. Your skin felt like it fit you again, even if you didn't really like looking yourself in the mirror. Your fingers twitched as you read the transcript from this morning with Chumak. You sounded way more intimidating on paper than you remembered. Of course, they hadn't recorded Lacroix's coaching. Ziv and Winston were translating all the science jargon into plain English, and you were pretty sure Winston wasn't going to be too happy to see you. You added him to your Christmas shopping list, just to keep things civil.

Gabriel wasn't in the office when you got in, which was OK, because you needed space to contemplate what you were going to do about Lao.

You kept seeing those severed fingers on the interrogation room floor. You wondered if your shrink would like to hear about this or if this would be too nightmare-inducing. Fuck. You really were more fucked up than you thought. It was like you'd been hiding it from everyone for so long that you'd managed to fool yourself. And now that you had to deal with feelings, your whole spectrum of crazy was making itself known. It was damned inconvenient.

You hadn't received any more messages from Bái Shé. You needed a way to track her. If you could tag her with a nanochip transmitter, even if they jammed signals, you'd be able to start collecting data and pinpoint her approximate location.
Switching over to Gabriel's administrative work was easier. You finished that and checked the time. You'd been here long enough. You could take a walk, get some air. It was fucking cold, but you didn't need to be around people.

You found your way out to the Memorial Wall. You didn't have incense, but you had a pack of cigarettes and a flask of bourbon. You lit a cigarette and sat in front of the wall. The ground was freezing, but there was no snow. You really didn't smoke often, but today called for it.

Lao wasn't quite dead. You weren't sure if that was living, but you knew that Captain Patel wouldn't abandon her. You knew Shin wouldn't let this crime go unpunished. And they wouldn't have faulted you for what you did today. They would have helped you. That thought gave you a greater measure of peace.

You contemplated the bourbon for a moment. Not as pacifying as the approval of your dead friends, but pretty high up there.

"This is a no smoking area, Agent."

You looked up to see Jack, in overcoat and eyepiece, standing above you, arms crossed. The stony look surprised you. Unless he knew what you'd been up to. Never mind, of course he knew.

"Sorry sir," you said, cigarette dangling out of the corner of your mouth. You stepped away from the memorial, because this wasn't for the dead, this was for you.

"Most of the grounds are no smoking, Agent. There are designated areas."

And you thought Blackwatch was petty. You sighed and pulled off your left glove, then put the cigarette out against a metal finger. You put the half-smoked cigarette back in your mouth and put your glove back on.

The Strike Commander was still giving you a look.

"It's out," you muttered.

"Walk with me, Agent."

That was definitely an order. You slunk beside him, noting that there were plenty of people on the grounds. He probably wasn't going to tell you off in front of them. Jack led you back to Gabriel's office. Gabriel was at his desk. He looked up when you stepped in after Jack. You shut the door.

"Lock it," Jack said.

You locked it. You turned around. Jack gestured for you to sit on the couch. You glanced at Gabriel, who was still at his desk, and sat down.

Jack pulled up a chair and he plucked the cigarette out of your mouth and tucked it behind his ear. "You don't need that."

"Jack-"

He leaned in clasp his hand around the back of your head. He pressed his forehead against yours. "How are you holding up?"
You blinked. "What?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "I know what you did after you left my bed this morning. I ask, how are you holding up?"

"Better now," you said, because it was true. "As long as you're not planning on telling me off too."

Gabriel snorted in the background. "I didn't tell you off, _chica_. I didn't even begin to tell you off." You heard his chair squeak as he stood.

"I talked to Lacroix and Genji about coping. Genji kicked my ass. I did some...thinking. I was smoking a cigarette. I'm doing better."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were already in that deep," Jack said. "If I'd suspected, I just would've left you tied to my bed."

You rubbed your neck. The couch dipped as Gabriel sat down beside you. "I didn't want to ask Gabriel to do it. He does enough of that shit. It's not fair."

Gabriel inhaled sharply.

"It's hard work, Lucky. Harder than it looks." Jack kissed you, his gloved hands holding your cheeks. "I know what always makes Gabriel feel better afterward. Would you like us to show you?"

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"I need to be more careful with you," Jack said, tracing the bruises on your wrists.

You sighed as Gabriel rubbed your back. You were warm, naked, and your limbs felt deliciously heavy. You rested on your side, your head in Jack's lap. He'd lost his gloves at some point. His fingers skimmed your neck and thighs.

"Doing a little better?"

You nodded, not trusting your ability to form words.

"I've done far worse than that, Lucky." Gabriel said in a low voice. "No one here's judging you harder than yourself."

"Me too, Lucky," Jack said, cheeks flushed.

"This isn't a competition, Jack," Gabriel said.

You blinked. Yeah, you could see that, actually. Worse, it didn't bother you, except for the toll it took on them. You were utterly fucked up.

"I know it's not a competition. I'm saying it so she knows I'm not judging her, Gabe." Jack's hair fell in his face and you ran your fingers along his jaw line. He leaned into the touch. "You need some time away from here. Come home with me for the break." Jack kissed your metal fingers, twining them with his. "Please?" The sincerity pierced your chest and you winced.
Gabriel's hands kept stroking your back. You couldn't keep your eyes open.

"OK," you said.

Damn, you'd been outplayed again.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone who celebrated "Eat Yourself Sick Day" enjoyed it. Thus starts the insane shopping season. Ugh.

Christmas Fluffocalypse begins after this. -_- 

As always, comments are love and totally make my day. Need to edit the hell out of the next few chapters.
"You guys are never allowed to ask me for things after sex, ever again," you snarled at Gabriel as you packed your duffel bag. "That is unethical coercion and I fucking resent the hell out of it."

"You're going to want to dress warm," he said helpfully, sitting in your guest chair. He was eating your chocolates and some of the pastries you'd picked up at Ana's favorite downtown bakery.

"...According to Genji, I am expected to take a hostess gift as well as individualized gifts from Christmas. I don't know these people. I don't know how they celebrate. Gabriel, I don't even like Christmas."

"These cakes are good. You should bring some. Jack always takes chocolate. I bring booze. Mostly for me." He laughed at that. "Bring at least one nice outfit. Nothing dazzling, just nice."

"Assassin-Butler?"

"That is nice, but not quite what I had in mind. Too formal and probably too intimidating for this venue. You know what, I'll take care of it."

"You're not buying me any clothes, Gabriel." You scowled at him.

"Jack really likes Christmas," Gabriel said, ignoring you. "Almost as much as I like Halloween. His family goes all out: the shiny tree, fruitcake, nonstop Christmas carols, clichéd traditional movies..."

"So basically, this is penance for all my sins. Especially the most recent ones. And I'm not allowed to complain about it, because it will make Jack sad. It's like double penance; I'll have my karmic debt paid off in no time. Got it." You stared down at your bag. You had jeans. You had black turtlenecks. You had some gray ones too. You had the green scarf Gabriel had fucking made you. You had lame presents for Jack and Gabriel. And now you had to go get cake or something for Jack's family.

"I'll put your name on all the presents I'm taking," Gabriel soothed. "Stop panicking. It's adorable, but this really isn't that bad."

You would buy tins of chocolate-filled hüppen, those rolled wafers that looked like stick pretzels full of cream. You'd even get some tirggel, which were dry and hard biscuits depicting Christmas scenes, and they were meh despite being made with honey, but given Jack's tastebuds, maybe his family wouldn't notice. And just in case they had better culinary taste than Jack, you'd buy some luxemburgerli, which were just smaller, less filling, Swiss versions of macarons.

"I've constructed at least three polite exit strategies, if you need breathing room. And we will use them. Jack only knows about one. We can use hand signals. Think of it as an op. You're going to support Jack. You're undercover. I'm your backup."

You nodded, because that you could handle. Because maybe you needed more than
therapy to make you less fucked up.

You sat on the transport with your duffel bag. You had a separate bag for all the baked goods you'd bought, trying to fill the void in your Christmas spirit.

Gabriel ditched his usual hoodie for a thick green cable-knit turtleneck and black wool coat. He wasn't wearing his hat either, which surprised you. You had on your gray combat overcoat and a black turtleneck and black pants. You wore Gabriel's scarf under your coat. Though you'd traded the armored boots for leather ones, you didn't really look off-duty.

Jack had on his usual overcoat, but instead of armor he was wearing a blue sweater, and if you were interpreting the knit correctly, it was covered in snowflakes and gorillas. No, you were not interpreting it correctly, those were yetis, probably.

He beamed at you. "I'm glad you're coming."

"Um, thanks for inviting me." The words came out strained.

"It'll be fun, I promise." Jack kissed your cheek, settling between you and Gabriel. "Maybe not as fun as Gabriel's family, but quieter."

You couldn't begin to think about *that* part of the equation yet. You just studied your boots. This was an op. You were there to support Jack. Hoping for an assassination attempt would be bad. Normally you blended in or flirted during ops. Those rules weren't going to apply here.

You stared at your stripped down tablet. No work on this trip, plus you didn't need to leave controlled information around Jack's family home. You just had people's numbers, and you wondered if Jesse could recall you for a work emergency. He could ask Captain Amari. You could get shot again. That sounded more up your alley.

The transport landed in a snowy field. There was a forest surrounding the area, but this area had been cleared, probably specifically for landings. Three agents in Overwatch blue waited alongside a beat up pickup blue truck. Jack practically bounded down the ramp, giving the agents an easy nod. "Chang. Fitzpatrick. Almasi."

"Your family is back at the house, sir. Onwuachimba and Maracle are with them," Chang said, a large pistol resting on her hip. She was strikingly attractive, had a sergeant's bars, a long braid, and the voice of a smoker. "Commander Reyes." She nodded in acknowledgment.

"What's Lucky Strike doing here?" Fitzpatrick asked. He was a thin brunette with longer than regulation hair. You studied his hands, noting the chemical burns and missing fingers: demolitionist.

"Not your business, Fitzpatrick," Chang snapped.

Almasi gave you a curt nod. He was a tan hatchet-faced man carrying a shotgun.

"Lucky's here to help with Michael," Gabriel said, smirking. To your surprise, Jack put his arm around Gabriel's shoulders. Apparently, this squad was in the know.
"'Bout time someone did," Fitzpatrick muttered.

You raised a brow. Michael was Jack's nineteen year old brother. Quite the little shit if the stories were true.

Chang didn't even blink. "Fitzpatrick, you can walk back to the farmstead. It will give you time to think about keeping your damn mouth shut.'

Fitzpatrick rolled his eyes. "Yes ma'am."

She and Almasi climbed into the bed of the pickup. You glanced at Gabriel, wondering how you were supposed to act.

"Ride with us," Jack said, smiling at you. "It'll be fine."

You tossed your bags in the back of the truck, and wondered if the three of you would fit in the cab.

Jack got in the driver's side. Gabriel gestured for you to climb in, and then you were pressed tightly between the two of them, wincing as Jack sped down the gravel road.

"Chang's SEP," Gabriel said. "Obviously, she's from our gen. She runs a tight ship, and everyone in the squad knows about me and Jack."

"OK," you said.

"They're discrete," Jack said. "Even Fitzpatrick."

You snorted at that.

"Relax," Gabriel murmured in your ear. "You'll make the squad nervous if you keep making combat face."

He kissed your cheek and you knew Chang and Almasi had to have seen that through the window. You sighed, hanging your head.

Jack laughed, and kissed your other cheek, and then began whistling. You'd never heard Jack whistle. You didn't know the tune, but you had to assume it was something obnoxious and Christmas-themed.

He stopped in front of the farmhouse. There was plenty of room to land the transport, but knowing Jack, he probably wanted to be low-key and not "The Strike Commander has descended from the heavens to grace you with his presence." There was a large barn, a corral, and several fields bordered by forest. It looked like a fucking thrift shop painting, too sentimental for any self-respecting person to put on their wall.

"Plenty of places to disappear to," Gabriel said climbing out of the truck. He held the door for you. Jack was already out, walking purposefully toward the people on the porch.

You spotted Onwuachimba on the roof of the second story house. She nodded at Gabriel and stayed where she was. Maracle must be the big guy on the porch, holding the barrier plate. It wasn't on, but those shields fired up quick.

When you looked up, Jack was hugging an older blonde woman. She wore a green wool dress with Christmas tree motifs, her hair in a bun. The man beside her was thinner than you
expected, though it made sense. Jack went through SEP, he didn't come out all muscle-bound and
god-like. Jack's dad had close cropped graying hair and a weather-beaten face. He was a lean,
rugged sort of handsome in his flannel and denim, and you wondered if Jack would get rougher as
he aged.

You already knew about the teenagers on the porch. Maggie was fifteen and charming,
according to Gabriel. She wore a bright red coat and her hair was braided. Michael was a slender
version of Jack, hair spiked and dyed black. He radiated surliness and surveyed you all with a
sneer. It deepened when he saw Gabriel and you began to understand what you were dealing with.

You followed Gabriel up the steps, giving Maracle a nod.

"Gabe!" Maggie squealed and leapt at him.

Gabriel caught the teenager in one arm. She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm so
glad you came!" She smiled brightly and you saw shades of Jack. Had he been that exuberant and
cute at that age?

"Ah, Margarita, my year isn't complete if I don't see your smiling face," Gabriel said
cheerfully. "And Jacqueline," he kissed Mrs. Morrison's cheek. "Thank you for having us. I'm
looking forward to your spice cake."

"Lucky, these are my parents. Mom, Dad, this is Lucky."

"What kind of name is that?" Michael scoffed. "Is she a dog or something?"

You ignored him, shaking Mr. Morrison's hand with your right hand. He had a firm grip
and sharp gray eyes that seemed to take in everything at once. "Good to meet you," he said
gruffly.

You reached out to shake Mrs. Morrison's hand, but she swooped in and hugged you. You
went rigid as soon as she wrapped her arms around your chest, and you knew she felt it. But you
took a deep breath, and carefully hugged her back. "It's so nice that you could come," she said, her
cheer a little more strained than before.

"Thank you for having me," you said sounding stiff to your own ears.

You solemnly extended a hand to Maggie and she shook it once. "Ignore my brother. He's
an asshat."

You refrained from telling her that both her brothers were asshats.

"Maggie!" Mrs. Morrison said. "Language!"

Huh. You'd heard that before too. You glanced at Jack sideways, but he was already going
into the house, happily chatting with his father. You looked back out at the forest. This wasn't the
Yukon or the Alps. You could probably make it out of here on foot if you needed. Hell, you
could bribe Fitzpatrick for a lift.

"Come on," Gabriel said, his hand firmly on your back, like he knew exactly what you were
thinking. "Let's go get ready for dinner."
Apparently you were rooming with Maggie. Great. Well, at least it wasn't Michael. You folded your coat and set it on top of your bag. Your turtleneck and jeans would be fine for dinner. The bedroom had two beds, apparently one for Jack's other sister Jane who had since married and moved out. The floral wallpaper was...something. Thankfully, the rest of the room was done in a soothing shade of green. You checked out the Overwatch posters and track trophies. There was a big poster of Jack's team, Gabriel front and center. Well, that didn't surprise you. It seemed at least two Morrisons had similar tastes.

You tucked your cigarettes in your boot and your flask in your coat pocket. You had the feeling you were going to need them.

Maggie was across the hall in Michael's room, which had been Jack and Michael's room back in the day. Gabriel and Jack had that one to themselves, Michael loudly announcing how he was going to sleep on the "worn out" living room couch. One glance told you it was nicer than the rec room couch.

"So, what's with Lucky?" You could hear Maggie very clearly. "Is she your bodyguard or something?"

"Sometimes," Gabriel chuckled.

"Is she Jack's bodyguard?"

"Sometimes," Gabriel sounded smug. "Why don't you ask her?"

"Because that's awkward! Come on, Gabe. You can trust me!"

"You saw that newspaper clipping Jack sent you, the French one?" Jack sent his sister newspaper clippings? You smacked your forehead. Jack probably called his mother weekly, at the very least. Just because you didn't have a family, didn't mean everyone else neglected theirs. That meant Gabriel probably did too... You couldn't really bring yourself to picture that yet.

"That's Ms. Strike?! Oh my God, her outfit was so amazing! Jack called her the Assassin-Butler. Wait...Lucky Strike? Is that her real name? That can't be."

"Her real name is classified," Gabriel said, and you wondered if that was true. Because no one fucking called you it except Captain Amari and them.

"Oh my God, I'm rooming with a super spy? Gabriel, that's so cool," she said, equal parts awe and excitement.

You felt an odd smile on your lips. Damn Morrison charm. You sorted your boxes of cookies. You'd brought enough to give some to Chang's unit. Whiskey and brandy too. Traveling on Overwatch shuttles was duty-free and you'd been a smuggler too long to ignore that benefit.

You gathered three boxes of Swiss cookies and headed downstairs. Jack was in the living room, watching football with his dad. Mrs. Morrison was in the kitchen. You had no idea where Michael was, and that was fine. You went to the kitchen with your cookies.

"Do you need any help?" You asked, watching her bustle around, pots steaming, and the oven timer going off.

"Oh no, I have it under control. You just settle in." She smiled at you, her eyes the same
"I uh...brought some cookies. The bakery I go to is really nice." You offered her the nicely wrapped boxes.

"Oh, store-bought? That's such a splurge," she said.

You weren't quite sure how to take that. You didn't have enough time to bake. That and everyone else would steal them if you did. "They're really good," you said, trying to sound sincere. "Well, I like the luxemburgerli best. The tiggen are more of a...Zurich Christmas thing. The hüppen are pretty good. I got chocolate and raspberry."

"Oh set them in the living room. John will probably want some right away."

You carried the boxes out and set them on the coffee table. "Mrs. Morrison said to put them here."

"Cookies?" Jack asked. "Oh, yeah, Gabriel said he told you to bring them. Hey, these picture ones are pretty good. Try one, Dad."

"They're kind of dry, Jack," his dad said biting into one.

"The tiggen are more a novelty," you said. "The macaron-clones are better."

"In between missions, Lucky cooks for me sometimes. She made this fish egg spaghetti that was really good. Of course, she didn't tell me it was fish eggs till after I'd eaten two bowls, but, you know. It was good." He grinned at you.

John Morrison looked at you. Then he looked at the cookies. Then he looked at you again.

"I bought these from a bakery. There are no fish eggs or anything unusual inside," you said awkwardly. "I...am going to go see what Gabriel's doing."

You headed back up the stairs, listening to them creak. You'd be better off going out the windows. You could climb the porch easily enough if you had to sneak back inside. You just had to make sure Chang's unit didn't shoot you.

You peeked inside Michael's room, watching as Gabriel applied eyeliner to Maggie. "Your sister doesn't use enough for night wear," Gabriel said. "You don't need it per se, but if you're going for dramatic eyes, then you'll want to use liquid liner and outline the top lid at the very least."

"You need to marry my brother now," Maggie said. "Oh my God, that is amazing! And you can do contouring too?!"

"I have three sisters," Gabriel said, looking at you.

You shrugged. "You're better at it than me."

"You have very steady hands too," he said, his smile sharp.

Maggie looked between the two of you. "What do you do, Lucky?"

Your mind flashed back to Chumak's fingers on the ground. You forced your left hand to relax, because you weren't wearing your sap glove. "Not makeup," you said a little too tightly. "I...There are cookies in the living room. I got them from this excellent bakery in Zurich."
"Cookies?! Shit! I better get some before Michael crams them all down his rude face." She jumped up, hugged Gabriel, and bounded down the stairs.

You stood in the doorway. Gabriel sat on a bed, eyeliner in hand. You crossed your arms. "This is...weird."

Gabriel set the liner down and stood. "Come here."

He hugged you and you sank against the heat of his chest. "She's fucking adorable," you said. "Was Jack like that?"

"A little less enthusiastic, or so Jacqueline tells me. But only a little. There were traces of that when we were in SEP so I can believe it." Gabriel stroked your hair. "I wasn't kidding about Michael. I think you know what to do."

"You sure Jack wants us to bury his brother alive?"

Gabriel laughed. "I wish. But he'll probably approach you. You can do that thing you do with diagrams. I'm too threatening and Chang's unit is supposed to protect the family, not police them. Though I'm not sure Fitzpatrick won't eventually snap and do something drastic."

Gabriel was clever. He'd given you a sub-mission and that extra focus would center you. You didn't want to think too hard about what that said about your psyche. You were starting to think civilian life wouldn't be an option for you.

"These are so goo- Gabriel?"

You almost jumped away, but Gabriel held you firmly in place. "Yes, Maggie?"

You could feel Maggie's eyes on the back of your head. Gabriel had one arm around your waist and the other on the back of your neck.

"What are you doing?" There was a tension in her voice that sounded almost familiar. It was weird to hear the same cadence of the Strike Commander out of a fifteen year old girl.

"Hugging Lucky," he said. "She gets too tightly wound sometimes."

"Does Jack know?"

"Jack does it too," Gabriel said, sounding smug.

"I'm going to ask him about it," Maggie said, daring him to contradict her.

"That's fine. He'd probably prefer to talk about it in private." Which wasn't exactly true. That was you. But Gabriel was telling a white lie for your sake; you weren't about to quibble.

"...Fine. But you better be telling the truth."

"I wouldn't lie to you, Margarita."

She huffed. "Do I get a hug too?"

"Of course." Gabriel released you, and you stood very still, wondering if he'd heard her coming up the stairs and if he knew exactly what he was doing. Because no matter what Lacroix said, Gabriel had no problem being underhanded. Gabriel stepped past you and you stared out the window at the winter moon.
"Are you OK?" Maggie asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"I'm fine, thank you," you said, your voice distant.

"Mom said dinner would be ready soon and we should come sit. You're sitting by me, right Gabe?"

"Of course," he said. "Come on Lucky. Jacqueline is making her famous chicken broccoli casserole. You'll love it."

"Sounds great," you said.

Maggie was watching you with suspicion now. "What kind of cookies are these?"

"The flute-shaped filled wafers are hüppen. The sandwich cookies are Swiss knockoff macarons called luxemburgerli. The picture ones are tirggel. They're honestly more of Christmas novelty than something you want to eat." You had the cookie speech down now.

"Like fruitcake," Gabriel said.

"Bring anything else?" She asked, eating a luxemburgerli.

"I bought some cherry brandy. It's pretty nice."

"I'm fifteen," she said, not actually sounding outraged.

"...Umm..." You turned and looked at Gabriel.

"After dinner tonight," he said. "But if your mom catches us, we're all dead, and you killed us, Margarita."

Maggie's expression relaxed. "OK, after dinner tonight. Now let's go before Mom starts yelling."

Gabriel patted your back. "Smooth, Lucky. You're plotting to bury Jack's brother alive and give his underage sister booze. I can't wait to see your next trick."

You rolled your fist, and followed Gabriel down the stairs, wondering if it was too early to break into the alcohol.

The dinner seating arrangement was acceptable. You sat between Gabriel and Jack, Gabriel listening to Maggie while Jack talked with his parents. You were across from Michael, but he didn't look at you.

Green bean casserole, spinach casserole, chicken broccoli casserole. "Casserole" apparently meant "canned cream soup" and/or "lots of cheese" on stuff. And Jack kept scooping things onto your plate, like you couldn't serve yourself. You kicked him under the table. He innocently blinked at you.

"I don't have an SEP metabolism," you said.

"You haven't eaten all day," he said.

You were pretty sure Gabriel was laughing at you and had put you there because he knew Jack would attempt to overfeed whoever sat next him. Gabriel lied to you. This wasn't an op. This was a suicide run. Your tanto rested in the small of your back, a familiar comforting weight.
reminding you that seppuku was an option.

You picked up your fork and knife, studying the food on your plate.

"Lucky, you don't need to wear your gloves at the table," Mrs. Morrison said, possibly registering the assassin aesthetic.

"Mom-" Jack began.

"Really, it's unnecessary," Mrs. Morrison gave you an expectant look, like an older, less tolerant Strike Commander, one you weren't about to argue with.

"My apologies, Mrs. Morrison." You exhaled slowly and took off your right glove off first. Then you peeled off the left glove, paired them and placed them in your lap. Your augments glowed brightly in the dining room. Your metal fingers looked wrong at a farmhouse dinner table covered in assorted casseroles. But you were already here, so you picked your knife and fork back up.

Jack's parents had the grace or the shame not to stare.

Michael began to snicker.

"Wow, those are really cool," Maggie said. "Can I paint your nails?"

"If you like," you said, then remembered these weren't your basic set. "But nail polish doesn't stick to the omnium very well."

"Aww," she said. "Can I paint your other nails?"

"If you like." You took a bite of casserole. It was comfort food. You wouldn't make it yourself, unless Jack asked, but it was better than it looked.

"Do you have other robot parts?" Michael asked, smirking at you.

"Michael!" Mrs. Morrison also had the Strike Commander cadence. Huh.

"I was just asking," he snapped.

"Don't be rude."

You ate your casserole and ignored him.

"I'm sorry." Mrs. Morrison caught you on your way to the kitchen as you helped her clear the table. "I didn't realize."

"It's fine." You managed a zen smile. "I blame Jack."

"I do too," she said. "But I should be used to soldiers' idiosyncrasies by now. That wasn't fair of me."

"Apology accepted, ma'am," you said. "Do you need help with anything else? Opening
jars? Flattening pennies? Checking electrical sockets?"

It took her a moment, but she laughed. "No thank you, Lucky. Why don't you go see what the boys are doing. You're a guest too, you know."

"Do you need help?"

"John will be in here in a moment. He's just dealing with Michael. Michael's going through a...difficult phase."

Michael just needed a kick in the pants. "Teenagers," you said, blandly.

"Yes," she said, and shooed you out of the kitchen.

You pulled your gloves back on and found your way back up to Maggie's bedroom to dig out the brandy. You could hear Jack and Gabriel chatting with Maggie. You peeked your head in.

"I have cups!" Maggie stage-whispered.

Jack and Gabriel sat on twin bed. Maggie sat on the other.

You nodded and shut the door behind you. You took the cups and poured everyone a little brandy, except for yourself. You gave yourself a lot. You handed Maggie a cup, and set the bottle down.

You took a sip, the sweetness almost too much. It burned nicely though, heat traveling through your veins. You sat down on the bed next to Maggie.

"So, I came in on Gabriel and Lucky hugging. You hug her too, Jack? And is that all you do?" Maggie asked as she took a drink.

Jack started coughing and Gabriel slapped him on the back laughing.

You drank your brandy, and refused to look up. Jack and Gabriel could handle this. You were done. You'd been good today. They'd set you up.

"Hey," Jack stood up. "Lucky?"

You knew what was coming next. You really thought Jack would have more restraint. But he placed both hands on your face and kissed you, his lips tasting of cherries and brandy. You relented, kissing him back. When he let go of you, he was beaming.

"That answer your question, Maggie?"

She squealed. "You have a boyfriend and a girlfriend?! And you're OK sharing him?! New life goal!"

So much for keeping it quiet. Forget about not telling the household. You were pretty sure the whole state of Indiana heard that.

Gabriel laughed. "We're all sharing," he grinned at you and it wasn't just the alcohol warming your blood.

You shook your head, drank your brandy, and wondered if telling Jack's fifteen year old sister these things constituted some kind of child endangerment or emotional abuse.
"Does Mom know?"

"She suspects," Jack said. "I don't mind telling her, but Lucky's shy."

"Why?! You should be proud. Gabe is hot! My brother is OK. But Gabe!"

You shrugged. "It would look bad at work."

"Who cares what other people think?! You're an Assassin-Butler! You're a secret agent femme fatale! You're boning Gabe! I need details!"

"Was the brandy a mistake?"

"No, she's always like this." Jack sat on the floor and tugged on your leg. "Come here."

"I'm not happy about the glove incident."

"It slipped my mind." He gazed up at you with heartfelt remorse. Because even if Jack was thoughtless, he never meant harm. "I'm sorry, baby."

"Uh-huh."

"There's nothing wrong with your fingers."

"Not with the ones I have left," you muttered. "Honestly, Jack..." You swatted his hand away.

"Is she always this grumpy?" Maggie asked.

You shrugged.

"No, that's usually Gabe. She's just embarrassed."

"You don't believe I'm grumpy," Gabriel said, placing a hand on his chest. "Do you?"

Maggie laughed. "Never. Gabe's the good one."

Jack's incredulous face was cute. He looked rapidly between you and Gabriel. "That is so wrong!" You sighed and patted Jack's head.

"Stop pouting, Jack."

He kissed your hand.

"Sorry, Maggie. It's not you. I'm just not used to this," you said. "Apparently I don't know how to function outside a military setting any more."

"How do you act with your family?"

You downed the rest of your brandy. "My hometown burned about a decade ago. I'm not the only survivor, but there weren't many."

Maggie got quiet. She must have realized the lack of questions directed at you during dinner didn't have to do with the fingers. "You warned Mom, but you didn't warn me, Jack."

"See, he's terrible," you said.
"The worst!"

"I'm sitting with Maggie. She gets it."

"I'm painting your nails. How does green sound?"

"Paint Gabriel's first," you said.

"Gabe?" She batted her lashes at him, and you wondered just how he acted with his sisters.

Jack's family wasn't anything like yours, mostly in the fact that they were alive and functional. But the differences made you homesick in a way you couldn't put into words.

Maggie only smirked when you stayed in Jack's room. You sat on the floor, studying the music posters and books on Michael's shelf.

"So on Christmas Eve, my family goes to church. Christmas Day we stay home and exchange presents. Jane'll probably be over with her family. There'll be a few neighbors and friends stopping in. And we leave the evening after."

You were going to make yourself scarce for that church service. Gabriel could help you, or you could hide in the woods alone.

"We'll be doing that op tomorrow," Gabriel said. "It might run over."

Jack snorted. "Really?" He didn't look offended though. He just sprawled across the bed. "Let's push the beds together. Can't really do anything fun on them, but we can sleep that way."

"We're not going to fit," you said, eyeing the twin beds.

Gabriel ended up pushing them together against the wall, so the three of you could lay on the floor. Jack spooned Gabriel, and you sat up, back to the wall, still studying Michael's belongings. He had a lot of space sci-fi and military history. He also had a lot of art books, a good number of them featuring scantily-clad ladies. But you noted the large amount of sketchbooks and the art supplies, displaced by Gabriel moving the beds.

"Coming to sleep?" Gabriel asked.

"In a moment, thinking."

"Hit the lights when you do," Jack murmured, already drifting.

You got up and took a peek at the sketchbooks. You didn't know much about art, but there was a natural life to the drawings; most were animals, some people. You found one of Jack in combat fatigues drinking a beer. It was a rough sketch, but you recognized the posture and smile immediately. You turned off the lights, wrapped yourself in a blanket, and sat back down, back against the wall. You weren't sure how long you sat there, but eventually, you tucked yourself against Gabriel's chest and went to sleep.
You were awake and cleaning your gun when Michael opened the door. He stared at you, eyes darting between your gun and the sleeping men.

You watched him as he tried to decide if whatever he needed from his room was worth being in here with them.

He clenched his jaw, glared at you, and slammed the door.

"Little shit," Gabriel muttered. "Come back over here, Lucky. It's too early to be playing games with kids."

"Nah, I've got plans. Where'd you say that spot was again?"

Gabriel grumbled. "Ask Chang."

"Wish me luck."

You kissed him and he tried to pull you back down.

"I have a mission, Gabriel. I'll sleep in tomorrow."

"That's what you think," he muttered.

You found the coffee pot half full and poured yourself a mug. Michael sat in the kitchen, pointedly ignoring you. But you felt his eyes on your back when you left. Chang was on the porch drinking coffee too. The sun was bright and it was colder than you expected.

"Morning," you said.

"Mm." She looked at you blankly. Chang didn't look SEP. She wasn't muscle-bound like Gabriel and Jack. Captain Patel had been compact, but stocky. Chang was tall and slender with sharp cheekbones and flawless skin, almost too pretty to be a soldier, though she did nothing to accentuate her looks. You wondered if SEP did other things besides acting as superhuman steroids.

"I hear Mrs. Morrison doesn't like smoking. Gabriel said to ask you where I can do it discretely."

"So it's true," she said, sipping her coffee.

You shrugged. "I don't know what you heard."

"You were Aishani's protégée, weren't you?"

"That was probably Lieutenant Shin Sato," you said. "But yeah, I served under Captain Patel."
Chang's expression was almost flat, but you could see the shadow of something rippling under her skin. "You were there?"

"Yeah," you said. You stared out at the forest. There were gray clouds on the horizon. "Captain Patel held the chokepoint, said the Durga Shatru-Shanti, and started shooting. No one got past her."

Chang exhaled. "Reyes told me." She set the mug on the railing. "Aishani was a good teacher. Best of the first gen."

"Yeah." You jammed your hands in your pockets, because you weren't wearing your sap glove.

"Jack hasn't brought anyone besides Reyes home for years. Are we expecting extra trouble, agent? Or is this what it looks like?"

You snorted. "I have no idea what this looks like."

"It looks like Jack and Reyes have picked up a third," she said, her voice still monotone.

"Yeah." You couldn't argue with that description. You'd worked so hard to keep your feelings secret, and then it turned out that everyone and some random strangers already knew. You sighed. "I--"

"I don't need to know," Chang said. "I just needed to make sure Reyes wasn't holding back critical information."

"He wouldn't-"

Chang gave you a wry smile. "Reyes and I go way back. We've always clashed. He would."

You sighed, because Gabriel defined Blackwatch petty. "Yeah. OK. Can you point me to the smoking zone?"

You stopped by the barn. Half a dozen goats meandered in the corral and you reached in to scratch their furry heads. They seemed to like the attention, though it could have just been a ploy to eat your sleeves.

You heard someone moving around in the barn, and angled yourself to keep an eye in that direction.

John Morrison emerged from the barn carrying a few flakes of alfalfa. He stopped and opened the gate, going to the feeder, goats suddenly at his heels.

"Morning, Mr. Morrison," you said when he came out.

"Good morning. Just call me John." He looked between you and the goats. "They're useless. Maggie used to do 4-H with them. Wouldn't sell'em for slaughter. Now they just get fat and terrorize the chickens."
"They're cute," you said.

He stood beside you. "Are we expecting trouble?"

"No more than usual," you said, wondering what would have been the right thing for Jack to tell his family.

"When Jack brought that Captain Amari back, he introduced her as his friend. He swore up and down there was nothing going on. Jacqueline didn't believe him, thought he was being shy, but I knew right away. He gets a look in his eye. You, he didn't say a word, but it was all over his face."

You tilted your head back and stared at the sky. It was going to snow. You knew it. Jack, that damn liar, swore up and down that the climate was fucked up and it didn't snow in Indiana for Christmas any more, honest. But you could feel it in your leg and your fingertips. "It's going to snow, isn't it?"

"Yes," John said. "So you, Jack, and Reyes too?"

"Yes," you said, waiting for the shitty comments.

"I know what Jack tells my wife. I know he says all he does is go to meetings and take photo ops now. That his soldiering days are behind him. He might have my wife's charisma, but he has my brains. Sort of. He thinks I don't know when he's lying?" John Morrison gave you a wintry smile. "I know the look a man gets when he's killed another human. I know the look a man gets when he's planning to kill another human. Jack has the former. Reyes has both."

"They're soldiers," you said.

"Reyes is dangerous," John said simply. "So is Jack, and so are you. But Reyes is the one closest to going rogue."

"We all have triggers and scars," you said tightly. "Gabriel's are just the most visible. He's good to Jack and he's good to me."

John watched the goats. "It's a lot for this old man to get used to."

"There's nobody I trust at my back more than Gabriel."

You expected him to say something about Jack, instead he just studied your face, those gray eyes too piercing. "It's good you like goats, Lucky. More importantly, they like you back. Don't have much more to add than that."

The field was cleared, the view blocked by the barn. You sat on a crate, and noted a lot of smashed down grass and visible footprints. Obviously, Chang wasn't the only smoker. You lit your cigarette, and you waited.

It was another ten minutes before he trudged up behind you, his boots crunching the frosted grass.

"Got a cigarette?" He sounded surly, and you'd been told the soldiers hadn't been sharing
with him for obvious reasons.

You shook one out of the pack and offered it with a gloved hand.

Michael snatched it up and fumbled in his pocket for a lighter.

You went back to focusing on your cigarette. You wondered how Jack would react if he caught you. Now there was a thought. He didn't seem to like seeing you smoke.

"Are you guarding my brother or that other asshole?"

You laughed and tilted your head to the side. "What makes you think I'm their bodyguard?"

"I saw those clippings Maggie got. You're "Ms. Strike" from Paris. You saved Jack from cyborg assassins." He tried to sound blasé, but his eyes kept darting to your gloves.

"It was teamwork. Jack actually killed more." You lit another cigarette.

"Bullshit. I've hear the reports he gives Mom. He's just a candy ass figurehead. Some pseudo-Captain America propaganda," Michael spat. "But everyone eats it up. They love him. He's so fucking fake."

You laughed, because this one did not take after his father. "You're right. Jack is a fucking liar. We killed five cyborgs in Paris that day. He did four with T-box shots in about three minutes. I incapacitated one, because we needed him alive for interrogation, and then I killed another with my combat knife. Jack might be doing political work, but his skills are real. I spar with him regularly and even at half strength, he messes me up."

Michael stared openly at your hands. "Jack won't spar with me. Reyes laughed in my face. Jack and I used to box. Now he thinks I'm too weak."

"I'll spar with you. I'll even take off my fingers if you're worried." You smiled at him sharply, because he was making this too easy.

"I'm not scared," he said.

"All right. So what do I get if I win?"

Michael stared at you. "Do I get something if I win?"

"Sure," you said, knowing that wasn't going to happen. "What do you want?"

"I-" He looked around. He hadn't thought that far.

"If I win, you're going to go have a talk with your brother and be polite to Gabriel for the rest of the visit. You don't have like him. You don't have to pretend to be his friend. You just have to be civil. And I'll answer one question, because you obviously don't have all the facts."

"If I win, hand over those cigarettes, and you have to talk to me, and answer all my questions," he said. "Plus show me how your fingers work."

"Nothing classified," you said, relieved he didn't suggest anything creepy. "So we going to first blood, tap out, or knockout?"

"Tap out," he said.
You took off your coat and scarf. You stretched, noting Fitzpatrick leaning against the barn. Oh, you had an audience. Was he there to make sure Michael didn't get hurt? Or was he just there to enjoy the takedown?

Michael danced like a boxer. He circled you, jabbing at your defenses. He was strong, and even had some training. You waited for him to charge, then ducked under his blow, sweeping his legs out from under him. He went down and you were on his chest, feet pinning his arms, forearm pressing down on his throat.

He tapped the ground.

You got off him.

"Best two out of three?" He coughed.

You obliged, mostly to see what he knew. He understood the basics, but he fought clean and within the bounds of good sportsmanship. In the second round, you just slid past his defenses, fingers closing around his throat. He asked to go again, even if it didn't matter. So for the third round, you left him wheezing on the ground after one of Genji's hip throws, and then you went and pulled on your coat. It was fucking cold.

"It must be difficult to be The Jack Morrison's younger brother. Quite the legacy to live up to." You sat back down on the crates.

"Fuck you." Michael picked himself off the ground, cradling his arm.

"No, I feel for you. Everything you do will be judged against his actions. People aren't about to let you be your own person when they could try to clone another Jack Morrison. It's completely unfair."

"I didn't ask for your psychobabble."

You handed him another cigarette. Michael took it, begrudgingly. He shuddered and sat down beside you, now rubbing his side.

"Jack's a good man, but he's pretty thoughtless. I bet he just tried to give you some platitudes about just being yourself and figured this was a phase you'd grow out of."

Michael eyed you suspiciously. "Did he tell you this?"

"No, I just know Jack."

"You in love with him or something? Because he's fucking that faggot, Reyes."

You bit down on the cigarette, reminding yourself that he was a stupid teenage boy and you shouldn't kick his ass for real. It was just a shame that slur rolled off his tongue so easily. "Do you actually think it bothers me that they're lovers? Are you really hung up on that toxic idea that men can't love other men? Or are you worried that it's going to reflect on you? Knew there was a reason I avoided rural America."

Michael stared at his feet. Shame was good. At least he wasn't an asshole to the core.

"I suspect Jack takes your relationship for granted. He thinks that if he just gives you time, everything will work out and you'll be back to being friends again. Jack's an idiot like that." Maybe it was good you'd come to Indiana. You were getting an idea of what made Jack tick and
the insight was valuable. "So what bothers you more? His reputation? The fact you think it's fake? His gay lover? The way it all reflects on you?"

"All of it!"

"Jack'll be the first to tell you he's no saint."

Michael glowered at the ground.

"Does it really bother you that Jack likes men?"

"It's not how men like that are supposed to be," Michael muttered.

"How are they supposed to be? Alcoholics and abusive? Emotionally numb? Misogynistic?" You scowled, burning through another cigarette. "Gabriel is even stronger than Jack. So I can't think of anything manlier than those two together."

"I'm not a bigot, OK?" Michael said. "I just don't like Reyes. Maybe if Jack was seeing someone who was less of an asshole."

"OK, then don't be a bigot about it. You don't have to like Gabriel."

"Jack liked girls before SEP!"

"Jack still likes girls. He just likes Gabriel too." You smirked. "You thinking about SEP, but worried it's going to turn you gay?"

"Everyone expects me to join up. Follow in Jack's footsteps. The recruiter said I was candidate, given my brother."

You sighed. "Recruiters lie all the fucking time. Maybe you are, maybe you aren't. But you should talk to Jack, Gabriel, or even Chang. Because from what I hear, SEP was miserable."

"Do you lose to my brother?"

"Regularly. Fucker thinks it's funny to throw me." You shrugged. "I don't pick fair fights. I'm not SEP, so I have to be smart about how I do things. What works for Jack and Gabriel doesn't work for me."

"So he'd kick my ass, is what you're saying?"

You laughed. "I bet if you ask real nicely, Chang will let you train with her people," you said, lighting another cigarette. "She could give you a lot of insight."

"She's such a bitch," he said wistfully. "Hot, but a bitch."

"She's SEP. It made them all a little crazy. Though if you want a favor from her, I wouldn't call her "hot" or a "bitch." You sighed. "You going to hold up our bargain?"

"Yeah, sure. Fuck. I think you broke my spleen."

You shrugged. "Got more questions, besides "what does my spleen do?" Because I'm no doctor."

His laugh turned into a moan. "So Jack really is a badass?"
"Yeah," you said. "He channels your mother. It's kind of terrifying to see her and Maggie do that voice. It's the Strike Commander in stereo."

"Huh." Michael sat up. "That is terrifying. Shit."

"You're an artist, aren't you?" You studied the sky. It really was going to snow. Fucking Jack.

"Yeah, I mean...I draw. I'm not great or anything."

"I'd like to see some of your work if you have time later."

"Yeah, sure." He blinked again. "OK, who would win? Reyes or Jack?"

"Hard to say. They're pretty evenly matched. I'm partial to Gabriel, though."

"Why are you here?"

"That's like your fourth question," you said, not actually caring. "Jack invited me."

"I figured. But, why? Don't you want to see your folks?"

Someone wasn't reading the family newsletter. Oddly enough, admitting the loss got easier each time they asked. Or maybe you were just used to being detached. "Everyone else is dead. Early casualties when the omnics went bad."

"That sucks."

You shrugged. "Gabriel shipped me off to therapy. It helps. I think."

"You guys talk to shrinks? Seriously?"

"Yeah. We've all seen and done some shit." The image of Chumak's severed fingers was seared into your brain. But it was better than Shin's dead body; you still saw that sometimes when you drifted into sleep. "I know it doesn't match the big damn hero image, but this life takes its toll. I've buried a lot of people." Which was kind of a lie, because there hadn't been enough left to bury. "No shame in getting help when you need it. Seen enough people eat their guns in the aftermath to know that I don't want to be one of them."

Michael kept his eyes on his lap.

You managed to smoke two more cigarettes before he spoke again.

"Jack never made it sound like that."

"It's not something you bring up in polite conversation. If I had younger siblings left, I wouldn't tell them the truth. Unless they were looking to join up." You stared at your cigarette pack. You were burning through these way too fast.

"How is Jack holding up?"

"OK. Gabriel's good for him, and vice versa." You couldn't keep the fondness out of your voice.

Michael looked longingly at your cigarette and you handed him another one.
"Are you in love with my brother? Or is it Reyes?"

"I don't know, but apparently I'm dating them both." The admission made you smile just a little. Maybe because you liked them, but mostly because it was a shocking thing to say.

You were gratified when Michael choked and almost swallowed the cigarette. "What?"

"Good talk, Michael. Looking forward to the sketches. You should do a highlight reel with Jack. I'll be sending him your way," you said, and strode back to the farmhouse before he could get his bearings.

Mission accomplished.

Chapter End Notes

I feel so cheesy. But then I remember everyone was like "fluffing fluffy fluffertown!" and feel less bad.

As always, comments are loved. I read them at work and they help with all the cringey people I have to deal with. Today an old man came up behind me and tried to speak Japanese to me. I'm not Japanese, but his Japanese was bad. Then he proceeded to ask all my coworkers if I was Japanese, while I tried to ignore him, because murdering people on the clock with so many witnesses is frowned upon. It just degenerated from there.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

You guys are awesome.

Slight daddy kink in one of the scenes, just a warning to those who don't like that. Also, fighting as foreplay, for those of you who don't like that either. Sorry?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I'll take Chang, Maracle, and Onwuachimba. You take Fitzpatrick and Almasi. We'll hit before the family goes to church so Fitzpatrick, Maracle, and Onwuachimba can accompany them. I'll probably be busy with Chang." Gabriel showed you on the map where everyone was supposed to be. You knew it was never that simple.

"Chang has to be expecting this "surprise inspection." You sat on the floor of Michael's room, studying the tablet map.

"Of course she is. So is her crew. They know we'll skip church, so they're expecting it then. That's why we hit before the Morrisons leave. You'll go after Almasi last, because he's in the woods and you'll be out of sight. Afterward, you can come watch me and Chang. She's great." Sharp amusement tinged his words.

"I got the impression you aggravate her."

"I do." Gabriel's grin wasn't very nice. "But she's on edge and needs a real fight. Jack normally does it, but I'm a good guy who's happy to help."

You briefly wondered about their history, then shut it down. Not your business. You grabbed the paintball gun. "You have eyes on any of them?"

"Onwuachimba is on the roof. I'm going out the back window, and I'll hit her first. Fitzpatrick was by the barn. I'm pretty sure Chang is in the deer blind."

You nodded and casually tucked the paintball gun under your coat.

Being here, with Jack's family, sent your fight or flight instincts into overdrive. It made no sense, because there wasn't any action. It was the idleness, you realized. You didn't know how to just sit there and do nothing. Years of survivalism and military training had left their mark; you were a goddamn border collie, uneasy if you didn't have a job to do.

Or maybe meeting Jack's family just filled you with anxiety and you were grateful for a high-energy outlet. That was normal, right? Way more normal than being unable to adjust to civilian life.

You went out the front door, hit the smoking zone, and doubled back. Fitzpatrick was perched on the roof of the truck, his legs swinging.

You nailed him in the back and he fell off the truck. "Fuck!"
You crept up and found him rubbing his back. You touched the barrel to his nose. "Tag."

"Goddamnit, Lucky Strike! And I was starting to like you after watching you trounce Michael." He scowled at the black paint on his glove. "Really?"

"Commander's orders: surprise inspection," you said shrugging. "Sorry."

You tucked the gun back under your coat. "I got plenty of brandy and cookies for later."

"If you're out here, then Reyes is going after Chang." His eyes widened. "Oh shit. We can't miss that fight!"

"Yeah, well, I got one more tag and I'll be back. You're "dead" and "out." So no warning the others."

"Ugh. Fine." He glanced at you. "You really got cookies and brandy to share?"

You laughed and crept off to the woods.

Almasi was quiet. You knew his patrol routes, but you were pretty sure he deviated from them. You found a large maple at the junction of one of the footpaths, and climbed it. There wasn't much cover, but people rarely looked up. You surveyed the area, catching sight of a blue hat in the distance. You squinted. It wasn't moving and you didn't see a coat. Hmm. Had you been spotted already?

You slid out of the tree and circled around. If Almasi set his hat as a decoy, he'd probably shed his coat too. Those Overwatch blues stuck out in the forest. You perched on a stump and listened.

Snap.

You dropped off the stump, taking cover behind a tree. Almasi rushed you, blue coat gone. You fired, black paint splattering across his face and throat. He made a gagging noise and stumbled. You got up and tapped his shoulder with the gun. "Tag."

"I had you in my sights," he muttered.

You shrugged. "I'll let Gabriel know. Go get cleaned up. I don't think he's found Chang yet, and Fitzpatrick says we all want to watch that one."

You headed toward the deer blind, conscious of how the frozen grass snapped underfoot. But you heard them before you saw them.

"-Not your concern, Reyes."

"I'm just testing you, Chang."

"You're testing my patience," she said tightly.

You came up behind the deer blind, taking cautious steps.

"You're wound too tight. Jack's here to visit his family, not babysit you."

You heard a sharp intake of breath. "Stop pushing me, Reyes."

You peeked around the corner, and were slightly surprised to see Gabriel's paintball gun smashed on the ground. He stood squarely facing Chang, arms crossed. She had her back to you
and you didn't see any paint on her.

"Almasi and Maracle might be able to double-team you, but they can't take you down. Come on, Chang. We all need to expel. You don't have to hold back on me."

"I'm fine," she snapped.

You glanced at Gabriel, waving your paintball gun. He gave you a barely perceptible nod.

You shot her in the back.

Chang snarled and whirled, her eyes wild as they fell on you. Faster than you could see, she leapt at you, and then fell short, because Gabriel had her by the back of the neck. She swore and he laughed, spinning her in a half circle away from you.

"You're too close, Chang. You obviously need to work it off. Come on, you just got my blood up." Gabriel's lips were drawn back in a fierce grin. "I won't hold back either."

Chang didn't look at you. "Fine." And she leapt into the air, all coiled muscle and steel grace. Gabriel met her head-on and your chest constricted.

Chang was fast, much faster than Jack. She was on par with Genji, maybe faster. She was agile too, barely touching the ground when she moved. She sprung off trees and made impossibly high leaps. What Gabriel couldn't block, he took, his blows heavier and harder. If she'd been armed, you would have been very concerned, but she went in barehanded.

"Shit, she's going all out." Fitzpatrick panted as he came up behind you. "Knew she was overdue, but...I wasn't going to say anything."

"She's beautiful," you said, an odd pang hitting your chest. You'd never be able to match Gabriel like that.

"Like a naked blade," Almasi said. "I heard there were going to be cookies and brandy."

You glanced at Gabriel and Chang, still parrying and striking at blurred speeds. They were going to be at it awhile. "Yeah, I'll be right back."

You went in and out the window of Michael's room, avoiding the Morrisons and any potential invitations to church. Carrying a sack of cigarettes, brandy, and cookies, you were like Blackwatch Santa.

You passed the bottle to Fitzpatrick, and crouched down, opening a box of cookies. "Shit, anything broken yet?"

They were both bleeding from the mouth, and Gabriel's coat was on the ground, his shirt shredded.

"Hard to say," Fitzpatrick looked at his watch. "Well damn, I guess I'll have to cover the Christmas Eve service. Sarge isn't going to be done here any time soon."

Almasi sat on the ground, stoically eating cookies. "He planned it like this. When they're done, I'll patch her up. The rest of the squad is sufficient to cover the church outing."

"There better be brandy and cookies when I get back," Fitzpatrick warned.

"I brought plenty for the class," you said, because it was true.
"Then we're good, despite the fact you're a lowdown, dirty, cheating, backstabber."

You shrugged. "I'm in Blackwatch. That's how we roll."

Chang went down hard, one of Gabriel's kicks knocking her to the ground.

"You left it too long," Gabriel said, wiping blood off his face. "Sort yourself out sooner next time. Before you're a danger to everyone else."

Chang exhaled slowly, picking herself off the ground. "Damnit, Reyes. You kick like a fucking AA gun."

She glanced over at you and Almasi. "The rest of the squad accompanying the Morrisons?"

"Yeah, Reyes got us out of church service. Merry Christmas, Sergeant," Almasi said dryly.

Chang snorted and limped over to you. You offered her what was left of the open bottle of brandy. She downed it in one go. "Aishani should've taught you that if you surprise one of us, you better be ready to run."

You shrugged. "I normally use more...effective weapons."

She nodded at you. "Come on Almasi. Can't let the Morrisons see me like this."

You stepped aside, watching as Almasi casually took a whole box of cookies as he followed his CO toward the farmhouse.

"You OK, Gabriel?" He stood there in the cold, shirt gone, hat and coat on the ground. He bled from dozens of tiny cuts and you wondered how badly he'd be hurting later.

He took two quick strides and cupped the back of your head, his mouth covering yours. He tasted like blood and you didn't care. He drew you against him, his chest radiating heat. You sighed softly, his tongue parting your lips. Gabriel ground against you, and suddenly your coat was too warm and your clothes too tight.

"Damnit, Gabriel," you pulled away. "Let's get you cleaned up."

"You're not hurt, are you? His voice was raw, his hands tracing your side.

"She didn't touch me. You got her first."

"I didn't think she was that bad off," Gabriel buried his face in your hair, his breathing heavy. "Otherwise I wouldn't have gotten you involved."

"You just frustrate people at twice the usual rate." You tried not think about how stunning Chang was when she fought. She would look good on the battlefield beside Jack and Gabriel.

"I'll get cleaned up. Then we'll grab my bag. I have a treat for you."

He grinned down at you, his smile promising something wicked. You bit your lip, heat building between your legs.
It started to snow then. And in that moment, you couldn't bring yourself to care.

"Didn't you learn your lesson back in SEP?" Chang sat on the porch, drinking coffee. Her hands were bandaged, and she had a rapidly healing black eye.

Jack sat on the steps, resting his weight on his elbows. "It's different."

"Yeah, Reyes likes this one. A lot." Chang looked at him sideways. "That going to be a problem?"

"Only if you try to hit her," Jack smiled back.

"Fuck you, Jack," she said, and went back to her coffee.

The snow continued to fall fast, several inches already sticking to the cold ground. Jack could still see the stars, but the snow blanketing the farm left him with an overpowering sense of nostalgia. This wasn't quite home any more, but having his people here made it feel right.

"Michael's going to politely ask you to start letting him participate in squad workouts."

Chang snorted. "Michael is? You're not ordering me?"

"Hell no, Ray. Even I know that's a bad idea." He rubbed his forehead. "I might've missed some things with Michael. But I think it's going to get better. We talked about...things. I guess I didn't really know what was going on with him."

Chang, very diplomatically, did not add to that.

"It seems Lucky left an impression on him. You know anything about that, Ray?"

Chang drained the rest of her coffee. "According to Fitzpatrick, she took him to the ground three times in five minutes. He wasn't close enough to hear what they said, but it wasn't an angry exchange."

"Huh. He left that out. I wondered why he was limping. Wasn't sure if Fitzpatrick hadn't finally snapped on him."

"If Fitzpatrick snapped, the boy wouldn't be walking."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Always a bundle of cheer, Ray."

"I am what I am, Jack." Her eyes were hard. "You sure this is a good idea? After what happened during SEP."

"This is different. It flows." Jack tilted his head back. "She makes Gabe happy."

"And you?"

"Yeah, I like her," he grinned. "She broke my nose. She stole my kills. She calls me on my bullshit."
Chang rolled her eyes. "You macho dickheads with your crossed wires. You like them fucked up, Jack. I don't know why I bother. You didn't listen to me then, you certainly won't listen to me now."

"She cooks for me too."

"Well, that makes it all better."

"I could go into graphic detail, but I don't want to make you uncomfortable," Jack said smugly.

Chang gave him a withering look. "Reyes told me to avoid the northeast quadrant by the forest. If you want to catch up with them."

"I wish. The family is watching holiday movies. Can't get away." He got up, looking out over the snowy landscape. "Lucky hates the cold, so I doubt they'll be long."

It was still snowing. You weren't sure how this was going to be a treat. If Gabriel wanted to show you the stars, you could see them perfectly fine from the farmhouse roof. Gabriel had a backpack, and there was an emitter peeking out. Maybe Chang had done more damage than you thought.

Gabriel led you to a clearing, the ground mostly even. You were right next to the forest, and while it was already night, the snow and the moon didn't allow for it to be dark.

You shivered, even though it wasn't that cold. You really didn't like snow.

Gabriel opened the bag and pulled out two wooden knives, about a foot long each. He opened a tube of lipstick, rubbing it across the edge of each blade, then he tossed you one. You caught it, and stared. It was weighted like a real knife.

"I want to play with you," Gabriel said, his eyes glittering. "You like knives. So this should even the score."

You raised a brow. "You want to spar on Christmas Eve in the snow?"

"Remember what I promised you? The harder you fight, the harder I'll fuck you. So don't worry about staying warm." Your pussy clenched and you gritted your teeth.

"So sparring with Chang really did it for you?" The words slipped out, and you blamed your habit of being Blackwatch petty.

Gabriel gave a bark of laughter. "Jealous, baby?"

You took off your coat, setting it on a stump. The snow was slowing down. "Give me a moment, I'm wearing blades." You'd brought your go-bag, unsure of what he had in mind. You swapped out fingers and took your tanto off. You left the gloves off.

You picked up the wooden knife. Gabriel had laid his jacket next to yours. He was oddly
relaxed, watching you with bright eyes.

You didn't ask about rules; Gabriel didn't play by them, so why bother?

"We go till someone mimics a deathblow. If you win, I'll give you an extra reward," he said, excitement roughening his voice.

You put your hair back, jaw set tight. Chang might have warmed him up. But you were going to finish him. You didn't wait for his invitation. You lunged, drawing an arc through the air, nicking his forearms. Lipstick smeared his skin and while it wasn't blood, you felt a surge of pride. If it had been your *tanto*, you would have cut him.

Gabriel's laugh was a low rumble. "Did watching me and Chang do it for you?"

He began to circle you, knife held loosely and pointed at the ground. You weren't fooled. Gabriel didn't have to be sneaky, he could just charge in and overwhelm you. The snow crunched underfoot and you moved with him, keeping him beyond arms length.

Gabriel had better reach, but you could gauge it now. He stepped forward and you scooted back. He laughed. "What's wrong, baby? Scared?"

"You're too cocky," you said, tone sharper than you expected. You edged toward his left side.

"You *are* jealous," he purred. "You can just drop the knife, *hermosa*. I'll *reassure* you right here and now." Gabriel could be a real bastard. You darted in, ducking under his arm and slashing him across the thigh as you passed behind him. You whirled to hit him in the back, but he was already circling around.

"You really like doing it the hard way." He thrust the knife like a fencer, a textbook move that had no business in real battle. You slid back, waiting for his follow-up. He didn't disappoint, lunging forward, knee raised. You scrambled out of range, your wooden knife would be useless against that. He stomped the ground in front of you, flashing a feral grin. It was meant to be an intimidation, but you were already sliding to his right, and jabbed your weapon into his liver, maybe harder than necessary.

He grunted, one hand dropping to guard.

You pulled back, knowing you were only fast enough to get one hit in without getting countered. Gabriel narrowed his eyes, rubbing his side.

"There's one mortal injury," you said tightly. "Keep going?"

Gabriel shook his head, a low growl coming from his chest. "You think that's enough to bring me down?"

"Then I'll keep going." You held yourself in a half crouch.

Gabriel's arm shot out, and you jumped backward. He was trying to grab you. Once he had you at close range, he'd disarm you and that would be it. You couldn't get airborne like Chang, but you stay close to the ground, forcing him to come to you. Nothing fancy like her leaps and kicks. You fought dirty.

You kept circling, because you couldn't afford to just charge in. Gabriel had that kind of stamina and power. You did not. So you had to wait for the right moment.
"How'd Chang get under your skin?" Gabriel's eyes smoldered. "Did she tell you all about our SEP days?"

You inhaled sharply.

And he swiped at you, the blade stinging your cheek.

You pulled back, one hand on your face. There was no blood, but that would leave a mark beyond the lipstick.

Chang had done no such thing. But Gabriel? Gabriel was taunting you. After you'd been so good this whole trip. You'd humored Jack's family. You'd assisted on actual missions and intervened in the Michael drama at his behest. Fuck him.

You dropped to a crouch when Gabriel charged you. You scooped up a mess of snow and dirt clods, flinging them in his face.

Blinded, his arm swung out to guard. You went under and past, turning in time to draw your blade across the back of his neck. The lipstick left a viscerally-satisfying red line.

Gabriel dropped to one knee.

"That's a second mortal injury," you hissed. "I win."

"Well-played, Lucky." Rubbing his face, he began to laugh, deep and pleased. You stayed behind him, your grip on the wooden knife too tight. "And I didn't even have to choke you this time. It's a shame Jack missed this."

You swallowed and waited for him to get back up. Gabriel bared his teeth at you, his lips curving into something fierce.

"You win, baby. Now come over here and claim your prize." He tossed his wooden knife aside and pulled off his shirt.

You glared at him if not for presumption, then for his cocksure attitude. "No thank you."

Gabriel's gave a sigh of pleasure. "Do you really want to do this the extra hard way? Because I meant what I said, chica. You won't be walking back to the house after this."

You just raised your chin and relaxed your grip on the knife. He would rush you again, and if your best hope was to hit him somewhere vulnerable.

Gabriel reached for you and you danced backward, knife up. "Damn you're wound up now." He watched you, pupils too big. "Is this how you and Jack get? Push, push, push. And then suddenly he's got you tied to his bed, rawing that pussy while you beg for him?"

Heat bloomed from your center outward. "Damnit, Gabriel." You clutched at words, loosening your grip on the knife.

"He told me all about it," Gabriel said, stalking toward you. "He should've sent me a picture of you, tied to his bed, legs spread wide, his cum dripping out of you. I would've been up there in minutes. I would've fucked him clean out of you, and filled your tight hole back up again."

"Didn't think you got jealous of Jack," you said, backing up.

"I'm not jealous of Jack," Gabriel purred. "I'm annoyed at the missed opportunity,
something I intend to remedy now."

You both moved at once, you to counter, him to disarm. He knocked the weapon out of your hand. You smashed him across the face with your left fist, and he didn't even blink. He just dragged you to the ground, blood trickling from his nose. You flinched, the snow a cold shock against your back.

"You going to be good now?" He gripped the back of your neck, pinning your body with his thighs. He wiped off his face, his grin taut.

"It's cold," you shuddered. "I don't- I really don't like that."

"I'm going to let you up. Get your clothes off, unless you want me to tear them off you."

You stared at him in horror, mostly because there was fucking snow on the ground and that was the opposite of how things were supposed to work.

"Trust me," he murmured and sat back on his heels. "I'll keep you warm." He got up and pulled a waterproofed blanket out of his bag. He placed it on the ground, and you kicked off your boots, stepping onto it. You were surprised to find it was hot. One of those luxury heating coil blankets, then. You would've killed for one of those back in Canada.

You pulled off your clothes, carefully placing them off the ground. The snow had stopped, but the cold air was a terrible shock. Gabriel picked up his jacket and helped you into it. It didn't cover you completely, but it provided some protection from the wind.

You sat on the blanket, not quite comfortable, but better off than you expected. Gabriel crouched in front of you, and tugged you forward, his hands on the lapels of his jacket.

"Better?" He pulled you onto his lap, against the heat of his chest, his cock hard against you.

"You're the worst. I hate snow, Gabriel."

"You know I like the challenge," he said and suddenly he had you flat on your back against the blanket. His jacket was still warm and smelled like him. "Have to get you ready for me, hermosa." He slid your knees over his shoulders, cupping your ass while he began to lap at your core. You lay on the heated blanket, wrapped in Gabriel's jacket while he tongue-fucked you. He slurped at your pussy, the sounds wonderfully obscene.

"Fuck!" You had your left hand splayed against the ground, your right fisting the blanket.

He slid two fingers inside you, giving your clit a slow lick. "I'm going to, baby. I'm going to fuck you hard and I'm not going to stop till your tight little cunt is overflowing with my cum."

Your breath hitched at that. "Gabriel-"

"Don't start begging yet, otherwise I'll just start pounding you now, and you're not ready to take me," he growled.

You writhed, hips jerking against Gabriel's face. He kissed your pussy, fingers working you open for him. Soon, you heard him unzip and watched through half-lidded eyes as he withdrew his fingers from you, and lowered you onto his lap. He rubbed your slick across his thick cock, then gave it a few quick tugs, and placed the head against your slit. He looked at you hungrily, eyes clouded with lust.
You lay on your back, propped up on your elbows. You stared up at him, breathing shallow.

His lips brushed your ear. "Don't forget your safe words." Then Gabriel slammed into you, his cock driving deep.

You wailed as his shaft stretched you wide, arching sharply off the ground.

He filled you to the base, his balls slapping against your ass. His hips snapped back, and you were empty and aching. Then he was inside you again, all friction and heat. The feeling of skin on skin intensified the experience and you dropped flat on your back, one arm thrown across your forehead.

Gabriel brought one of your legs over his shoulder, his thrusts hard and measured. He wasn't losing control, but he wasn't showing you any mercy either.

"Gabriel-" You couldn't finish that thought, because your voice cracked.

He leaned forward, his angle shifting, and you whimpered as he kissed you, his lips tangy with your juices.

"You're making the filthiest noises," he groaned. "That's it, baby. Listening to you pant for me is hot, but hearing your sopping pussy take my dick... That's even better."

You could see his length disappearing inside you each time he hilted himself, your slickness shining on his skin. The motion was hypnotic; you couldn't look away. You clenched around him, whining when he sped up, refusing to allow you any control.

"Please," you clawed at his chest, arching as he continued his relentless pace. "Gabriel-"

"I told you," he said, voice gravelly. "The harder you fight, the harder I'll fuck you. And I fucking meant it." He kept a savage rhythm. His body glistened with sweat as he began to speed up. "You're still so tight for me, baby. Feels like you don't want to let me go."

He had you pinned against the ground, trapped against his cock. He was all over you, mouth on your throat, hands playing with your tits, girth filling you while his tip hit your cervix. If you had less adrenaline, it would have hurt, but you were still wound up from the fight, endorphins turning any discomfort into a fullness that soothed the ache deep inside. You needed this after the pseudo-fight. He edged you on the boundary between pleasure and pain, working off the rest of the adrenaline coursing through your system. Your hips shook and you writhed, toes curling from the sheer intensity of it. The pressure made it hard to breathe and harder to think. "I can't- Gabriel, please!"

"You want to come, baby girl?" He crooned. "You think that will stop me? Go on then. Let me see you fall apart."

His fingers moved rapidly against your clit and your breathless sobs filled the air he drove you over the edge. Your hips bucked against his as your orgasm tore through you. Gabriel kept fucking you while you thrashed beneath him.

"Please, I need- need a moment," you clutched at his forearms, your voice hoarse. "Please-

Gabriel rested his forehead against yours, eyes wild. "That's not what you should be
begging for."

"Please, papi!" Jack said Gabriel would respond to this, though you couldn't think of his exact wording. "I can't-"

Gabriel froze, his breathing ragged. "What did you say?"

"I-I-papi," You hiccupped. "Jack said I should use it. I'm sorry-"

"Fucking Jack," Gabriel growled. "You can use it, baby. You can use it any time." He paused, giving you that moment you needed. "But it isn't going to get you any mercy. It just makes me want to claim that pussy more."

Your thighs trembled as he buried himself in you again. "You're wrecking me, papi," you mewled.

Gabriel swore, control fraying. "Keep that up and your ass is next," he snarled, pounding you frantically.

Gabriel's fingers were back against your clit, and you squirmed under him, sensitive nerves burning from his rough handling. "I know you have another one in you. Don't care if you don't think you can handle it." He grinned viciously. "Come on, baby. Let me feel that pussy milk me."

You screamed his name, desperation coiling in your voice as he forced another orgasm through you. Your muscles contracted hard around his cock, the intensity almost painful. He gripped your hair, his pace growing more frenetic. He yanked your head back, teeth sinking into your shoulder as his hips jolted against yours. "Mine," he grunted, head pressed against your cervix. And you felt it then, his cock buried to the hilt, his hot cum flooding you. You clung to him, labored breaths causing your whole body to shake.

Gabriel dropped onto his forearms, balancing above you, his forehead resting against your collarbone. He took a deep shuddering breath and then kissed you hard, grinding against you. You moaned as he pulled out, and it was a few seconds before his cum started to trickle out of your pussy. He held your legs apart, watching it flow, an expression of distinctly masculine satisfaction on his face.

You lay there, coated in sweat and semen, your heartbeat slowing.

"You like it when your papi gives it to you like that?" His voice was raw.

You closed your eyes. "Fuck. That isn't something I say. I uh...not a daddy kink person. But Jack-"

"Jack's not the one underneath me with my cum pouring out of her well-fucked little hole."

"I just thought you'd like it," you said lamely.

"Oh I do," he breathed, stroking your thighs. "But you can save it for special occasions." You were pretty sure that it was the opposite of the safe word, that it was the "wreck me" command, and that was not something you needed to use.

Gabriel petted you, his hands gentle now.

"You warm enough still?"
You nodded.

He stayed over you, peppering your neck and shoulders with rough kisses. You carded your fingers through his hair, taking slow deep breaths. Your body felt too light, adrenaline still dulling your pain receptors, and you were going to pay for this later. You tensed, realizing that you and Gabriel never had that talk about safe sex. Why the hell not?

"You're thinking too hard," he said as you tensed under him.

"We...uh never actually talked about not using protection. I mean, I have the implant, so I wasn't worried. Was there a reason you didn't want to when we started out?"

"I wanted to," Gabriel said, nuzzling your neck. "Been wanting to do this for ages: fuck you hard and make sure you know you're mine. But didn't want to spook you. Plus," he stroked your slit and you stiffened. "I have a lot. Another SEP bonus." He exhaled slowly. "Not sure about risks though. A lot of people came out of SEP infertile. I don't know if me and Jack are shooting blanks. Never had the occasion to research it."

The blanket was still warm, and Gabriel's body heat was comforting, but you wanted out of the wind and cold. You winced as you tried to close your legs. "Possessive asshole."

"You had to do this the hard way," he said, not sounding the least bit remorseful.

"You were flaunting a former lover in my face. And Chang's strong, fast, and gorgeous. What was I supposed to do?" You rested the back of your hand over your eyes. It was a natural position and maybe he wouldn't think you were avoiding eye contact.

"Huh. You are jealous," Gabriel said, sounding surprised. "I can't say that doesn't turn me on." He curled around you, a man-sized space-heater and chaos-bringer. "I guess now's the time to admit that Chang and I never got together. Jack and her neither. Wanted to a long time ago, but Chang's got her own issues and doesn't fuck anyone. She pushes me, sure, but then we end up with broken bones, internal bleeding, and penal latrine duty. It went down like that too many times to be fun. So no, there's nothing there. Never has been." Gabriel's mouth moved against your neck, his teeth worrying the skin.

"You-" Outrage flared in your chest.

"That wasn't fair," he admitted. "I shouldn't have implied that. But you got so angry, and stopped holding back. It was beautiful." One hand gripped your jaw and he kissed you then, his teeth nipping your lips.

"You're an ass," you said when he let you up for air. "And you owe me a prize for winning your game."

"Mmm, I can go again, baby." He pressed against you. "And you're still wet and ready for me."

"Jesus Christ, Gabriel, you're trying to kill me." Your breath hitched. You were starting to feel sore, but your inner muscles clenched for him anyway.

"Just little deaths," he said, flipping you onto your stomach. "Take my jacket off. I want to feel your skin."

"I can't do that again."
"All right. We won't." Gabriel peeled the jacket off you and kissed the back of your neck. You relaxed, which was a mistake, because then he pulled your hips up, your ass in the air. "I'll go easy on you this time." He already had his head pressed against your slit.

You bit your lip and rested your chin on your forearms. "You would do this even if I hadn't won. I still get a prize." You didn't care about "prizes," you just wanted to be petty. Because Gabriel deserved it.

"All right," he chuckled, chest pressed against your back. Then he pushed inside and you sighed, moaning into the blanket. "You're taking me so smoothly, baby. Guess I need to fuck the fight out of you more often."

"I thought you were going to be nice."

He rocked his hips at a leisurely pace, "I am being nice, hermosa." He gave a sharp thrust, hitting deep inside you and you whined. "Playing with you got me all wound up. I still want to pound you senseless." He squeezed your ass. "But if you're sore, I'll just have to be gentle."

"Please," you said and he rubbed your back, pressing kisses between your shoulder blades.

"If Jack were here, I could work this off faster. Make him clean you up with his mouth, while I drilled him," Gabriel purred. "Give you a little break while you got your second wind. You like having Jack between us, don't you?"

"Yes." The word came out breathless and you began to push your hips back, impaling yourself deeper on Gabriel's cock. Maybe you should be jealous that Gabriel was wishing Jack was here under him, but you liked the image. "I like it when you make him beg. I can't - I can't stop him when I've pushed him too far. He just turns the tables on me."

"I know." Gabriel laughed softly. "When we get back to base, I'll show you some tricks."

"Please." The rhythm between you began to speed up. You took sharp shallow breaths, trying to keep up with Gabriel.

"I want to watch," he said. "He told me how you rode him, edging him while he got more and more desperate. I don't mind watching him flip you and fuck you into the bed after that, but I'm curious to see how far you could push him." Gabriel's balls slapped against your pussy lips and your breathing grew more jagged. He was filled you so well and all these filthy words had you clawing at the ground.

"Want to do it to you too," you moaned. "I want to tease you, Gabriel."

"That's how you end up wrecked, baby girl," Gabriel murmured. "You tease me enough as it is. Much more and I'd break you. You're not ready for that yet."

His hips slammed into you and you buried your face in the blanket. "Gabriel, please-"

"Oh we'll get you there, don't worry. I want you between me and Jack again, one of us fucking open that tight little asshole. You took us so beautifully before. Want to do it again soon. Jack doesn't want to pressure you, but he really wants a turn. You like that thought? Jack'll fuck you harder than I did. I wonder if you can take it." His voice was so full of promise.

"Damnit, Gabriel." Your hand slid between your legs and you began to stroke circles around your clit.
"You do like that. Good." Gabriel gripped your hips tightly. "Keep playing with yourself."

You shuddered, your clit was too sensitive.

"Ask for my cum, like a good girl."

"Really?"

"You begged Jack," he said, nipping your bruised shoulder. "Don't you want me to come inside you again?"

You had enough trouble stringing words together. "Gabriel, please-"

"Please what?" His breath was hot in your ear and he rolled his hips, making you arch.

"Goddamnit! You hung your head, panting as he got you closer to the edge. "I need you."

Sweat trickled down your forehead and you squeezed your eyes shut, trying to focus on words and not the sensation of his cock. "Please Gabriel, you've fucked me so hard tonight. You've come inside me once and it's not enough, I want more, please-"

"Such a greedy little cum slut," he groaned, fistng your hair. "All right, I'll give you what you want." He yanked your head back, forcing you to look up. Your eyes widened, even as Gabriel's fingers pressed down on your clit.

Jack stood in the snow in front of you, arms crossed, grin crooked.

"Let Jack see your face while I fill you up."

You quivered, your jaw clenched. You didn't know how long he'd been there, but judging by his smirk, he'd heard you begging. The thought sent a thrill through you. You met Jack's excited gaze, whimpering as you clamped down on Gabriel's cock, his fingers coaxing you over the edge. You could feel his head twitching deep inside you, shooting thick ribbons of cum against your overly sensitive walls. Your thighs shook, and you collapsed when Gabriel released you, the blanket still warm against your chest.

"Hey pretty," Jack said, crouching in front of you. "Heated blanket, huh? No wonder you've been gone so long." He tilted your head up and kissed you hungrily. "Had to make excuses as to why you missed dinner. Don't know if anyone believed them."

"Sorry," you said weakly.

"You can make it up to me later."

Gabriel pulled out of you and you looked over your shoulder, hoping he was finally spent.

Jack got up, and stepped behind you. "You certainly made a mess, Gabe."

"I'll tell you all about it later," Gabriel chuckled, and Jack kissed him too, a little rougher, his teeth sinking into Gabriel's lower lip. It occurred to you then that Jack and Gabriel talked about you while they were fucking too. You sighed. That was hot - worrisome, because who knew what ideas they came up with during sex - but still very hot.

"Look at that, wow, Gabe, you're pouring out of her."

You shivered as Jack leaned in and kissed your swollen lower lips, his tongue flicking out
"Jack-" You tried to close your legs, but your lower half wasn't cooperating. Jack's fingers traced your slit, until one slipped inside.

"How many times did you fuck her?" Jack's voice was like honey on ground glass, smooth layered over jagged and dangerous.

"Two times," Gabriel said.

"That's it?" Jack slid another finger in and you dropped your head. "But it looks like you used her so hard. If it was only twice, maybe she's ready for more..."

"I can't-" The adrenaline was starting to wear off, and you ached.

"We sparred first, used training knives. She won, with two deathblows. I owe her a prize." Gabriel patted your ass. "It was fucking beautiful."

"Shit, now I'm really sorry I missed it. Guess that means he really gave it to you, huh?" Jack was still working himself up. He curled his fingers and you gasped. He pulled his fingers out and you glanced over his shoulder as he licked them clean. "Just wanted another taste," he said innocently. "Unless you want to go again?"

"Jack, I'm sore and getting cold. If you and Gabriel want to go, that's fine. But I can't." You finally managed to close your legs and roll over. You reached for Gabriel's jacket. Your front was now cold.

Gabriel chuckled and retrieved your clothes, helping you dress. He layered his jacket over yours, kissing your cheeks. "Let's get you back to the house. You can clean up there."

"Thank you," you said. Gabriel scooped you up. "Hey!"

"Can you walk back?"

Heat crept along your face. "Umm..."

"Didn't think so," he said smugly.

You tucked your head against Gabriel's chest. He was still so warm and you liked the feel of his arms around you. You'd been here before, under less pleasant circumstances. This time you could enjoy it.

Jack picked up the blanket and knives, stuffing them in Gabriel's backpack. He grabbed your bag too.

The two men fell into an easy stride.

"Good workout, then?" Jack asked you.

"...What do you think?" You scowled.

Gabriel laughed, hugging you against him. "She had to do things the hard way." He still didn't sound sorry.

"She seems to like that," Jack agreed. "What'd she do to push you so hard?"
"Besides winning the fight? Someone told her to call me "papi." Gabriel gave Jack a look.

"Oh I missed that, too? Damn."

Gabriel put you down before you reached the farmhouse. You were pretty sure whoever was standing guard saw that much, but you were too tired to care. Your gait was wrong and your steps wobbly, but you made it up the stairs and into the bathroom for a hot shower. It was past midnight and the Morrisons were already in bed, or pretending to be. Gabriel joined you, helping you clean up. The water pressure was pitiful, but it didn't matter. You were grateful for hot water.

When you emerged in clean pajamas, Jack had warmed two plates of leftovers and you kissed him in sheer gratitude before devouring one.

"Feel better?" He asked, rubbing your shoulders. You sat between him and Gabriel on the floor of Michael's room.

"I'm going to pass out," you told him. Because Jack was tricky and you weren't falling for it tonight.

"That's fine, I'll take care of him," Gabriel said, finishing his plate. Because apparently, he was still horny. Goddamnit, they were going to kill you. You were going to die of exhaustion if you tried to keep up with them.

Jack took your empty dishes and you dropped back on the floor. Gabriel set up the biotic emitter. A warm yellow light suffused the room and you practically melted into the pillow.

"You did beautifully today," Gabriel said.

"You're talking about the sex." You scowled.

"I'm talking about all of it: the fighting, testing Chang's unit, and definitely the sex," he said. "I want to spar with you more. There's still a lot of room for improvement. Your form is still pathetic."

"If those were real knives, I would have kicked your ass," you muttered.

"If those were real knives, I would have held you down and fucked your ass," he said smugly. "You think a little blood bothers me?"

"...I am too tired for this conversation." You pulled the covers over your head, and let yourself sleep.

"You're going to have to be quieter, Jackie. If you wake her up, I'll stop." Gabriel's voice
was a taut whisper, and come to think of it, he woke you up the last time he played this game with Jack. Well, last time that you knew he played this game with Jack. Still, was that a coincidence? Probably not.

Jack muffled his sounds in the pillow beside you.

You were on your side and they were behind you. You could feel the hum of the emitter and the heat pouring off them. You wondered then if you should just go back to sleep. Let Jack and Gabriel play their game, work off their tension, and you could finish getting the rest you deserved. As a bonus, you could totally thwart Gabriel's not so subtle plan to wake you up for more sex.

Wait a minute... Maybe there was such a thing as too petty. Even if you were in Blackwatch.

You turned over, treated the sight of Jack on his stomach, nude, his face buried in the pillow, his hands digging into the blankets. Gabriel knelt between Jack's thighs rolling his hips so slowly it made you ache.

You reached out, and gently stroked Jack's hair, already damp with sweat.

Gabriel gave you a lazy smile and pushed down on Jack's lower back with one hand, and thrust hard.

Jack kept his face in the pillow, body shaking.

"Just like chem camp, eh?" Gabriel murmured, not quite ready to give up the game. "You have to be real quiet, or we'll get busted. We had some close calls back then. Probably because you make such cute noises, Jackie."

Jack's hips jerked and he hissed into the pillow. "Shut up, Gabe."

Gabriel leaned forward and bit Jack. The blonde man jerked forward, his breathing sharp.

"Worry about your own volume," Gabriel said and went back to his slow strokes.

"Not giving you the satisfaction," Jack muttered.

Gabriel just tilted his hips, hitting a new angle that made Jack stiffen and sink his teeth into the pillow. "You don't need to give me anything, mi cíelito. I'm taking what I want, and it's so very satisfying. It's a shame Lucky's out cold. Bet she'd like to help edge you."

You raised a brow. Gabriel kneaded Jack's ass.

"Your fault," Jack growled into the pillow. "Can't believe you did all that without me."

"She was such a good girl today. Deserved a reward." Gabriel flashed you a brash smirk. "Told her all about how badly you want to fuck her ass. She liked the idea. Started playing with herself and everything."

Jack's breath hitched. "Damnit, Gabe-"

"You could've joined us."

You placed a kiss on Jack's shoulder and he sighed. "Family time. You were both
welcome to-" He shook his head. ".I get it. Not the same for you guys. She probably needed an outlet. Didn't think...didn't think about that." Jack clenched his teeth as Gabriel sped up.

Gabriel just laughed, his strokes slowing. "I know."

"I just...fuck Gabe. I just wanted us all here together. Didn't think beyond that."

"Good execution, bad follow through. And you're a shit host. You've always been like that." Gabriel's voice was gentle, despite the chastisement. He kissed the back of Jack's neck.

"I'll make it up to you both, just please..."

"You have to be quiet, Jackie." Gabriel nipped his ear.

Jack shuddered.

Gabriel glanced at you, brows raised.

You rolled your eyes and nodded.

"I think I have a solution." He pulled Jack up by his hips. "On your knees."

Jack pushed off the floor and rolled back onto his knees, his eyes widening when he saw you on your side, propped up on your elbow watching him.

"Damnit Gabe-"

"Shhh," you said, kneeling in front of him and pulling your top off. "You're supposed to be quiet."

Jack groaned as Gabriel embraced him tightly, hips driving forward. You leaned in, kissing Jack's face, fingers tracing the planes of his chest. His cock jutted up, but you ignored it, opting to place your metal fingers against his lips. Jack opened his mouth, moaning softly as you slid your fingers inside. He sucked them, eyes fluttering shut.

You bit his neck, marking his throat while Gabriel thrust deep inside him. "Is that better?"

You pressed against his chest, kissing his jawline.

He nodded, nostrils flaring as you tweaked his nipples. You lowered your head, flicking your tongue against them and he jolted backward, spearing himself deeper on Gabriel's cock.

"So sensitive." You grinned up at him, curling your fingers in his mouth. "I know what you're thinking, and the answer is still "no, I'm too sore." Plus, you were so pushy earlier, I don't know if you deserve any other relief from me."

Jack curved an arm around your back, pulling you tighter against him. He dropped your fingers, his mouth moving down, trailing kisses across your neck. "I'm sorry," he gasped. "Sorry, baby. I know I get carried away. I mean it, I'll make it up to you-" He shuddered, pressing his forehead to yours. Flushed and slick with sweat, Jack clung to you, eyes searching your face. "I'll take whatever you give me. Just stay here." His hips jerked, cock pressing against your thighs. "Please."

The sheer openness of his expression made you look away. Jack's sincerity was one of his greatest weapons and he knew it. That you knew this too didn't make it any less potent.

"Please." He whispered your name, a breathless prayer against your ear. "Need you too."
"Doesn't play fair, does he?" Gabriel murmured.

"Neither of you do," you sighed as Jack nuzzled your throat, hands running up and down your sides. You rubbed your metal fingers together and found them still a little slick. "Get them wet."

Jack's tongue wove between your fingers, still focusing on your face as he took them into his mouth, one by one.

"Show off." You withdrew them from his mouth and wrapped your left hand around his cock. "Is this what you wanted?"

"Anything you want to give me," he held you against him, shuddering as Gabriel began to thrust harder.

You stroked him in time with Gabriel.

"May I kiss you, please?"

"So polite," you said. "All right."

Jack's mouth covered yours and you sucked his tongue. His hips began to shake.

"He's close," Gabriel said, voice strained.

You sped up, squeezing Jack's cock lightly. You could hear Gabriel sliding into Jack and feel Jack's little gasps at each thrust.

"That's it Jack, here's your reward," Gabriel groaned.

Jack moaned into your mouth as you pumped him harder. His hips bucked faster against you and he came, cum spurting across your chest and his. When Jack released you, his cheeks were flushed and he dropped his head against Gabriel's shoulder. Gabriel's eyes were closed in firm concentration. His hips shook, arms tightening around Jack, thighs so tense. He bit his lip, but kept silent. You liked seeing him lose control, but this was charming too.

Gabriel opened his eyes, then leaned over and kissed you. "Lie back down and we'll get you cleaned up. I know you're tired."

You dropped back against the pillows, smiling as the boys disengaged. Jack picked up one of his shirts and wiped you clean before taking care of himself. He kissed your stomach, hands lingering on your sides. You found your top and pulled it back on.

Gabriel lay down beside you, sliding his arm under you. Jack was on your other side, his head against your chest.

"Too heavy?"

You put an arm around him. "You're fine. But if you drool on me, all bets are off."

Chapter End Notes
And that's Christmas Eve. Because I couldn't do mistletoe or "Santa baby" as a legit sexy thing. I'm cheesy, but not Cheez-whiz, processed American cheez-food cheesy. More like smoked blue cheese or hipster goat cheese cheesy. Hmm. I like cheese. If you couldn't tell.

Totally going along with certain fannon with Gabriel having daddy kink. Not my fav, but in my humble opinion, it kind of fits. Not kink-shaming, just like "I hope I did that right and managed not to squick people who don't prefer it..." Also see him as not caring about minor things like blood and bruises; so long as no one's critically injured, "hey, let's have sex." Hell, he might like it more (post-sparring, high-adrenaline, etc). But that's not everyone's taste and I digress.

Appreciate all the comments. They really do brighten my work days. (And my off days, but you know, you need more "moral support" on work days.)
"Merry Christmas! Oh my God that's adorable!" Maggie laughed, peeking in her head in. "Now get up before Mom sees you!" She slammed the door shut, and you wished, not for the first time, that there were working locks on these doors.

"What time is it?" You were still on the floor, in the crook of Gabriel's arm, Jack draped across your stomach. He was drooling on your shirt.

Gabriel chuckled. "It's 0800. They let us sleep in this year."

"Eight?" You sighed. This was a holiday. You were exhausted. "What the hell do we need to be up that early for?"

"Presents," Jack muttered. "Maggie wants her presents. Can't open them till everyone's there. Gotta get up. She'll send Mom next."

You groaned. "You drooled on me."

"Was comfortable," he said, not sounding the least bit sorry.

"Gross. Gabriel, why is he so gross?"

"Wait till I get you a ball gag, then you'll feel some real drool," Jack said, still not lifting his head.

"I'm going to poison you," you said. "Get off." You shoved him, but he didn't budge, clinging tightly to your waist.

"Uh-uh," he grinned, eyes squeezed shut. "You have to ask nicely."

"Gabriel, hand me my tanto."

Gabriel rolled over, still shirtless, and kissed your neck. "It'll be faster if you ask nicely. He's kind of stupid when he first wakes up."

"Jack, please let me up or I'll give Maggie your present."

He opened his eyes. "You got me a present?"

"I could be wrong, but I hear that's what people do at Christmas. Was it presents? Or anatomically-correct piñatas? I get confused sometimes."

"Mm, don't know if I want an anatomically-correct piñata." Jack sat up. "But if it's from you, I guess I'll pretend to like it."

You wobbled to your feet, still sore, despite the emitter. At least the swelling had gone down, though the bruising hadn't completely faded. "I'm supposed to wear something nice today, right?"
"Nah, don't worry about it. I got us covered," Jack grinned. He handed you a box. It wasn't wrapped, and you shook it. "It's technically not a present," he said.

"So I technically don't have to pretend to like it?" When you opened the box you realized there was no way you could convincingly pretend to like it. It was a blue sweater, Christmas-themed, the front dominated by a Christmas tree covered in pom poms, sequins, glitter thread, and ribbons. It was hideous, and you just stared at it, not quite comprehending how all the parts formed the whole.

Gabriel groaned. "Really Jack?"

"It's an ugly Christmas sweater. It's a tradition."

"I'd rather have an anatomically-correct piñata." You put the lid back on. "Thank you for the optical illusion in a box, but I'm sorry, Jack. No fucking way."

"I packed Gabe's," Jack said. "We'll all be wearing them."

"No, we won't," Gabriel said, wrinkling his nose.

"Everyone else will be doing it."

Gabriel folded his fingers. You nodded and made the hand sign for the woods. There was an exit strategy in place, and you would use it.

Jack eyed you both suspiciously. "There'll be an ugly sweater picture later. You have to wear them then. That's an order."

"Mmm-hmm," you glanced at Gabriel.

He rolled his eyes. "Here." Gabriel handed you a box as well. "This technically isn't a present either, and it's more tasteful than anatomically-correct piñatas, or that." He waved at the box of ugly, dismissively.

"...Are "technically not a present" presents a Christmas tradition? Because I missed the memo."

"Shut up and open the box, Lucky."

You took the lid off and pulled away the tissue paper. It was another sweater, but black and very soft with a wide cowl neck. It would hang off at least one shoulder. "Cashmere, really?" You raised a brow. That wasn't cheap.

"Gives me an excuse to pet you," Gabriel smirked. "And it doesn't look like you got jumped by a craft store."

"Ah. Thank you." You looked between them, unsure of how your choice would affect their feelings. Gabriel's sweater was obviously superior, but finding something that ugly took effort, among other things.

"Wear the pretty sweater," Jack said, rolling his eyes. "I'm sure it will look good on you."

"Anything is going to look good compared to that eyesore," Gabriel said, and you silently agreed.
It looked like something out of a TV show. There were stockings on the fireplace, names embroidered on them. The tree was a shiny fire-hazard, decked in lights, glass balls, and strings of tinsel. A crooked star perched precariously on top. There were neatly-wrapped packages underneath, and you placed your gift basket underneath beside Gabriel's offerings, despite the fact every tag said "From: Gabriel & Lucky." You weren't sure how that made you feel. But it was a nice gesture.

You'd skipped personal and brought a gift basket full of smoked meat, processed cheese, decent wine, and cookies.

Jack's parents were fully-dressed and sitting on the couch. Michael and Maggie were still in flannel pajamas, sitting beside the tree. Michael's gaze darted between you, Jack, and Gabriel, his expression guarded. Maggie's eyes were glued on the boxes, her grin somewhere between eager and downright avaricious.

Jack brought you a cup of coffee and you sat on the floor beside Gabriel. The sweater fit perfectly, slipping down one shoulder, and it was now the softest thing you owned. You wanted to take your gloves off and pet it, but not in front of other people.

Gabriel casually draped his arm around you and Jack settled beside you, resting his head on your shoulder. You sipped your coffee and stared at the floor, because apparently they weren't going to pretend any more.

You could not look at Jack's parents.

"I think we better let Maggie open presents before she combusts," Jack said.

"I want to hand them out too!"

"All right," John said. "We can go ahead. Jane and the kids won't be here till after noon."

"And I can't wait that long!" Maggie grabbed a box and shoved it at Michael. "This is for you from me! And you better like it because it's awesome!" She continued along that vein, distributing presents, all from her.

"Jack! Lucky!" She dropped a box in your lap. "Gabe! Now I'm just a poor teenager, so don't judge too hard, OK?"

"I'm sure it's lovely," Gabriel said.

"Thank you," you said, staring at the candy-striped box. You watched Jack tear through the wrapping paper before taking your cue and opening your gift. It was a fluffy stuffed fox, cute and pseudo-realistic.

"Because you're clever and sneaky," she said, grinning at you with a certain amount of subtext. You glanced over at Jack, who was blushing. "He called you a "wily vixen," Maggie stage-whispered loud enough for people outside to hear.

You were just going to go dig a hole and stay there till the transport came. You could live off the land. Foraging for nuts and berries. Pooping in the woods. No, it was too cold out. You would have to use a different strategy.
"I uh...thank you? It's cute. Like Daisy."

"Wait, how do you-? He still has Daisy?! Oh my God!" Maggie shrieked. "You told me she got lost when you moved to Lisbon!"

You smiled sweetly at Jack.

He sighed. "This is a really nice scarf, Maggie. Thank you."

"You still have Daisy! You totally lied to me!"

Gabriel chuckled, and showed you his nice new leather-bound edition of The Count of Monte Cristo. Well, everyone knew whom Maggie's favorite was. You knew Gabriel read for pleasure, but you had no idea what. You would ask later.

Most of the gift exchange was between Jack's family. It was...odd, and while they had been welcoming, you felt like an intruder. This wasn't your family. They were being nice because you were a guest. You didn't fault them for anything, but the togetherness, that you weren't part of, was very tangible.

But this wasn't for you. This was for Jack. So you smiled pleasantly, and tried not to make eye contact, because you still weren't sure how Jack's parents felt about your arrangement.

"Oh Lucky, we just got you a little something." Jack's mother handed you a heavy wrapped box and you kept your smile pasted firmly in place, in case it was another gift with subtext. Because you couldn't handle much more of this.

"Thank you very much," you said brightly, because you were in cover. You weren't going to break cover. You weren't going to hide behind Gabriel or Jack. You were going to do this and look happy. You opened it and found a large cast iron skillet.

"Jack says you cook for him, and I'm glad someone else is making sure he isn't eating MREs all the time," Jacqueline said cheerfully, and you detected no hidden messages.

You didn't think anyone willingly ate MREs, but when you glanced over at Jack, he wore a shit-eating grin. Actually, you could see him doing that. Never mind.

"Thank you very much. I'll definitely get a lot of use out of it." It was also heavy, and you could hit people with it.

Gabriel, thankfully, distributed the gifts he'd put your name on, and while everyone said "thank you" you were pretty sure they knew who did the shopping. Which was fine.

"Hey," Jack nudged you. "Here." He handed you a small box. "This is technically a present, in case you were confused."

Maggie gave him a weird look.

"This may be an anatomically-correct piñata," you told him, handing him your clumsily-wrapped gift.

Maggie gave you a weirder look.

You opened the box. The earrings were omnium hoops, the same gunmetal color as your prostheses, inlaid with spiraling panels of fiery blue opal.
"I thought they'd...match. You don't seem to have a lot of jewelry," Jack said.

"Thank you," you said, softly. Because they were a thoughtful gift. They did match your fingers, though the blue color was pure Jack. "I like them. They're very fitting."

"Can I put them on you?"

You blinked. You didn't normally wear jewelry - it didn't survive missions and sparring. But you were on vacation. "Yes, please."

You held very still, heart beating a little too fast. Jack gently put the earrings in place. You swallowed, leaned over, and gave Jack a quick peck on the cheek.

Jack grinned at you one more time before opening your gift. "Really?" He stared for a moment, then got out the "Jack Morrison's #1 Fan" t-shirt, complete with his face on it. He stared for a long moment. Gabriel started to laugh and you covered your mouth. "I uh..."

"You have to wear it," Maggie said. "And I want a picture."

"Your actual present is underneath it," you said.

"You had me worried."

"It's in your size," you told him.

"I know what I'm getting you and Gabe next," he muttered.

"We can get them for the whole team," you said. Because you could take this joke further than he dared, and you would, if necessary.

He studied the square ebony wood box inlaid with mother of pearl. Then he tried to take the lid off.

"It's a puzzle box. You have to figure out the order of panels to move and then it opens. I think there are twelve steps."

He shook it gently.

"I promise it's not going to open a portal to Hell. But there's something small in there for when you figure it out." Explaining all this was awkward. Maybe you should have gotten him a tie or something. Not that you knew the first thing about tie-shopping. You'd have to ask Gabriel.

"That's really cool," Maggie said. "Let me see!"

"I'm solving it," Jack said, keeping it out of her reach.

Gabriel placed a large box in your lap. "It'll take him awhile. Open mine."

You laughed and complied, because you couldn't remember the last time there'd been this many presents for...anything. There were two large polished wooden boxes you opened one and found a slew of familiar pentagonal tiles. The hinged box folded into a grid board. You studied the characters on the tiles. You didn't remember exactly what they said, but Shin had showed you how to play. "I'm terrible at shogi."

"What is that?" Maggie hovered over your shoulder.
"It's a Japanese chess-type game. First one that lets you reuse your opponents captured pieces," Gabriel said.

You rubbed one of the wooden pieces between your fingers, recalling how Shin had fastidiously explained everything a lifetime ago.

"Aishani preferred it to regular chess," Gabriel said.

You bowed your head. "I watched her and Shin play once."

"I play, if you want a partner." Gabriel's eyes were on your face and you nodded. "Jack has a regular chess set in his room. We can play that too, but you'll have a better chance at winning against him."

"Shut up, Gabe," Jack said, still fiddling with the puzzle box.

You opened the next box and found a slew of black and white stones separated into different compartments. There were pretty carved wooden bowls included. "OK, I can go."

You studied the gift, sensing a theme. "Thank you." You had not expected games from Gabriel, but you weren't displeased. You kissed his cheek. "I like them."

"You work a lot," he said. "It's good to have different ways to unwind. And it gives you a few more options to beat Jack."

"Shut up, Gabe." Jack sounded a little more annoyed this time, but he was still sliding pieces on the box. Maybe you should have got him the five step box instead.

"Jack and I both play strategy games. It's a good way to compete without getting...physical." Ha! You could easily picture them flipping the game board and punching each other or playing strip chess. And it was kind of hot. "And you're clever. I thought you'd like the challenge." He seemed almost embarrassed and you studied the boxes in your lap, your smile secretive and strangely happy.

He carefully unwrapped your gift. "Really?"

There were two chocolate bars on top. The same awful military ones he'd fed you in Canada.

"I owed you some chocolate."

Shaking his head, Gabriel lifted up another puzzle box, this one rectangular and carved from lignum vitae and inlaid with horn and bone. The color of the wood was odd - it had a green tinge - but it smelled like perfume and you heard it wouldn't rot. He tilted the box, listening to the soft clink of something moving inside.

"It's also twelve moves," you said.

"Jack's been at it for seven minutes now? Let's see if I can beat that."

"Ha! Finally!" Jack popped the lid off and looked inside. The necklace was simple, a lapis disc, shot through with gold, circular hole in the center, wrapped on a buff leather cord. It was the color of his eyes and you knew it was cheesy as fuck, but you wanted to give him something pretty. He held it up, studying it carefully for a moment.

"Lapis lazuli, right?"
You nodded. "Sorry, it's not expensive but-"

"Put it on me?"

He could damn well put it on himself, but you undid the clasp and fastened it for him. He tucked it against his chest, and kissed you on the nose before you could back up.

"Thank you. Even if I had to work for it."

"I'm always going to make you work for it," you blurted out and Maggie snorted.

"And I'll make you pay for it," Jack said softly in your ear, sounding pretty pleased.

Gabriel had the box open in under seven minutes and his contained an almost identical malachite disc on a black leather cord. He silently offered it to you and you fastened it for him too.

"Thank you," he said. He looked at Jack for a moment, then you. "You got another one?"

You nodded. You chose a black obsidian one for yourself. It was simple and elegant, but it was still in the box. You weren't sure if they'd like the necklaces, let alone want matching ones. It sat in your duffel bag.

"Good. Why don't you go get it?"

When you came back, Jack was holding a green sweater, in the same yarn as your scarf. It didn't match his eyes, but it looked good against his skin. Maggie giggled. Gabriel was chuckling, and he held out his right hand. The pinky ring was gold, with a flat black inlay. A small diamond protruded slightly from the center.

"He said he wanted one! Why is this so funny?" Jack looked at you, bewildered.

"Pinky rings are a mafia thing, Jack. Made-men wore pinky rings as tokens to pay for their funerals." You'd seen it happen once or twice back in the day. You might have...harvested and resold one or two, and not to pay for a funeral. "Also, if he punches someone, that ring is going to cut their face."

"Royalty and church figures wear pinky rings too!"

"Yeah..." You shook your head. Bishop Gabriel? King Gabriel? "I uh...no comment."

Gabriel held his hand out and you offered him the box. He opened it and studied the stone.

"Why obsidian?"

"Didn't want to be flashy. I'm not a big damn hero, after all. And I guess I default to black."

Gabriel put the necklace on you. "Thank you, corazon." He kissed the back of your neck.

You looked up and realized that at some point Jack's parents had gone to the kitchen. Maggie sat there smugly, and Michael lingered by the tree, his back to you.

"I'm going to take Chang some coffee and cookies. You want to come?" Jack asked.

"Sure," Gabriel said, smiling with teeth.
"I'll uh...stay inside," you said, because it was cold. And maybe because you were not up for the ribbing Chang's people were going to give you about last night.

You picked up your trash and put it in one of the plastic bags the Morrisons had for the occasion. Then you gathered up your gifts and carried them upstairs. You packed them carefully in your bag before heading back down.

Maggie was in the kitchen and Michael stood by the door, rubbing the back of his neck.

"You uh, want some spice cake?" He asked you, staring at his feet.

"Sure," you said.

"I'll grab some," he said, already heading to the kitchen.
You sat down on the couch with your coffee.

Michael came back with two slices of cake and two forks.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." He sat down beside you, a sketchbook in hand. "You said you wanted to see some of my work?"

"Yes, please." You took a bite of the cake. It was nice, not really spicy enough to be called "spice cake" but you were in Midwestern America.

He handed you the sketchbook and studied his hands.

It was not the one you'd seen before. The drawings were more polished. You put the cake down and leafed through it slowly. They were mostly of his family, with a few farm animals sprinkled in. You paused on one of Maggie, fist in the air, caught mid-shout, her braids swinging.

"You really captured Maggie's energy."

He blushed.

"I'll fully admit that I'm not an expert, but I think they're really good. There's a life to them." You paused, seeing one of Jack sitting in a chair, staring off into space. "I like this one. You work from photos, live models, or memory?"

"A combination. I freehand the live models, sometimes get a photo, then polish it up."

You finished flipping through the book and handed it back. "Have a good talk with Jack?"

"I-yes." He glanced up at you.

"He's dense," you said. "You have to lay things out with diagrams."

"Yeah," Michael said. He turned the sketchbook over in his hands, fingers tracing the binding. "I'm sorry I was a jerk to you."

You shrugged. "We're good now. I'm not the one you were really a jerk too."

Michael nodded. "I know. I'll talk to him later." He sighed. "It's going to suck."
"Yeah, Gabriel's petty as fuck," you said, and then realized that wasn't the encouragement he needed.

"Would it be weird if I asked to see your prostheses?"

You took off your glove, held out your hand. "You want me to take them off?"

He studied them. "Umm, if it's not too much trouble."

So you broke them down and showed him the nerve augments. You explained basics as Torby and Angela had done to you in the beginning, and went over the upkeep routine.

He watched you attach the prostheses to the sockets.

"How'd you lose them?"

You sighed. "That's classified. But despite popular rumor, the Yakuza did not cut them off."

His eyes widened. "They did?"

"No." You shouldn't have mentioned that. "Never mind. Someone else was spreading that rumor. It's not true." You sighed. "Lost them to shrapnel. I was too close to an explosion. That's about all I can say."

"Jack said you had a wicked scar on your leg."

"Jack has some wicked scars-" You stopped. Because you didn't need to go there. "How did that get brought up?"

"I asked who had the coolest scar."

You weren't going to out Jack to his family. But you did not have the coolest scar. "That's a matter of opinion. Mine's a burn and shrapnel scar, so it looks more like tree bark and not epic like a plasma blade or something."

Michael's eyes darted down to your leg, but you did not roll up your pants.

"Do you do color work? Or just black and white?"

"Umm, dabbling still." He looked away.

"I'd like to buy some of the Jack ones. I'd be fine with a digital copy."

Michael's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, they're good."

"I uh...sure, I'll have to scan them."

"Well, let me know." You reattached your prostheses and pulled on your gloves.

"Reyes bought me that hideous sweater, didn't he?" Michael asked. It was a terrible shade of yellow-green that was vaguely reminiscent of vomit.

"Yeah, I had no idea what to get anyone." You laughed. "You should see the one Jack
bought me for the Ugly Christmas Sweater photo. It's fucking awful." You paused. "Though I bet if you wore when you uh...apologized to him, he'd go easier on you."

"Really?"

You shrugged. "Maybe."

He eyed you skeptically.

"I mean, it's hard to act mad when you're laughing at someone wearing the terrible sweater you gave them."

Michael deflated. "Yeah, you're probably right."

You didn't need a cigarette, but it was such a sinful luxury that you snuck out behind the barn and had one anyway. Because you'd made it through Christmas morning at the Morrison farm without causing any awkward incidents. You deserved a reward.

"Really?" Jack asked, arms crossed. You hadn't even heard him approach.

"Uhh..." You shrugged.

Jack plucked the cigarette out of your mouth and leaned in, his hips pressed against yours. He kissed you hard, mouth covering yours and for a moment, you couldn't breathe. When he pulled away, he blew out a mouthful of your smoke.

Your eyes widened when he took a drag off your cigarette. "I thought you didn't like smoking!"

"I never said that. I've got accelerated healing. But it's bad for you." Then he kissed you again, and when you exhaled, smoke curled from your lips. "If you hadn't figured it out, I like bad girls. A bit too much." He ground against you and your breath quickened.

"This where you'd bring all your conquests, farmboy? Behind the barn?"

"Only if I planned on fucking them," he said and kept smoking your cigarette.

"We are not having sex here."

"No," he agreed. One hand slipped into your coat and stroked your stomach. "That sweater is soft." He kissed your neck. "How are you holding up?" You leaned against the wall, hands in your pockets.

"I'm a little sore."

"I mean, do I need to make excuses so you can escape into the woods?" He straightened your coat, though he hadn't stopped touching you.

"I think I'm OK," you said.

"Jane'll be here soon. She has two kids, Gloria and Martin. They're four and two. I think
her husband is scared of me, so who knows if he'll show."

"Why would he be scared of you?" You said, when you actually meant "what did you do to him?"

"I might've threatened him a few times before they got hitched. You know, rural sexist stuff about "treating my sister right" and stupid things like that. Of course, it was after I'd finished SEP, gained like a hundred pounds of muscle, and my emotional control wasn't great..." Jack shrugged, cigarette dangling from his mouth. "The irony is Jane's the meanest out of all of us. She can take care of herself. But Will's not the brightest bulb. My sister bats her lashes, and he's tripping over himself to get her what she wants. Which is the smart thing, honestly. But she doesn't need to raise her voice to get her way."

You laughed, because Jack didn't have to raise his voice to get what he wanted from you or Gabriel. "I see. She know about us, too?" You don't know why you bothered asking. Everyone knew. And you were pretty sure Jack had known that it would happen like that; which was why he hadn't been the least bit worried about explaining it. Sneaky bastard.

"Yeah. I talk to Jane the most," he said. "She knows where a lot of the bodies are buried." He finished the cigarette, stubbed it out, and tossed it in the designated coffee can.

You surveyed the land. "Well, you have the room for them."

"That was a metaphor."

"Sure, it was."

Jack's hands skimmed your hips. "Thank you for being a good sport about this. I'm sorry I wasn't a better host."

"It's been...nice. Alien, but nice."

"Yeah. I like...not having to pretend. It can't be like this in Zurich," he said regretfully.

"I know. I'm not the one advertising our private life."

"That's not what I mean. I like being here with you and Gabriel. I like being in the open. It's going to be hard going back."

"I'm sorry." You looked away. Jack was good at showing emotion. You didn't mind the secrecy as much. You weren't ashamed, but this arrangement between you three, it was private. Explaining your business to everyone else was strange, even if they were accepting.

"Not your fault." Jack ran his fingers through your hair. "What'd you say to Michael?"

"I said a lot of things. I can't remember every word."

"I heard you threw him around," Jack said, eyes bright. "Are you beating up my kid brother?"

"Nah. We made a deal. He asked for best two out of three, but wanted all three matches, even after he lost the second. I obliged, because I'm a good guest."

Jack gave you a sly look. "You left an impression on him. He asked if we were really "dating." Dumb question. It's much too late to concoct a scenario so I can pretend that I don't like
cock."

You snorted. "He was a bit hung up on your sexuality. I'm scared to ask what you told him."

"I said, "yes, and more." Emphasis on more." Jack lifted your gloved hands to his lips.

"I bet you did. "Wily vixen?" How old are you? Seventy?"

"I was being stupid for Maggie," he huffed. "My siblings like you. It's a good thing."

"Well, that's good. I worked hard to be likeable," you said, unsure of what he was getting at.

"You're treating this visit like a mission."

You winced. Were you that transparent? "I wouldn't say that."

"You think I don't know when you're playing a role?" He raised a brow, and you had to admit, Jack was a better actor than you. He could probably recognize your bullshit pretty quickly.

"I mean, a little. Mostly I'm just milling about in confusion."

"I didn't realize how uncomfortable you were. I'm sorry. Maybe Gabe's family would've been easier to start out with. I uh, shouldn't have pushed you so hard. Not after Cambridge."

"It wasn't just you," you said, recalling Jesse's little digs in the mess hall. "Other people played a part too. It's fine. I'm glad I came." And you were. It might have started awkward and harrowing, but there'd been something here that you couldn't have gotten in Zurich. Not just the cornfields and excess of casserole. There was something about seeing Jack with his family that was intimate. And it made Jack happy. That counted for something.

He studied your face.

"I mean it," you said. "It's good for me to do things that...aren't work."

Jack placed both hands on the wall on either side of your head and looked you in the eye. "I know it's not the same for you and me as it is with you and Gabe. You're more guarded with me. I see you working hard to hide it, but it's fine. We don't know each other as well as we know Gabe."

You shrugged sheepishly, because of course Jack noticed. "Sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for. We're getting there. I'm just saying, you don't have to pretend."

"I'm not pretending. I just don't know what I'm doing."

Jack sighed against you, one arm slipping around your waist. The gentleness surprised you. "You're trusting us to work it out," he said and kissed you softly. You leaned into him, one hand gripping his shirt, your metal fingers held firmly at your side. "I think we're doing pretty good so far. I know I have trouble keeping my hands off you, but it's not just sex for me. You know that, right?" The earnestness on his face made your chest ache.

"I...I'm not just here to humor Gabriel," you said quickly. "I hope you don't think that."

"I know," he said. "You're not as inscrutable as you think."
"You're not as smooth as you think," you scowled.

"Well obviously I'm doing something right, otherwise I wouldn't have you alone behind the goddamn barn," he gave that damn recruitment poster grin and you wanted to bite him. "You're doing it again. You get that look and I want to do bad things to you." He nuzzled your cheek. "One more kiss, please? Then we'll go back before I get us in trouble."

You wanted to say "no" on principle. But Jack had a way of circumventing your Blackwatch petty. He cupped your face, and you wrapped your arms around his neck and met him halfway.

"Hey Jack, Gloria's looking for yo- Shit! Sorry!" Michael's voice went high.

Jack broke the kiss, but his hands stayed on you. He grinned at his brother. "We'll be there in a minute."

"Damnit, Jack, how old are you? Sixteen? You're still sneaking behind the barn?" Michael faced away, but the tips of his ears were red.

"Did she bring Will?" Jack asked, conveniently ignoring Michael's query. He did that a lot. "Or is he still traumatized?"

"He's here somewhere," Michael said, turning around, a scarlet blush blazing across his cheeks. "Gloria's looking for you."

"Want to meet a living breathing wrecking ball?" Jack asked, his smile infectious.

"I already know Reinhardt."

"This one's smaller, maybe a little less innocent," Jack said.

"Sure," you said, because you really were treating this like a mission, and you didn't get the option to chicken out.

The pair of towheaded kids were far more interested in their Uncle Jack than you. Sitting on the floor, a thin blonde man in a cowboy hat smiled nervously at you, but couldn't quite bring himself to make eye contact. He kept shooting panicked glances at Jack. That must be Will. Beside him was a tall blonde woman with sharp gray eyes and full lips. Jane was pretty in a severe way, and she reminded you more of Jack's father than his mother.

You sat on the couch beside Gabriel, watching Jack toss Gloria in the air. He was good with them, not that you were surprised. Jack was good with people in general. Maggie and Martin played with a truck, repeatedly ramming it into Michael's leg. Michael rolled his eyes, now wearing Gabriel's hideous present. Jack's parents looked on fondly.

It was so domestic it made your teeth hurt.

You did your best to look placid, but having to watch all this togetherness that you could never reclaim, it made breathing hard. You didn't resent the Morrisons, but you needed air.

"Be back in a minute," you told Gabriel cheerfully. "Forgot to send instructions to Ziv."
Gabriel gave you a measured look. "Go ahead: that boy needs constant supervision." It was a prearranged signal, and you slipped off the couch and up the stairs. You went into Michael's room, closed the door, and pulled on your coat. You were halfway out the window when the door opened.

Jane stood in the threshold, a small smile on her lips when she spotted you. You should have dropped then, slipped down the roof and off the porch. If you ran, you could make it out of earshot before she had the chance to react.

"I was hoping I'd get a chance to talk to you," Jane said too quickly for you to feign deafness. Her tone was pleasant, but there was measure of steel at the core. It wasn't quite the Strike Commander cadence, but she had plenty of confidence in her authority.

"Ah," you said, crouching outside the window. Damnit, you should have run when you had the chance. It was too late to pretend to be polite. "I uh..."

"Why don't you come back inside? It's cold out there."

Damnit. She'd been waiting to get you alone. That was the only explanation. You wondered then if Jack had tipped her off. Who knew what he told her?

You sighed and climbed back inside. You debated on leaving the window open so you could fall out if necessary.

"Do you mind closing the window? We don't want to let all the heat out."

_Damnit._

You shut the window and watched her, back to the wall. She stood tall, wearing a bright red sweater and jeans, her riding boots, freshly polished.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" You studied the other exit route. She blocked the doorway and you couldn't slip by her politely. Damn these mission parameters.

"I just wanted to get to know you a little better. Jack speaks quite highly of you." She smiled, and you tried to return the expression. Fuck, you'd misread the entire situation. You thought Jack's family was going to leave you alone because Jack asked them to. No, they were waiting for the big guns: Jane was here to interrogate you.

You'd survived Lacroix. You could handle a civilian, right?

"Maggie told me all about her new life goal."

You winced.

"Though I think she wants two boyfriends, rather than a boyfriend and a girlfriend. She is severely disappointed that Gabriel doesn't have any brothers." Jane's smile was friendly and you didn't trust it in the least. "And Michael, well, his attitude has drastically improved, though I'm a little concerned about that limp. He swears he tripped over a goat."

"Ah," you said cleverly. "Those goats. Very trippy." She had a disturbingly clear picture of what you'd been up to for the past few days.

"Jack won't tell me exactly what you do, only that you work with Gabriel, so I have to assume it's very classified. I'm a school psychologist; I can only imagine how difficult your work..."
"Dealing with children is much more challenging. I do lots of paperwork," you said, used to redirecting. "It's awful."

She tilted her head to the side. "We've all seen the "Ms. Strike" photos. Jack was pretty tickled about how you got rid of his personal assistant. It's funny, I always thought he'd end up with a girl like Ainsley. Turns out he has better taste than I expected."

"He has great taste in men," you agreed, because you had no idea what kind of women Jack actually liked.

"I'm making you uncomfortable," she said, keeping that same measured, easy tone, like she was talking to a child.

You crossed your arms. There was nothing polite you could respond with.

"I'm not trying to interrogate you about your intentions toward my brother, despite how he terrorized my husband. I honestly just want to get to know you," Jane said, not raising her voice or even looking disturbed. "Jack says you spar with him and you cook for him. He says you're loyal, brave, and acerbic. He says you like your space, and I think I'm starting to understand what he means." She leaned against the door. "You know the interesting thing? Dad's more relaxed about Gabriel since you're in the picture. Not that I agree with him - Gabriel is great - but Dad seems to think you're a civilizing factor. It could be a kneejerk reaction of relief that Jack still likes women, but I can't be sure."

"He said something about the goats liking me."

Jane laughed. "I bet he tried to tell you Maggie wouldn't let him get rid of them. Don't be fooled. Dad adores the goats. Maggie lost interest long ago."

You waited for her to continue, because you'd learned your lesson about volunteering information.

"Jack's very fond of children. I know he terrifies poor Will, but his niece and nephew adore him. Gabriel is also good with kids. I know they've talked about starting a family."

You blanched, eyeing the window. Those were not thoughts you were ready to build upon, let alone talk about with this uncomfortably perceptive stranger. You recalled how they doted over Farah. That was safe. "Yeah, they'd be great parents."

Jane waited expectantly.

You gritted your teeth. She wasn't going to move till you'd satisfied her curiosity, and you couldn't just shove her out of the way. That window pane didn't look too thick. If you punched it with your left hand, you could jump out.

"Hey Jane, what are you doing in my- Oh, hi, Lucky." Michael stood behind his sister. "I meant to ask, did you have a print you preferred? I think I'll start the coloring tonight."

Jane watched you shrewdly.

"Can you show me them again? I liked the sketch work for the three-quarter face, but I don't know if color would really add to it."
"Yeah, sure. My sketchbook is downstairs."

"I'll come take a look," you said, and Jane stepped out of your way.

"It was good talking to you," she said brightly.

"Uh-huh," you said, because if you used real words, you might tell her what you really thought.

In the kitchen, a room with three exits, you gave Michael all your cigarettes and a firm handshake. He just grinned at you, looking pleased with himself. He handed you the sketchbook. You examined one of Jack in Strike Commander gear petting a patchy Labrador. You hadn't seen the dog, and now that you thought about it, what farm didn't have a dog?

"That's Atticus. He was Jack's dog before he left for boot camp. We haven't tried to replace him yet," Michael said.

"Ah. Then that one for sure." You weren't sure if Jack would like it, but you thought he would.

"She means well," Michael said after a moment. "She's just intense."

"I get that." You rubbed the back of your neck. You weren't going to badmouth his sister, as uncomfortable as the encounter had been. "I really appreciate the assist. You had excellent timing. Thanks."

Michael just turned red and mumbled something unintelligible.

You stayed away from the house till you saw the minivan drive off. You gave it another fifteen minutes, then casually made your way back.

Gabriel sat on the porch, drinking something out of a mug. "You missed the ugly sweater picture."

You shrugged. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"Didn't know she'd come on that strong. She was all lightness and flowers when I met her. Of course, Jack hadn't traumatized her husband yet." Gabriel handed you his mug and you smelled whiskey.

"Thanks." You finished it, craving heat.

"After you left, Michael said some sharp things to Jane, mostly about "not scaring you off." Maggie caught some of it and joined in, definitely on the side of not spooking the feral Lucky." Gabriel patted your back.
You rubbed your forehead. "She could give Lacroix a run for his money. Seriously, you should consider hiring her for interrogations. You'll have people begging for the bolt cutters."

"You're pretty persuasive when you want to be. I know you're the reason I got a vague stuttering apology from a maladjusted teenager in a hideous sweater."

"Jack's terrible at honesty. I blame him."

"Of course," Gabriel said, tolerantly. "Everyone's watching The Christmas Story. Why don't you come back inside and warm up?"

You followed Gabriel in. Jack was on one couch. His parents were on the loveseat. Michael and Maggie were on the floor, and Maggie waved before returning her attention to the film. They all politely pretended like the movie was very engrossing. It felt staged.

It hit you then: Jack's family was fucking catering to your crazy. Goddamnit.

You sat down beside Jack and he put an arm around your shoulder and kissed your cheek. Gabriel settled on the other side rubbing your back. You forced yourself to smile and stare at the television screen.

Jack's family wasn't perfect, however they felt normal, supportive, cohesive: whatever families should be. They had their problems, like all families did, but it wasn't hard to see how Jack turned out to be such a goddamn decent person.

You changed into your pajamas. At some point, you'd dozed off during the movie. Tonight was the last night here and then it was back to Zurich and work. Work would be good. Though no one had sent you any messages or requests, not even Bái Shé.

Gabriel came in and sat on a bed, eating a cookie, his new book under his arm.

"What kind of books do you like?"

"All kinds." He looked at you. "You looking for a recommendation?"

You shrugged. You didn't read for pleasure any more. There was too much work now, but maybe once upon a time, two lifetimes ago, you had. Back when you thought you'd be a doctor, or a firefighter, or an astronaut. Back before.

You'd transported a rare book or two. "Incunabula" they called it, which you assumed was academic-speak for "pretentiously expensive." Thousands of credits just for the first or a unique printing of a real paper book. One particularly old manuscript required temperature control, no exposure to light, and definitely no reading. Digital readers made more sense, letting you carry thousands of books in one convenient package. Anything else was silly. Now, you realized, you were most likely missing parts of that equation.

Gabriel finished his cookie. "Jack used to get real sick during SEP. Me, not so much. I read to him: Borges, Tolkien, Achebe, Kawabata. I started Pride and Prejudice as a joke, but I couldn't get through the second chapter. Jack bought Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, and that was more fun. We did The Color of Water, H is for Hawk, Cry the Beloved Country, Shadow of
the Wind..."

You weren't sure what to say; you'd heard of a few of those. But Gabriel rattled them off like they were common knowledge. Maybe they were. You hadn't exactly been attending book clubs. There were a lot of things you'd missed out on, this was only one of many.

"Hey." Jack stepped into the room and shut the door. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah." You managed a wry grin. "I'm fine."

"I know." He pulled off his shirt and sat down in front of you. "I appreciate you not deck ing my sister or breaking a window."

"I am a normal healthy person who wouldn't do things like that to a civilian," you said, not the least bit defensive. No, not you.

Jack just kissed you, his hands sliding down your waist. He rolled backward, pulling you on top of him. "Hi."

"Is that how you greet everyone?"

Jack just ran his knuckles across your cheek. "You're so pretty."

"Jack-"

"Want to make you smile, the happy one, not the mean one." He kissed your hands. "What can I do?" He looked up at you, eyes wide and hopeful. Your heart hit your ribcage too hard and you wondered if everyone else could hear it.

"How do you do this to me?" The question was meant to be rhetorical, but Jack dragged you down to his level, sprinkling light kisses across your neck. "Jack-"

"I know you're sore. I'll stop now." He dropped his arms to his sides. "Just tell me what I can do."

Your pulse was too quick and you were already breathing too hard.

He lay beneath you, the yearning on his face making your throat tight.

"I don't know what to do when you look at me like that." You turned your head.

"Whatever you want," Jack said softly.

You shivered and he rubbed your lower back. "I can't do hard tonight, Jack."

"Whatever you want," he repeated. "I mean it."

You rocked your hips against him and he groaned, arms tightening around you. He felt good against you and even if you knew you should stop, he'd just given you the invitation you needed. "I want to be on top."

He nodded, placing his hands flat on the floor. "You lead."

"Off." You tugged at his shirt and he obeyed, grinning.

You stripped off your clothes and unzipped him, unsurprised to find him ready for you.
You licked him and he squeezed his eyes shut, inhaling sharply. Once he was slick, you lowered yourself onto him, gasping as you sank down taking him to the base. It was always a slight shock at how smoothly you could fit him.

Jack's eyes were on your face. "Do you want me to move?"

"Slowly," you said, resting your knees on either side of his thighs.

Jack raised his hips and you put your palms on his either side of his neck, giving yourself extra leverage.

"I love watching you take me," Jack whispered. "I can't get enough of that look on your face. Like you want more, but you're not sure if you can do it. I want to make you feel good. I want to see you come while riding me."

You rolled your hips, sticking to languid motions. Jack moved with you, slow shallow thrusts. The gentleness was comforting.

He stroked your face, fingers twining in your hair. "That's it, baby. You want me to keep going like this? Or you want me to go faster?"

You whined, clasping his hand against your cheek. "A little faster."

He obeyed, a dreamy smile spreading across his face. "Want me to rub your clit too?"

You nodded, biting back a moan.

He started slow, rubbing circles around your nub. "Do you want me to come inside you? I can finish with you, if you like. But I don't have to."

"Please."

"Look at me, please."

You couldn't deny him that much. You locked eyes, and his smile widened. "Going to come soon, baby?"

You nodded, hips shaking as his fingers sped up. His cock slid into you at an achingly gentle pace. You flattened one hand over your mouth, not looking away from Jack's face. He grinned up at you, breathing hard. He drove his hips into you and you shuddered as he filled you all the way. Your control snapped and you could feel yourself clenching around him, trying to take him deeper. The pleasure came in waves, and you forced yourself to keep your eyes on him.

It was your name on his lips when he came, his naked gaze on your face. You dropped against his chest, whimpering as you rode out the aftershocks. He held you against him, kissing your face while you caught your breath.

Jack's tender smile made your chest clench. "I'll do whatever you want, just keep looking at me like that."

"You're ridiculous," you murmured. Jack pulled out, and his cum streamed down your thighs.

Still on the bed, Gabriel groaned.

"Don't be self-conscious." Jack kissed your throat. He looked up. "Do you want to watch
me take care of Gabe? Or do you want to help?"

You followed his gaze. Gabriel sat on the bed, legs spread, eyes dark as he watched the two of you. You sat back on your heels, looking for something to clean yourself up with.

"Leave it," Gabriel said hoarsely.

Jack unzipped Gabriel who was already hard. He pushed the foreskin back, tonguing the head. Gabriel had his legs wide enough apart that you could kneel next to Jack. So you joined him, kissing Gabriel's shaft. Your breath quickened as Gabriel stroked your head. You nibbled on Gabriel's inner thigh as Jack began to deepthroat him. Gabriel thrust slowly while Jack took him to the base, eyes closed as he moaned around the cock in his mouth.

"Don't be greedy, Jack."

"I can't fit you like that," you said.

"Don't need to tonight. Just like watching you both share." Gabriel sighed as you and Jack licked his cock, Jack cupping Gabriel's balls while you slurped on the head.

"He just likes debauching us both in my childhood bedroom," Jack said and nipped Gabriel's thigh.

"You like it just as much," Gabriel rumbled. "Go on then. Show me some of that teamwork you're always going on about, Jack."

"Shut up, Gabe."

You laughed and kissed Gabriel's thigh. "You're awful."

"Seeing you two playing so nice together is such a rare treat. I might as well enjoy it."

Jack placed your hand on Gabriel's shaft. He kissed you before running his tongue around the head. The two of you worked in tandem, sucking and stroking till Gabriel's fingers tightened in your hair. He came down Jack's throat and Jack kissed you hungrily, Gabriel's seed on his tongue.

"That was adorable," Gabriel said, somewhere between sardonic and satisfied.

Jack helped you clean up, with one Gabriel's shirts, you were pretty sure. You put pajamas on because the lack of a lock was really going to get you in trouble. Gabriel tucked himself back in his pants. Jack sprawled in the center of the floor, grinning at you both. Gabriel took one side, and you lay on the other, legs tangled with Jack's.

Something had changed over the course of this trip, and while you weren't too sure what it meant, it didn't bother you as much as you would have expected.

In the early noon hours, you visited the goats. Then the barn cats. There were a variety of people dropping by today, mostly to get a glimpse of Jack. You made yourself scarce, because you didn't need the attention. But you were getting hungry. Maybe it was safe to sneak in?
You were halfway up the drive when you saw Gabriel on the porch, hands casually arranged in the "woods" sign. You turned around and casually headed toward the barn before breaking off toward the woods. Chang was waiting for you there.

"Sitrep?" You asked, touching your sidearm.

"Nothing serious. Local reporter friend of Jane's weaseled an invite. Reyes wanted you out of sight. He'll be along shortly."

You sighed in relief. "That's fine."

She handed you a travel mug of coffee. "That's from him."

"Thanks." You leaned against a tree. The snow was only up to your ankles, but it still aggravated you. "Am I keeping you from something?"

"No." Chang watched you, and you weren't sure how to interpret her expression. You just held the coffee a second, savoring the warmth. "Reyes asked me to stay with you till he came."

Huh. You sipped your coffee. Gabriel had made it just the way you liked it. That man was a treasure, when he wasn't being a dick. "Do you know how I met Captain Patel?"

Chang reminded you of a hawk. She had that slow, serious blink and slightly feral gaze that made you feel like prey. "No."

You told her about the grenades and your old rifle. Chang's stance relaxed just a little over the course of the story. "She was a good mentor. I was a terrible student." You studied your cup. "How well did you know her?"

"Aishani was the best teacher in SEP. She was harsh, but fair. Jack and I served under her in Lisbon. After we were assigned our own units, she told us to call her by her first name. There was another Patel in the platoon and he was a moron. She said she didn't want people to think they were related. Aishani wasn't openly affectionate, but we understood what she meant." Chang closed her eyes. "Shouldn't you be asking Reyes or Jack these questions?"

"I'm trying to get a broader view." Gabriel didn't like talking about her. He would, if you asked, but there was such a shadow on his face that you stopped asking awhile ago. You hadn't asked Jack yet. You didn't need to be dropping more of your baggage in his lap.

Chang uncrossed her arms. "I heard you regularly spar with Jack."

"Ha, I wouldn't call it sparring. He kicks me around the mat and thinks it's funny. He has to go at significantly reduced speed and strength. I'm nowhere near his level. My skills skew subtle: B&E, surveillance, assassination." You looked at your cup. "You're pretty amazing to watch. I've seen Jack, Gabriel, and Captain Patel in action. You're faster than all of them. Graceful too."

She wrinkled her nose at you. "What are you getting at?"

"Compliments where compliments are due," you said. "I may avoid straight up fights, but I appreciate skill where I see it."

"Fitzpatrick and Almasi shared their displeasure regarding your skills." She smiled that cool, not quite friendly smile. "I can't fault them too much."
You shrugged modestly. "You were busy with Gabriel. He's good at driving people to distraction."

"That's an understatement." Chang laughed harshly. "He and Jack have always pushed too far. I have never had any interest in getting mixed up in their dominance battles. They fight, fuck, and eventually work it out. I hold grudges close to my heart and have no desire to be touched."

You kept silent, because that's not quite how Gabriel told it, and drank the rest of your coffee. "Gabriel said you got along with Jack."

"Jack and I are friends. Reyes and I, not so much." The way she said "friends" made you think she didn't have very many of those left. Jack obviously trusted her with his family and the knowledge of his relationship with Gabriel. That was definitely friendship.

"Is this the part where you give me friendly warnings? Because I met Jane yesterday, and she was terrifying."

"Jack's an adult. He can take care of himself. You're the one who stands to lose the most." Chang said it as cold statement of fact. On someone else it would be catty or backhanded; but you were coming to understand that she was just uncommonly blunt. Maybe that's why she'd never risen above sergeant.

"Yeah, I know. I can't even say this is the dumbest thing I've done. I mean, the omnic grenade attack was pretty stupid. I really shouldn't be allowed on an open battlefield."

Chang nodded. "You're the kind of idiot they like. You should be careful though. Jack's soft. He'll be upset if you stupid yourself to death. Reyes too, probably."

"Wow." You laughed because there was someone out there more emotionally stunted than you. "I uh, thanks."

"Michael came to see me today. He wants to train with my squad. He even asked nicely. Your doing?"

You shrugged. "Sorry."

"Oh no, I've been waiting for this. Because he's been a little shit for the past two years. I'm going to enjoy this." Chang's smile was beatific; it was the happiest you'd seen her. "Don't worry. I won't cause permanent damage. He'll be better for it. I trust you remember Hell Week."

"Uh..." You did, though it was the basic training one, not the Navy Seal one.

"The Road to Heaven? You know, where you crawl over rocks and coral through ocean water in an obstacle course of pure endurance and suffering?"

"No."

"Pig Pond? It's how you get the best ghillie suits."

"I uh...no." You wondered if you should warn Michael.

"Aishani didn't make you do any of that?" Chang looked annoyed.

"We were in the Yukon. There were the sleeveless snowball fights and polar bear club-style ice-swimming. Fuck, I hated that shit."
Chang nodded. "Yes. I'm going to do it all. And when I'm done, he will be able to take care of himself. Perhaps Maggie will want to join in."

You weren't sure if anyone would willingly do that shit, let alone Maggie.

Chang smiled to herself and you knew her excitement was real. Yeah, no one who went through SEP came out normal.

Goodbyes were more emotional than you expected. Maggie kept wiping her eyes, repeatedly hugging you and Jack, but mostly Gabriel. Jack's mother gave each of you a packed lunch and a long hug. Jack's father grimly shook everyone's hand, Gabriel included. Michael did the same.

"Chang's uh...got an intense workout planned for you," you said.

"Yeah, Jack warned me." Michael sighed. "But it'll give me an idea of what to expect if I join up."

"Sure," you said, hoping he wouldn't.

"Jack gave me your contact info. I'll uh, send the work when I'm done."

"Yeah, want me to pay you now?"

"No, no. It's fine." Michael handed you a large envelope. "I uh...late Christmas present."

"Thank you," you said, opening it. The sketch had been inked, but not colored. It was you, Jack, and Gabriel on the couch. You asleep against Jack's shoulder, Gabriel with his arm around both of you. Jack was smiling and Gabriel looked vaguely amused. It had to be from last night during the movie. "Wow. I...thank you."

"It's rough. I'm going to do a color version, if you like."

"Definitely."

"What do you have there?" Gabriel glanced over your shoulder. "Oh, that is good." He studied the page. "If you do a color page, I'll buy one. Jack would too."

Michael looked at his shoes. "Yeah, OK. Thanks."

"You can't go featuring this in your portfolio though," Gabriel said.

"I know." Michael gave him a look. "It's a present, OK?"

"Thank you, Michael," you said. You wouldn't be able to display it anywhere, but just knowing it existed made your stomach do flip-flops.
Jack was quiet the entire ride home. Gabriel had his new copy of The Count of Monte Cristo out. He saw you studying the cover.

"Have you read it?"

"Saw the movie. It was OK."

"None of the movies do it justice. It's too long and complex for one film. There was a French mini-series that stayed true to the book. Gérard would probably be able to dig it up. The book is much better than any films." Gabriel looked slightly offended by your reference to the movie. "It's very clearly about revenge. Would you like me to read it to you?"

Sometimes shogi boards, weren't just shogi boards. You felt the undercurrent of something in Gabriel's offer. This wasn't just about expanding your literary horizons. He knew you were capable of reading it on your own; granted with your workload, that was highly unlikely.

"Sure," you said, because Gabriel had a nice voice. "Thank you."

"It's long," Gabriel said. "He got paid by the word. But it's worth it."

"I trust your judgment." You back in your seat, head resting on Jack's shoulder. "If it's boring, I'll just fall asleep."

"You better not," Gabriel said, thumbing through the book.

"It's your voice," you said. "Makes me sleepy."

Gabriel snorted. "Chapter One, Marseilles, the Arrival-" he began.

Jack looked at you both and smiled.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote fluffy sex. What the fuck is that? I can't even.... Oh well. Christmas fluff-fest has mostly come to a conclusion. Thank God, because I'm fluffed out. (Haha, joke's on me, writing several chapters ahead and stuck on another fluff part right now. I just want to write violent adventures, damnit, is that too much to ask?!) Back to our regularly scheduled story. Yeesh.

Been sick and it's pissing me off. Wrote slightly less than 2k over the last two days and that also pisses me off too because I need to write more if I'm ever going to finish this monster.

Appreciate the comment-love. It cheers me up and reminds me that I have to edit my work because other people are actually reading it. And trust me, the editing is very important. :P
"So, how'd it go?" Jesse sat in your room eating the casserole Mrs. Morrison packed for you.

"It was weird," you said. "Good, but weird." You put the games on your desk, unsure where you were going to store them. And you took your earrings out, because you couldn't wear them on missions.

"Morrison?" Jesse asked, gesturing at the earrings. You put them in an empty ammo box and tucked them in your drawer. You left on the obsidian disk. You'd take it off before any action, but no one else could see it under your shirt.

"Yeah. Gabriel got me the board games and a sweater."

"They liked your gifts?"

"I think so." You put the fox in the drawer and tucked the envelope with the drawing in your desk. The cast iron skillet was already in the kitchen. "His whole family knows now."

"Drama?"

"Mostly from me hiding, I guess. His married sister was dead set on interrogating me. Sorted out his younger brother. We're good now. Everyone else was nice."

Jesse nodded. "We took Genji with us. Ate too much chocolate. Fareeha liked all the lights." He paused. "I ran a short mission with your boy."

"Oh? How'd it go?"

"He's fucking obnoxious."

"Yeah, I know." You laughed dryly. "But how'd he do?"

"Wasn't a combat mission. Good B&E skills, adequate E&E, obviously superb tech ability. You and me, Lucky, we talk shit; Ziv spews it like a goddamn geyser."

"Yeah, there's a limit to how much smart ass we can contain in Blackwatch."

"Oh, here's your gift." Jesse casually pulled out a bottle of Johnny Walker Gold with a ribbon on it. "Figured you should probably learn to drink better stuff."

"Thanks, asshole." You handed Jesse his present. "It's kind of from both me and Genji."

"Shouldn't Genji be here for it then?"

"He made the recommendation. Said he'd show you how to use it, if you wanted."

"Now I'm worried." Jesse opened the box and studied the tea set. The clay pot and straight edged cylindrical cups were glazed a swirling white and gray. It came with a bamboo whisk, mixing bowl, and scoop for a Japanese tea ceremony. You'd included some good matcha as well.
"Thought you and Captain Amari might like it."

Jesse gave you a grin. "You're putting both our names on this gift?"

"Oh no, I'm giving her the wagashi."

"Thanks, Lucky." He studied it. "Can't believe you got me a tea party set. Can I have a pony next? Maybe a tiara?"

"Oh fuck you."

"Chanukah is over." Ziv stared at the package.

"Well, sorry."

"This isn't a Christmas gift, is it?" He sounded offended.

"No. Christmas is over."

"You insensitive bitch. Not only did you get me a Christmas gift, you gave it to me late. And I'm Jewish!"

"It's a New Year's gift, you ass."

"Who gives gifts for New Years?"

"I do, you ungrateful little shit."

Ziv huffed and opened the box. "...Your taste in clothes sucks."

"Oh shut up. Those are omnium plates, meant to be worn under your clothes, and will hopefully deflect bullets."

He lifted the lumpy black vest up; it was lightweight. "For missions?" His voice went high. "They provide armor, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But you managed to piss off Gabriel, Jesse, Torby, and who knows who else, while I was out. I figured you needed the extra protection."

"Fuck you, Lucky."

"Maybe you need a helmet too..."

Three hanetsuki sets for Genji: the Japanese badminton game was a New Years tradition, and you anticipated Jesse, Fareeha, and Ziv wanting to play. Five pounds of peanut brittle for
Winston. Wagashi for Captain Amari. Chocolate fudge for Torby and Angela. An emergency flare kit for Lacroix. It was a joke and probably inappropriate, but you gave it to him anyway.

And now, you were having a sit-down meeting with him and Captain Amari.

He was mobile, finally, dressed in a dapper black suit with long cuffs and a Nehru collar. Captain Amari was in uniform and sat behind her desk. He sat on the side of her desk, and she frowned at him.

"Chanceux," Lacroix greeted blithely.

"Is my real name classified?"

"Yes," Captain Amari said. "But no more so than any other Blackwatch operatives."

"Just checking," you said, giving Lacroix a look.

"You are wondering why we have called you here. Rest assured, it is not about your personal life or your questionable taste in gift-giving." Even if Lacroix sounded amused, that was no reason to let your guard down.

"Bái Shé?"

"In a way." Captain Amari looked like she was struggling with the urge to push Lacroix off her desk. "Gérard, this is your show."

"Chanceux, you've graduated beyond short-term ops, and frankly, they're beneath you. You're wasted on admin work. And you don't have the discipline to remain a permanent member of a frontal assault team. I would like to offer you more training and have you come work for me."

You blinked. "...I'm sorry, I heard a bunch of backhanded compliments, at least one honest insult, and then something about you wanting me to work for you? What?" You glanced at Captain Amari. "Did I hear that right?"

"Yes, Chanceux. Your powers of observation have not failed you yet."

You couldn't keep the incredulity off your face. "Is this some kind of twisted payback for saving your life? Because I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Captain Amari cleared her throat.

Lacroix just laughed. "No, the Shanghai incident has led me to believe I should assemble a larger team, preferably of people cleared for Shit Spiders. I am making the same offer to Agent Mihret."

"Ziv's combat skills are mediocre."

"That's what training is for. Though in this line of work, if you have to fight, you've already botched the situation. Anyway, you weren't nearly as accomplished when you arrived a little over year ago."

Yeah, Lacroix hadn't given you the time of day till after the Alps mission. "You didn't seem to interested in training me back then." You realized that was petty as fuck, but it was Lacroix.

"Back then there were four possible outcomes, and this was the least likely," he said
pleasantly. "The first and most probable, was that you wouldn't be able to handle the pressure and wash out. I was wrong about that."

"Good to know," you said, wondering if Lacroix actually heard what he was saying.

"The second option was that you would break down and self-destruct. You were traumatized, delusional, and erratic. It was a legitimate concern." His tone didn't change at all, still pleasant and conversational.

You rubbed your forehead. "Thanks. Your concern is...touching."

"There was always the chance you'd do an adequate job and adapt. You'd be another cog in the Blackwatch machine, and that would be that. I never doubted that possibility. Gabriel is good at training up his agents."

You sat back in your chair and waited for Lacroix to deliver an actual reason to hire you.

"You surpassed my expectations, Chanceux. Not only did you adapt, you thrived. You have good instincts, a strong stomach, and the fortitude to get the job done. On top of that, you are much smarter than you first appear."

You snorted.

"And while you are achieving what Blackwatch requires of you, I think you could be doing more."

"I hate torture," you told him. "I never want to do it again."

"Yes, well, the job requires more than asking painful questions." He smiled thinly at you, like he knew you'd do it again if you had to. "Do you know how to plan a long-term op? How are you at running HUMINT? Can you maintain cover for months?"

You worked for Gabriel. Because you trusted him. You didn't trust Lacroix for shit. "I'm happy where I am."

"And if your relationships falter, what then?"

"There's a reason Captain Amari is my CO," you said, unsurprised that he would use that against you.

Lacroix stared down at you, arms crossed. Clearly, he didn't expect this level of resistance. Clearly, he didn't get you. "You don't trust me."

"No," you agreed. "I know we're on the same side. I know you're very good at your work. I know you're a lot smarter than most of us. But I don't know if I can follow you. I don't know if you have my back. So I don't know if I can work with you."

He tilted his head back. "But you know that about Gabriel?"

"Obviously."

"I won't insult you by insinuating that you're afraid to leave your position because your lover favors you."

"Thanks," you said. "That's very decent of you."
"I meant what I said, Chanceux. You have real potential. I hate to see that wasted. Take a few days to think about it. We can work something out."

He slid off Captain Amari's desk and took a jaunty step out the door. "Talk to Gabriel, see what he thinks."

You stared at the door for a moment, then looked at Captain Amari who was resting her face in her hand.

"Did that just fucking happen?"

You asked Gabriel's opinion on the matter, even if you could guess it.

"That's a terrible idea," Gabriel said, not looking up from his desk. "I like Gérard as a person. He works well with most people, despite his sociopathic tendencies. But he's a ruthless operative: clever, dangerous, and hyper-focused. I don't think it's wise for you to go work for him."

"Why?" You had an idea what Lacroix was angling at, but you asked Gabriel anyway.

"You will be doing enhanced interrogations," Gabriel said. "I've seen how Gérard trains his protégées. He is a harsh teacher, more concerned about shaping their psyches than any kind of moral compass. Gérard may have served in the military, but he was DGSE for years. You may be used to black ops, but you haven't worked with spooks like him. He's an extremely Machiavellian le Carré novel made flesh."

"You don't sound surprised though." Because Lacroix's request had shocked you.

Gabriel paused. "I might not have been entirely honest with you after you interrogated Chumak."

You crossed your arms. "What?"

"I didn't see you leave his room. Gérard called me once you started and it was too late to stop you. I wouldn't have let you get that far," Gabriel glared at the wall. "I don't know if he called me because he wanted to show me that you were capable of the work, or if he knew you'd need someone to...support you afterward. I was too angry to ask and we had an audience. In all likelihood, both reasons factored into his decision."

Anger flared in your chest. "I asked you directly how you knew. Why'd you lie?"

"Because the more I thought about it, the angrier I got. I didn't get Gérard's angle at the time. Why didn't you ask me to do it? I know the answer now, but that doesn't make me feel any better."

"It wasn't about you," you snapped.

"I know. After everything was said and done, you were hurting and I didn't want to fight about it. You should have just asked me to do it."

"Not about you, Gabriel." You scowled at him. "And it doesn't excuse lying to me."
"You knew I didn't want you to do it and you went behind my back." Gabriel glared at you.

"You lied to my face." You stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"To get some air."

He stood. "Is that all you're doing?"

"Guess you're going to have to trust that I'm telling you the truth," you said, fully capable of Blackwatch petty.

Gabriel stared darkly at you. You could practically read his mind. He was considering ordering you to stay. Then he was thinking about your inevitable bad reaction to that. Yeah, he had to let you walk away.

You casually strolled out the door. You didn't even slam it. Because you were a goddamn professional.

Even angry, you could be smart. You fully understood Lacroix's parting shot. It was meant to get you riled up at Gabriel, because the two of you knew Gabriel would coddle you if given the chance. He might not think he was doing it, but he would. Hell, if Gabriel tried to forbid you to do it, you'd do it to spite him, because you were Blackwatch petty. OK, maybe you weren't that bad, but you had a reputation, and Lacroix had to be aware of it. Just like he probably suspected that Gabriel hadn't been honest about the Chumak interrogation either. These fucking alpha males and their high-handed methods.

But personal feelings aside, you most definitely understood that Lacroix was blatantly toying with you and you were not going to play into his hands.

"I wouldn't," Jesse said and threw a punch.

You slid under it and hit him in the stomach. He grunted, but didn't go down. "I know you wouldn't, but you're better in a straight up fight than I'll ever be."

He went on to demonstrate that by hitting you back and you dropped onto your ass, wheezing.

"You'd be good at it," Jesse said. "I agree. But I don't know if it would be good for you. I mean just look at this mess. He's one mindfuck after another. One sentence and he has you and the boss fighting. You really want to work for him?"

"I'm well aware of how conniving Lacroix is. Doesn't mean I can't learn anything from him. Doesn't mean I have to do this on his terms."

Jesse shrugged. "It's up to you, Lucky. You're better than a year ago."

"I know. I sparred with Gabriel over the break. We used training knives. I won. I cheated, but I won."
Jesse chuckled. "I see where you're coming from." He paused. "I've been thinking about going over to Overwatch when my tenure here is up. I'm good at ops, I like being in the shadows, but I'm not crazy about some of the morally gray shit we get up to. Some of it's dandy. But some of it...I'm not that kind of man now."

"Does Gabriel make you take those kind of missions?"

"Never really talked with him about it."

"Maybe you should," you said. "I mean, if you actually want to go over to the Blue Side, fair enough. Ugh, you'd have to find a blue cowboy hat. But I can see you in their dorky little uniform shouting, "yes, sir; no, sir; I'm team player, sir!" And saluting all the goddamn time."

"Shut up." Jesse laughed.

"In all seriousness, you could do it," you said, because you didn't want to crush his dreams. "But I don't think you'd like it. Blackwatch gives us a lot more leeway. You and me, we're not fans of military discipline. The chain of command can go breathe down someone else's starched collar. I guess Genji could handle it, but Genji can do anything."

Jesse snorted.

"If Gabriel's not full of shit, he'll take it into consideration," you said.

"Haha, let's see how your little spat works itself out first, sugarpie."

"You need to practice more." Captain Amari studied your finished targets. "Even if you use a mid-range weapon in combat, you need to keep up your sniping skills. Especially if you decide to take Gérard up on his offer."

"About that..." You sat back on your haunches, examining the sights on the rifle. Captain Amari regularly made shots from two miles away. You could do a decent assassination from half a mile, but any farther was pushing it. "What do you think?"

Captain Amari was silent long enough to make you uncomfortable.

"I think Gérard could teach you a lot. But he also has a very...strong personality. You're already surrounded by many of those. You have to be able to tell them "no." And it is hard, in a military setting, to set those boundaries."

"Are you not just talking about Lacroix any more? Because I'm picking up some subtext, but I'm too dumb to translate it."

"Playing stupid may suit you on ops, but it does you no favors with your commanding officers, or your lovers."

"Ouch." Busted. You lined up the rifle, focusing on the target because it was easier than looking at Captain Amari. You turned on the high decibel blocker on your ear protection. Then you steadied yourself, fired, and picked up a the viewing scope. You hit the target, but not the bullseye. "Gabriel didn't react well." You shrugged and turned off the blocker; it made
conversations sound like they were underwater. "His opinion matters to me, but it's not the deciding one."

Captain Amari inclined her head to the side. "Is that so?"

"He has my loyalty, not my obedience," you said, hoping you didn't sound defensive.

"Mmm." Captain Amari held her hand out and you handed her the scope. "Better. Not quite there yet." She adjusted her hat. "Windy, isn't it?"

"Yeah, still learning to compensate for that."

"You'll get it," she said. "What are your qualms about working with Gérard?"

"You heard me back in your office. I don't trust Lacroix. He's...slippery. And yeah, I am a little worried he'll push me too far. Maybe in the moment, I won't be in the right mind to say "no." And I'll do something I'll regret." Chumak was your own fault, but you weren't sure that Lacroix wouldn't use that against you.

"I don't think that statement just applies to Gérard," Captain Amari smiled. "You aren't worried about Gabriel or Jack?"

You loaded the gun again. "Jack, yes. Gabriel, no; he skews in the opposite direction. I know that's not the case with everyone else, but I'm coming to understand we have a weird dynamic."

"How do you handle, Jack? He is the Strike Commander after all."

"Lots of compartmentalization," you said dryly. "The difference is Jack wants me to trust him. I have no idea what Lacroix's endgame is."

"Gérard is harsh and bold, but he is not a monster."

"Hearing you say that is the best endorsement he could get," you said truthfully.

"Your...history with him does cloud your perception."

You shrugged. "Guilty." You knelt, bracing the rifle, turned on your blocker, and fired again. Captain Amari handed you the scope and you grunted. Another hit, but not a bullseye. Captain Amari unfolded a few metal rods and set the on the ground to form a tripod.

"Try this. You need a stronger foundation. Take a moment. Breathe. You already know what to do."

You ejected the spent cartridge, reloaded, and balanced the rifle.

"Keep track of the space between breaths. You adjusted properly for wind last time, but now you're flinching from the recoil."

"It's always something," you agreed.

"If you can handle Jack, you can handle Gérard. That is my personal opinion. If you wish to pursue this learning track, you have my support and blessing. If you do not, well, I see no point in forcing you. And as always, if you have problems with people placed above you, come see me."
You lined up the shot, the tripod providing a good balance. Breathing steady, fingers warm, you aimed and fired.

"Nicely done," she said, handing you the scope.

It was a bullseye, of course. And you got the subtext loud and clear.

"Why'd you ask me? There are plenty of people with talent. Are you trying to recruit Genji or Jesse too?"

"No. Agent McCree would be fully capable, but he doesn't have any interest. He'd do well in a frontal assault unit too. But he's best suited for black ops because he has authority issues." Lacroix was studying paperwork at his desk. You hadn't spent much time in his office. He had tasteful prints on the wall and fucking sculptures on pedestals like it was a miniature art gallery. You'd seen paperweights in Jack's office - because they were awards or gifts. But Lacroix actually had a decorative alabaster hawk on his desk.

"Genji has a better temperament for this kind of thing."

"Agent Shimada has proven himself reliable, but he's here for one reason only. After that, who knows?"

"Why Ziv?"

"You're just full of questions." He looked up at you, expression one of almost paternal aggravation. "Can't you see I'm trying to work?"

"You've been staring at the same page the entire time I've been here. You're just playing with me."

"I'm trying to concentrate," he said, tolerantly. "McCree has done a good job with Hanoi, but he doesn't know the city like I do. I'm rechecking your evacuation routes too."

"Great. So why Ziv?"

"Agent Mihret has espionage in his blood. He's more ruthless than you give him credit for."

"Oh, I know Ziv's a right bastard. I'm glad he doesn't have the skill to back up his nastiness. I'm just inquiring about your reasoning."

"Agent Mihret might run his mouth, but he has skills and isn't squeamish. Most importantly, he asks questions and won't take bad orders." Lacroix smiled slyly. "You want to know why I asked you, Chanceux? I'll admit, saving my life did impress me, even if you were more concerned about your hacker. You saw the holes in the op, got your CO onboard, and planned countermeasures. And you did well on your first and maybe only enhanced interrogation. But that's not what convinced me."

"To stick one to Gabriel and Jack?"
"Side benefit," he agreed. "But no."

"All right, I'll bite. Why?"

"Because after Chumak you came and asked me about coping mechanisms. I know full well that you don't trust me, but you still knew that you needed help and you recognized that I could give it. I've watched too many talented agents burn out because they can't ask for help, especially when they need it. You have the skill and you know your limits. If you don't want to engage in torture, fine. I won't make you. If you have deep moral qualms about a mission, I don't want you on it, because you'll hesitate. I want the job done right, and part of that is making sure I put the right person on it."

"That sounds almost too much like what I want to hear." You grinned at him. "You play a lot of mindgames, Lacroix. It really fucks with your credibility. You're like Jack; I can't take you at face value."

"Jack would have been an amazing covert operative if he had just a little less charisma. And maybe if he wasn't so distinctly good-looking," Lacroix said. "A few years ago, you would've been right." He looked you dead in the eye, no longer smiling. "I would've told you what you wanted to hear, pushed you down a slippery slope, and molded you into a better agent, whether you liked it or not. That approach has not always...ended well. I don't throw my assets away, Chanceux. I'm sure Gabriel told you that I worked for the DGSE, but he doesn't realize how much of what they taught me was what not to do. I won't even blame my government. All intelligence agencies are bureaucratic monsters that devour their own. I have no desire to continue that trend."

You sat back in the chair. "Wow, I kind of believe you." You paused. "But I'm still pissed that you managed to stir up shit between Gabriel and me."

"That fight was a long time coming. And it's one you'll have over and over," he said without remorse. "If you don't want it, don't be with him."

You laughed, because he was fucking right. Gabriel would always look after his people, and he would fight them for their own sakes.

"That you didn't come over here and join up right away to spite him, speaks better of you than I expected."

"I have cultivated a little bit of a reputation as Blackwatch petty," you said. "It isn't entirely deserved."

Lacroix laughed politely. "Of course. I didn't expect you to be that easy to influence, if that's what you were wondering. Sometimes I sow a little chaos and see what rises to the top. You understand that."

You gave him a long look. "All right, Lacroix. I'm going to talk to Captain Amari and Gabriel. I won't work solely under your supervision, because I have trust issues. But I respect your skills and want to learn from you."

He made a courtly half-bow while sitting at his desk. "I could not ask for more."
Gabriel was waiting for you outside Lacroix's office.

"Did he call you this time?" You asked, unable to help yourself.

Gabriel just gave you a hard look, brows heavy. "No. Walk with me."

You fell in step beside him.

"You're right. I shouldn't have lied." He stared straight ahead. "Whether or not you went behind my back doesn't change that. At the time, I thought it was minor and the right call."

You clasped your hands behind your back and resolved to let him talk. You'd tear his argument apart once you got back to the office.

"In retrospect, that was the wrong decision. I'm sorry."

Well, maybe not. You walked in silence and when you reached the office, Gabriel opened the door for you. You sat down on the couch and he locked the door behind him. He watched you cautiously, like he wanted to ask what you'd been up to, but knew there was a chance you wouldn't answer.

"That was a good apology. I accept," you said. "I know you can't help but be protective. It's who you are. And you're going to do it more to me because I'm not like you and Jack. Doesn't excuse you being an ass, but I get it. Would this have played out differently if we weren't lovers?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. Lovers or not, you're one of my people. I know you. You can do it, sure. But you can't walk away from it like it's nothing. Jesse can't either. I won't ask it of him or you."

"You should talk to Jesse."

"All right." Gabriel came and sat down beside you. "So?"

"I want to train with Lacroix. Sure he's devious and calculating, but my skill set does match his more than yours."

Gabriel looked you in the eye. "That's true."

"I also want to stay on Shit Spiders. I like working with you."

Gabriel relaxed and pressed a kiss to the side of your head. "Of course," he said.

"I don't entirely trust Lacroix. Mostly his methodology and the fact he's a real bastard. But I can't have you intervening just because you don't like something. I'm going to run it through Captain Amari."

"Fair," Gabriel said. "Ana won't let him make you do anything heinous."

"I don't know if your worries are overblown or just right," you said. "I'm glad you're looking out for me, but there have to be boundaries. Lacroix made the same offer to Ziv. Can you imagine? I now feel obligated to join just because those two together will commit genocide, or torture puppies, or divide by zero. Someone has to keep them in check."

"You're serious." Gabriel shook his head. "Fucking Gérard. Always stirring up shit."
"Yeah, I noticed." You patted his knee. "I'm going to have to be extra alert around him. I'm getting antsy just thinking about it."

"I don't want to clip your wings," Gabriel said. "But I don't want you flying too close to the sun either."

"If I were Jack, I'd say something cheesy about waiting for you to catch me when I fall." You studied your hands. "But I'm not Jack. I know I'm going to fuck up and I have to own it. Some things I'll have to learn the hard way. If I do this you're probably going to have to fish me out of the deep end multiples times. Is that something you'll be OK doing?"

"You shouldn't have to ask," he growled.

"Sorry." You didn't realize how offended he would be.

"At least you know you're going to fuck up. Jack always seems surprised when it happens." Gabriel leaned back against the couch. "You seen him recently?"

"Not since we got back. You?" You'd been too concerned about chasing down Bái Shé leads. She'd gone quiet since you'd taken care of Chumak. Ziv hadn't found anything either, which had you worried.

"In passing. I got some paperwork for him. You want to run it over?"

"I can." You leaned against Gabriel, soaking in his body heat. "Don't want to take away from your time with him."

"Jack knows where to find me. You're a little harder to track down."

"My desk is right here," you said.

"He can't just go asking after you. It's different." Gabriel smirked. "You're my assistant after all."

"All right, I'll go see how Jack's doing."

"Come by my room tonight. I'll read you to some more."

It almost sounded like a cheesy pickup line, except you enjoyed curling up on the bed beside Gabriel while he recounted the exploits of Edmond Dantès. The story resonated. You certainly could swear by the motivational power of revenge.

"...waiting to see if you recover from that disappointing performance. You need to keep your people in line. I expect more from you, Morrison." You stopped outside Jack's office, an unfamiliar voice raised. Jack's office was soundproofed, but his guest had left the door slightly ajar.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, sir." Jack was in full Strike Commander mode. You could picture him sitting at his desk, eyes steely. His palms would be flat on the desk. Maybe he'd be standing, staring the man down, teeth clenched.
"Don't be sorry, do better. And write Ainsley back, for God's sake. She's still traumatized from Paris!"

Ah. You knew whom it was now. You heard footsteps and meandered down the hall, tablet in front of your face. You kept your back to Jack's office, even as you heard the door open.

He was average in size, and you knew what to expect from his pictures: graying blonde hair heavy with product, large rounded nose, expensive suit. Everything about him screamed "politician." He stalked by you, and you studied the back of his neck, your fingers brushing against the handle of your tanto.

Petras had started as an ambassador to UN, climbing the political ranks from liaison to eventual Director of Overwatch. He was rarely seen in Zurich, preferring New York. That spoke volumes. He might be the Director, but he was the UN's political bitch. He didn't know how things were run. He just liked taking credit for Overwatch's successes.

You turned around and headed to Jack's office, papers in hand. The door was partially open, and you knocked.

"Enter."

You peeked your head in, but he didn't look up.

"I said "enter," agent, not loiter outside my door like a feral cat."

"Meow," you said and stepped inside.

Jack's head snapped up and he stared at you, eyes narrowed. He clasped his hands under his chin, watching you.

"Shut the door behind you, agent."

"Secure it too, sir?"

He nodded.

You complied. Jack's office was more modern than Gabriel's, all brushed metal and blue glass. You'd been here in passing. Jack's office was even less personal than his bedroom.

"Gabriel had some paperwork for you. Asked me to bring it by." Jack was still watching you, a sharp look on his face.

"Is that the only reason you came by, agent?" Jack stood, removing his gloves. His tone was harsh. And you didn't quite like that look on his face.

"I came to say "hi." Haven't seen you since we got back. You doing OK?" You approached the desk, not quite sure if you should be saluting. You'd dealt with the professionalism of the Strike Commander before, but it was jarring, considering how much of just Jack you'd seen over Christmas.

"Come here."

You raised a brow and set the papers on his desk. You stepped around the desk and Jack gripped your collar, yanking you against him. He looked down at you, eyes hard, teeth clenched. "Be nice," you said, because he looked anything but.
"Was wondering where you were."
"Working," you said. "Some of us have to do more besides wear a blue coat and look sexy."

Jack growled. "Don't tease me right now." He buried his face against your neck inhaling deeply. You stroked his hair, fingers tensing as he nipped your skin.

"Want to talk about it?" You swallowed roughly. His hands roamed up your sides and down your back.

"If I wanted to talk about it, I'd be talking about it," he snapped.

You pushed him back, shoulders squared, and crossed your arms. "Petras is a dick. I get it. But take it down a notch."

"I don't want to talk about it right now," he mirrored your stance.

"OK. Then don't. But I didn't show up just to be your stress-relief fuck, Jack."

He grimaced. "Damnit, Lucky." He pushed his hair back and rubbed his face. "I didn't mean-" Jack dropped his gaze.

"Should I leave?"

"Do you want to leave?"

"No. But I can call Gabriel if you think he'd be more help."

"No." Jack looked over at you. "Stay? Please?"

You sat on his desk and patted the spot next to you. He sat, shoulders hunched. "Sorry I haven't stopped by," you said. "I've been putting a lot of time into the Bái Shé stuff. Going on a run with Genji to Nagano tomorrow. I don't think it's wise to let him in Japan alone." Jack seemed to like it when you just talked about your day. You weren't sure if it was your voice or the rhythm you fell into. Hell, you weren't even sure if he was actually listening half the time. "Lacroix offered me a job. Gabriel didn't react so well. We're good now, but there was some spitting over that." Your gloves were looking worn. You went through left-handed ones quickly, especially on ops. One finger flex and rip! "He didn't like that I went behind his back with Chumak. I didn't like that he lied about how he found out. Petty stuff, I know."

"Are you taking Gérard up on his offer?" Jack's voice was more relaxed.

"Sort of. I don't really trust him enough to want to work for him permanently, but there's a lot he can teach me. Plus he's recruited Ziv. Someone's got to keep an eye on them." You reached over and rubbed the back of Jack's neck. He leaned into you. "Gabriel is worried that Lacroix is going to push me too far." You shrugged. "It's a possibility."

"Gérard is...different than when we first met," Jack said.

"How so?"

"Better, I think."

"Tell me?"

Jack moved his big leather Strike Commander chair in front of you and sat down, your legs
dangling between his knees. He took your hands in his, resting them in your lap. "It was a few
years ago. We were just outside Algiers. The usual business: defend the city, take out a shit ton of
omnics, search for survivors. Got a radio SOS somewhere behind omnic lines." He rubbed your
knuckles. "Stop me if you've heard this already."

"Nope." Gabriel didn't share war stories quite so openly.

"There was some debate about it being a trap. We went in anyway; Gabriel, Ana, and me. It wasn't easy. In fact, it got pretty ugly. But we found Gérard shot to shit and delusional. He begged us to take a data chip back to DGSE and put him down, because he wasn't going to make it, and he didn't want to suffer any longer."

Jack sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Obviously, we took turns carrying him back."

It was a good thing he explained that, because you would've assumed that they obliged, but Lacroix survived it anyway, and came back to haunt them. You kept that thought to yourself though.

"We dropped him at a hospital, with his data chip, and went back into the field. Didn't think anything of it. Two months later, he shows up with a goddamn map of omnic movement patterns in North Africa, which was very helpful. It didn't stop there though. He kept sending us chunks of useful data in odd ways. Some of it would crop up in personal messages that didn't involve him: "Pick up milk; eggs; that meeting tomorrow is a trap, approach from the west side instead; flour." Sometimes it'd be delivered in a bottle or baked in a loaf of bread. Once he sent a knitted blanket, the pattern a warning in Morse code. Gabriel called it "flirting." I guess, in a way, it was."

"Uhh..." You laughed awkwardly, because even if he was attractive, you never wanted to think of Lacroix that way.

"Not like that," Jack patted your leg. "Ana got tired of the games. She just flat out told him to join up, because we weren't the kind of people who'd leave him to die and expect him to euthanize himself. A week later, he left DGSE for Overwatch."

"He helped with the black ops missions even before Blackwatch was official. It was...rough at points. Gérard was a harsh teacher, and some of his students cracked. It didn't end well."

"He implied something like that," you said.

"Ana sat him down and I don't know what was said, but there hasn't been a problem since. It's a little surprising though. He hasn't taken on any trainees in a long time."

Then it was a very good thing that Captain Amari was going to keep an eye on the process.

"I think he must be very confident in you to make this offer," Jack said, squeezing your fingers.

"How do you figure?"

"Gérard is my friend, and Gabriel's. He may be charming and suave, but Gérard does not have a lot people he trusts. He wouldn't invite you onboard without considering how it would complicate our relationships."

You smiled wryly at Jack, because you weren't so sure you agreed. You knew Lacroix was
not above leveraging you to annoy or even influence Gabriel and Jack. But the latter was a problem you'd deal with when you came to it.

"So I have your blessing, sir?" You grinned and Jack sucked in a breath.

"Damnit, Lucky. Don't tease me."

"Sorry. You not going to be sore if I go take lessons from Lacroix? Maybe help him with missions?" You asked, putting your feet on his thighs.

"No." Jack stroked your legs. "You seem to have no trouble telling me "no." I think you can handle Gérard." That was overly optimistic, but the sentiment warmed your chest.

"What'd Petras want?" You asked, because he was all relaxed and comfortable now. What better time to ask?

"You don't let up." He shook his head. "We're still getting conflicting orders. We're cherry-picking the ones that make sense, but the UN isn't happy about the numbers and Petras is laying the blame on me. Gabriel and I are both working in tandem to make sure we're not fucking up. There's more to it, but that's the gist."

"We still doing things we shouldn't?"

"Yes and no. Blackwatch is doing things Overwatch shouldn't, obviously." He gave you a look. "But none of those extra orders are slipping through. Petras has been pressuring Gabriel to...cut corners. Gabriel hasn't even tried to pretend to be diplomatic. It's just politics, right now." Jack rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Lots and lots of politics."

"Sounds awful." You felt a pang of pity for him, because you didn't have to deal with that stuff. Above your pay grade and your abilities. There was something you could do though. "Why don't you give Gabriel a call? Vent."

Jack raised a brow. "I just vented to you."

"Trust me."

Jack leaned back in his chair. "Really?"

"Yeah." You nodded vigorously. "I don't know if he's busy, but you should call and see."

Shaking his head, Jack picked up the phone.

"Gabe? No, it wasn't." He paused. "Yeah, she-"

You slid off the desk between his knees, your fingers already unbuckling his belt.

"Really?" Jack asked, as you knelt under his desk and unzipped his fly. Someone was going Strike Commando today, and if you made that joke out loud, you would ruin everything. "No, I'm talking to-"

You untucked him. He was only semi-hard and you took him down your throat all the way to the base. You couldn't maintain it, not after he was fully erect, so you enjoyed it while you could.

"Damnit, baby. Fuck-" You sucked his cock, slurping on the head while his fingers dug into his armrests. He always tasted a little salty, but clean, and you liked how his warm silky skin
felt in your mouth.

"What's she doing, Jackie?" Gabriel was on speaker now, his voice amused over the line.

"She's sucking me off under my desk."

Gabriel chuckled. "Guess it's good to be the Strike Commander." You rather liked the idea of doing this again while Jack was actually trying to get work done.

"Does she do this to you?" Jack groaned.

"No, we actually do work in my office."

Well, you did. Gabriel and Jack had gotten up to other things many times, and had sent you the pictures to prove it. But you didn't comment since your mouth was full.

"Damnit, she's drooling all over me," Jack panted. "You're getting better at this. Like that-oh fuck." He squirmed in his chair. "She's almost got me all the way, Gabe."

Gabriel gave a deep sigh. "I have a meeting in ten minutes. You're killing me."

"Damnit, I do too. Lucky, you sneaky bitch," Jack growled. "I'm going to get you for this. I'm going to bend you over my desk and fuck you senseless. Just you wait..." His threats made you clench, but there was a time limit. You could take care of yourself later. You kneaded his thighs, head bobbing as you tried to take him all the way now that he was fully erect. You still couldn't quite, but from the raw sounds he was making, the way his knuckles whitened while he gripped his chair, Jack seemed to appreciate the effort.

"Wait till tonight, chica. We'll get you back."

"Can't," you let Jack slip from your throat. "Mission tomorrow." You smiled sweetly at Jack, his cheeks flushed, hair falling in his face. Drops of sweat collected on his forehead and he bared his teeth at you.

"I'll remember this," Gabriel said, the undertone of frustration clear in his voice. You licked Jack's shaft, eliciting a throaty moan. Gabriel groaned over the call.

"Fuck, don't you dare leave me like this," Jack growled.

"Wasn't planning on it," you said, stroking him with your gloved hand. "But that is an interesting idea."

Jack glowered at you. "Lucky-"

You took him back in your mouth, your eyes on his face. Jack began to thrust, fucking your throat. You'd tap if you had to, but Jack was holding back, trying to go at a manageable pace.

"I should come on your face for this," Jack muttered. "Would serve you right."

"You like watching her swallow it down too much," Gabriel purred over the line. "Is she touching herself?"

"No, just-"

"Looks like she wants to get you off quickly, so greedy for your cum, Jack. Look at her pretty lips wrapped around your cock. Bet she's got that needy look on her face, like she wants you
to fuck her hard afterward, but she's going to miss out, all because she has a mission tomorrow." Gabriel chuckled, teasing you right back. Damn, he knew you too well. "Come by my room tonight, Jack. You can take the edge off, and Lucky, well, Lucky will just have to watch."

"Damnit Gabe!" Jack's cockhead twitched inside your mouth and his cum sprayed down your throat. There was a lot and you had a little trouble getting it all down, some of it dribbling out the corners of your mouth.

"Fuck that's hot. She's drooling my cum, Gabe."

"Damnit, Jack." The strain in Gabriel's voice was evident and you heard him muttering unhappily as he ended the call.

"Feel better?" You licked your lips, smirking up at Jack.

He nodded lazily.

You tongued him clean. He sighed as you tucked him back and zipped him up. He wasn't quite so happy when you wiped your mouth on his pants.

Chapter End Notes

This thing just doesn't stop. My cousin is all like "when are you going to come back and game with me?" And I'm like "lol never." Pretty sure this is demon possession. I'll fall asleep while writing, wake back up, bang something out, and totally forget what it was in the morning. Then I'll wake up and be like "...that's not as bad as I was expecting." Though to be fair, there are a lot of self-indulgent meanderings in fanfic that I wouldn't allow myself in original stories. But it's fanfic, and we're having fun. I hope.

As always, comments are love, and I appreciate. Seriously, I sit there at work and every time I get an email notification I get excited. (Which is sad because most of them are spam, but I digress.) I fully admit I have a problem. And you know what, I'm buying cake tomorrow, and that'll fix everything. (OK, not everything, not remotely, but it's a big morale booster.)
You studied the dossiers Genji handed you on the transport. Nagano was a mountainous region, and there was little chance he would be recognized by his clan: because he was wearing a mask, assumed "dead," and a cyborg. You were still concerned. Today's target was a distant cousin: Takeo Shimada, sixty-three, a high-level adviser. He was in Nagano for skiing. It was a cold weather mission, but you were willing to give it a shot, if only because Genji needed the backup. He'd personally invited you on this one, you weren't going to abandon him.

"I want this kill," he told you as he helped you tighten your armor straps.

You shrugged. "Sure."

"Bodyguards, other family members, you can have them, but Takeo is mine."

"It's not a competition. You want him, he's yours," you said. "I'm not Jesse."

"I know." Genji sat back. "My apologies."

You shrugged again. You liked Genji, but he'd always kept a certain distance and you respected his wishes. Sometimes you wanted to ask him about how he coped with his inorganic parts, but it was a sore subject and your losses were minor in comparison. You didn't feel right broaching the topic.

You'd stayed in Gabriel's room last night and he'd read to you. You wondered if Dantès had drowning nightmares after he escaped Château d'If. Maybe it was the weight of chains or being tangled in endless swathes of cloth, sinking to the bottom of the ocean. Your nightmares were better than they used to be, though the variety had increased over the past few months.

By the time Jack got in, you were already asleep, and they weren't quite so awful as to wake you up when you had to go across the world to kill someone the next day. Still, when you'd left in the morning, you'd gotten some sharp looks with your farewell kisses.

"What'd he do?" You asked, because Genji wasn't asleep, he was just staring at the floor.

"He was one of my greatest detractors. I hated him in my youth, but that's meaningless now. He also likes young boys too small to fight back." There was no outrage in Genji's voice. He spoke calmly, with that oddly sophisticated accent that Shin did not have.

"Sounds like a winner," you said, checking your carbine. Genji didn't want to bother making this look like an accident. Takeo had enough enemies. You didn't even have to plant a false flag, though you'd brought along some bone tokens occasionally left at hit sites by the On Sing Triad.

"I hear you are to train with Lacroix." Genji tilted his head toward you.

"Yeah. Umm, any tips?"

"Never relax your guard and never appear to be on guard."
"Wow, that's...circular." You checked your gun. "Opinion?"

"It suits you."

"You're taking this inscrutable thing way too far." You checked your chute. "Just tell me if you think I'm making a terrible mistake."

"No." Genji adjusted his gear.

"No, I'm not making a terrible mistake" or "no, you're not going to tell me" if I am? Because that was ambiguous."

"It's time to jump."

"Goddamnit, Genji."

Falling out of planes made your face hurt. Genji seemed to like it, a little more than he liked your cooking, but a little less than he liked desserts. The air was too cold for your tastes and breathing was always odd. But you had to admit there was a certain zen in freefall. Either you would die or you would not, but it was the closest to flying that you would get.

You deployed your chute later than Genji, because he needed extra deceleration. You didn't land in a tree, but you did end up sliding across the snow. Genji, of course, landed gracefully, his chute falling around him like a cloak.

The sun was high in the sky and you had a distance to go.

You rolled the tech cloth up and stuffed it in Genji's bag, because there was no need to advertise how you got in. Winston said the chutes were reusable and strongly recommended bringing them back.

Genji gestured to the west.

You tucked Gabriel's scarf around your chin, adjusted your hood, and slipped chemical hand-warmers into your gloves. Fuck the cold.

"Lacroix is clever," Genji said. "I would be curious to see what he has to teach."

"Want me to ask if you can sit in?"

Genji shrugged. "Maybe later."

"Yeah, you're too cool for the beginner classes. Hell, I might be too. Ziv's the one he has to bring up to speed."

"Your stealth is passable, but you have a long way to go."

"Well, I wasn't raised a ninja assassin," you huffed. The mountain air was chilly, but it didn't feel quite as brutal as the Yukon or the Alps. It was actually kind of pleasant. You immediately looked around, because that was never your reaction to snow.
Unless Gabriel had fucked the aversion out of you on Christmas Eve.

Huh. Unlikely. The temperature here wasn't quite as cold as the other freezing winter wonderland missions. Or maybe you just had a soft spot for Japan.

Genji held up his hand and you stopped. He gestured left and held up three fingers. You sighed. Your sidearm was silenced, but that just muffled the shot, it was still audible. You drew your tanto.

Genji took point, speeding up faster than you could keep up, but you followed.

They were dead before you reached them. Between his shuriken and sword, Genji was good at silent kills. You wondered then if maybe you should've just stayed home and had sex with Gabriel and Jack.

You studied the guards. They wore parkas over their suits and earpieces. You picked one up, because Genji was already moving again. There was only radio silence.

The ski lodge was small, a private compound with fancy wooden gates. Genji scaled them with ease. Your prostheses let you make handholds and you climbed up slower, watching for snipers.

It was too fucking quiet. You weren't making noise either, but there should have birds or civilians moving around. The comm unit hadn't crackled to life once. You dropped onto the ground, sticking to the shadows. Genji was already in the building, his footprints clear in the afternoon light.

You surveyed the area. There was blood on the snow. You crept forward, checking the half dozen bodies. Arrows protruded from their throats, and you sucked in a breath. Genji hadn't killed these guys.

"We have another guest," you hissed into your comm.

"Saw the bodies. Stay in cover. He won't miss."

"Shit." You slipped into the main building, hoping the archer couldn't do too much damage indoors. "...You know him?" You could gauge the high skill level just by the consistency of the shots, but Genji had said it was a man.

"We'll talk about it later. Try not to die."

He totally knew the archer.

There were more dead men on the ground, large holes ripped in their throats, glass shattered on the floor. The archer had retrieved his arrows, so he had passed through here. You really should have stayed home with Gabriel and Jack, had some hot kinky sex, cuddled afterward. You and Genji didn't even need to run this mission. It had completed itself. Instead you were stuck in a bizarre horror scenario trying to avoid a whacked out Robin Hood.

"He's been in the building."

"He's still here," Genji said, sounding very sure.

"Eyes on him?"
"No."

You kept your back to the wall, scanning for movement. The lodge was sparsely furnished - large cushions and neatly woven tatami around a kotatsu. The stairs up were narrow.

"Takeo?"

"Panic room. Opening it up. Between the second and third floors. Stay alert."

You took the stairs, the back of your neck prickling. You rolled forward, even as something silently rushed by your ear. The arrow thwacked against the wall in front of you. You yanked your carbine off your back, because stealth wasn't the issue any more. There was the creak of a bow being drawn back, and you dove across the room, looking for cover. Fucking minimalist Japanese furniture. There was a low table and not nearly enough places to duck behind.

Half a dozen arrows riddled the wall where you had stood. That wasn't fair. That really wasn't fair. How the fuck could he be that fast?

"Found him!" You said into your comm as you returned fire. He was somewhere in the shadows, you could roughly guess the angle, but you hadn't seen him yet.

"Don't kill him!" Genji said sharply. "Disengage!"

"I got nowhere to go, Genji!" You snapped, as a goddamn arrow ricocheted off a statue and nearly took out your eye. You raised your left hand, keeping your fingers as a shield. You couldn't snatch an arrow out of the sky, but maybe you could keep it from going through your skull.

You overturned the table and swung behind it. It was too low to be a good barricade, and since the bastard could shoot around corners, it wasn't going to be much good. You worked the table up like a tower shield and inched back toward the stairs. He had to be in the staircase. Even as you pushed the table forward, several more arrows thunked into the thin wood and you stepped back, reaching around to fire a few shots from your carbine.

"Genji, I could use some help-" You swore as the table splintered, expecting more arrows. Instead, a bow slammed into your stomach, and you staggered backward, gripping your gun.

The man was dressed like a goddamn ninja out of a movie, lower face covered, tattooed left arm bared. You went low, leg sweeping out and he leapt backward, loosing an arrow. It was too close and you swore as it struck your shoulder, embedding itself in your armor. It hurt, though you couldn't tell if it had actually pierced your armor or if the pain stemmed from the impact, and you didn't have time to look. You brought your gun up and fired again. He went high, one of those ridiculously smooth martial artist jumps that Chang and Genji made, and swung his bow, smacking it against the side of your head.

You dropped on your side, and he kicked your carbine out of your hand.

Grunting, you tried to get on your feet, but he pressed a foot against your chest, and rolled you onto your back. You winced, right hand underneath you. You reached for your tanto.

"Who are you speaking to?" He asked, the accent and cadence all too familiar. You knew someone else who spoke like that, though the voice wasn't the same.

"Fuck," you said, recognizing the dragon tattoo.

He drew his bow, aiming at your face. "I asked you a question."
"Shit," you said, cleverly, because this was not your business. "Hey partner, this is about to get ugly." Where the hell was Genji? He'd never been this slow before. You focused behind your attacker, and he turned his head.

You struck, driving your tanto through his leg, aiming for the Achilles tendon. Your left hand was up again, and when he released the arrow on reflex, it smashed into your prostheses sending sparking bits of metal flying. Half-lamed, he lost his balance and you dragged him to the ground, twisting your blade before withdrawing it. He swore and kicked you with his uninjured leg. Snarling, you lunged on top of him and stabbed him again, driving your knife his hand, intent on keeping him from using that bow.

"Disengage!" Genji shouted.

"I will! Just gotta keep him from killing me!" You flexed your fingers, finding only a single blade intact.

Genji swore a blue streak in Japanese, even as he pulled you off his brother. You glared at the bloody man, because you had a fucking two foot arrow shaft sticking out of your shoulder and two of your prostheses were broken.

Genji said something in rapid-fire Japanese, and while you understood the basics, Genji spoke some high-class aristocratic variant that made your head hurt.

His brother snapped something back and you leaned against the wall, eyeing that bloody hand with satisfaction. Try to draw that bow now, Green Arrow. You bitch.

"We're just here for Takeo," Genji said. "If you want him, fine. He's still in the panic room. Let's go, Kamaitachi-chan," he said to you. You didn't recognize the nickname, but it sounded condescending as fuck.

"I know you," the former Shimada heir glared up at Genji.

"No, you really do not," Genji said.

The man narrowed his eyes at you both. "She called you "Genji."

"It's a common enough name."

He knew, or if he didn't know, he damn well suspected. Not your problem though, unless Hanzo Shimada thought he could find and leverage you.

"Look, can someone just go kill Takeo so we can leave and get cleaned up. I'm not getting paid to kill you," you gestured at Hanzo. Which was silly, because you could have gotten paid a lot to kill the former Shimada heir. He had mad bounties on him, but Genji didn't want his brother dead and you didn't want to upset Genji.

"You take care of it," Genji said, not looking away from Hanzo. "I'll handle this."

"Right, whatever." You limped up the stairs and found the partially-concealed entrance to the panic room. Genji had already gotten it open. When you looked inside, Takeo was dead, severed head resting in his lap. Fucking Genji just wanted to get rid of you. You opened his mouth and left an On Sing token, just to fuck with everyone. Shaking your head, you went back to the stairs, sat down, and waited for your stupid inconsiderate partner to sort his shit out.
You now sat in the clearing, waiting for pickup. Genji was fucking fine, but you hurt all over.

"He wasn't trying to kill you," Genji said.

"Fuck him and fuck you," you said and held up your broken hand. "I've got a goddamn arrow sticking out of me, Genji, in the fucking 21st century. What is this? Agincourt?"

"OK, he might have been trying to kill you." Genji studied the arrow placement. "Just at first."

"Did you see all the arrows he shot at me? Because unlike you, I wouldn't have survived that."

Genji shut up and you started poking at the arrow again. It was in your flesh. You wanted to yank it out, but it'd be better to let a medical professional cut it out, less damage that way. You wanted to snap the shaft, but it was metal and your fingers were too busted to do the job. "You want to help with this?"

"Leave it alone. The shaft stabilizes the arrowhead. Too much wiggling and you'll just drive it deeper." Huh. Made sense.

"He know?" You looked at the sky. Hanzo had left first and you'd made no attempt to see where he was going.

"Probably." You were pretty sure Hanzo knew, but Genji liked to play his cards close to his big metal chest. "You are...very angry."

"You suck," you told him. "Were you hoping he'd kill me while you were taking care of Takeo? Because I know how fast you move and you should've been there sooner, Takeo be damned. Especially since you told me you didn't want him dead. I was trying real hard not to kill your stupid brother."

Genji blinked at you in surprise. "I- Thank you." He looked away. "I wasn't ready to face him." He looked away. "You're right. I should have come immediately. He outclasses you in combat."

"Fuck you, I was winning," you muttered.

Genji sat beside you. "What are you going to say?"

"I wouldn't have said anything if I hadn't gotten hurt. But it's pretty fucking hard to hide an arrow sticking out of your shoulder. It's ridiculous, Genji. A goddamn arrow." You studied your boots. "What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know," Genji closed his eyes.

You turned the facts over in your head. "Your brother is killing Shimada people. He's not our concern. We take out serious threats, not vigilantes." You would have shrugged, but there was something in the way. "I'm not issuing a bounty on him, if that's what you're worried about. Personally, I'd mark him as "do not approach." Though I think he's going to try to find you again."
"Maybe," Genji said and that was as good as a "bring casserole to the family reunion" in your book.

"I'll emphasize that we found a "peaceable resolution." If that's what you're worried about." You sighed. "You owe me big, Genji."

"I know. Thank you."

"Now tell me the rest of it, while I'm too sore to hit you." Because getting information out of Genji was like pulling teeth.

"I...suspected he might come this way. I invited you, because I knew you would hold back if I asked." Yeah, Jesse would've killed the bastard after the first volley of arrows. He probably would have role-played cowboys and Indians while he was at it. But that didn't excuse Genji not giving you a head's up.

"You could've warned me." You ground your teeth, because now you were pretty pissed.

"I- yes. I knew it was a possibility, I didn't think it a likelihood. I...am very sorry."

You rubbed your forehead. Because you could count the number of times Genji apologized to you on the fingers of your broken hand. He meant it, of course, but he damn well ought to.

"I will redeem myself. Any help you need on the Bái Shé op, just tell me what to do. Any interrogations you need, I will handle... I would have anyway."

"Now you tell me." You glared at him. "You're a self-absorbed shit, and while I will eventually forgive you, I am so mad at you I could set you on fire with my brain."

The transport was here, and you stood, shaking your head.

"If you really want to make it up to me, do not report my injuries before we get back to base. I need to get cleaned up before they see me. Do you have any idea how much trouble I'm going to be in?"

Angela was waiting for you when you landed. To her professional credit, she did not take one look at you and laugh. You knew you looked ridiculous, your metal fingers jagged and sparking, your face all bruised and bloody, an arrow sticking out of your armor like someone's lame-ass pincushion.

"Genji messaged me personally. Said you needed...discrete help."

"You've seen how they get," you muttered. "I can't deal with that right now."

"You are well then. Not...uncomfortable with your situation?"

"The only discomfort I can think of is how much I want this arrow out," you scowled. "I can't even...a fucking arrow."

"Of course." Angela covered her mouth and you knew she was laughing at you now. She opened her bag, grabbed a pair of what looked suspiciously like bolt-cutters, and snipped the shaft
down to a more manageable size. You stripped off your armor carefully. Angela applied a local anesthetic and you watched as she began to cut the arrowhead out.

"Torby's going to flip. My augments are OK this time, but I smashed up two more fingers." You held up your hand. "Well, I didn't. One of the assholes we ran into did. It was my fingers or my skull, and I had to prioritize."

Angela nodded, not looking up from her minor surgical procedure. "You will have to submit a report to him. I don't think he liked the fudge that much. You may want to try a different route of bribery."

"Thanks." You sighed and waited for Angela to finish patching you up. It wasn't deep and she wrapped you nicely.

"Giving you a round of nanites and an emitter. You know the drill by now, Lucky." She gave you a look. "I'd say no sparring, but you're not going to listen anyway."

You couldn't even shrug. She bandaged your shoulder too tightly.

You swapped out a basic set of fingers and while your shoulder was sore, you could type up a report. You'd keep your word to Genji.

"There you are!" Ziv peeked into the office, his hair taking up a third of the doorway. He slouched in, wearing a hoodie and some running shorts. He might have put on some muscle since joining, but he still looked like a kid to you. It was strange, considering he was only a few years younger than you. But it was experience that made all the difference. You were a grown ass woman. Ziv was a stupid kid. Now and forever.

"I had some luck with Chumak's organizer. I have location tags and everything. But...there are some things you should see. You're probably not going to like them."

You rubbed your face. "Ziv, you're not allowed to talk to me any more. You never bring good news."

Ziv pulled up a chair and brought the files up on his tablet screen. "I can narrow down the places Lao's been staying. There's a compound in Macau. There's another in New York. And I know there's one for sure in Copenhagen. I've mapped the location tags and they match up with known Talon sympathizers."

You nodded. "Good work."

"It was child's play. Be serious." He showed you the accompanying graphic. "They have to be moving her on private transport. Cyborgs always get tracked at airports, for obvious reasons. Chumak kept his notes on the device. I have a bio-hacker going over the procedures. It matches up to what he told us. You sure you don't want to go piss on his ashes or something? You totally could have made him last longer."

"Ziv, I don't like chopping people up till they beg. You, I might make an exception for, but in general, that's not my scene."
"Grumpy," he said. "Not getting enough sex? Because I'm not, but I'm single. What's your excuse?"

"I just got back from Japan. It was a stupid trip and I'm in pain. Just give the facts, Ziv."

"He kept video too."

You closed your eyes.

"I...most of it you don't need to see. I wrote up a report. It matches with the...methods he described. But this one, you should probably watch." There was a hesitation in his voice that told you what you needed to know.

You reached into your desk and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. You grabbed two coffee mugs and poured each of you a drink.

Ziv hit play.

Lao stood naked in a white room. She was bruised up, angry red lines shone under her skin where her metal arm connected to the flesh. Her ribs stuck out and her circuits sparked. She cringed, not making eye contact with the camera.

"Who is the woman in the footage, Bái Shé? She recognized you."

You swallowed a mouthful of whiskey, your fingers clenching painfully tight.

The circuits on her face sparked again and Lao screamed. "I can't- I don't remember!" It went on like that for some time. Whatever leashes they had implanted seemed wired through the metal on her face.

"Lucky. She's called "Lucky." There's more, but I can't remember. We never used her real name. She was just Lucky- Lucky Shot."

You sat back in your chair, watching Lao's eyes dart around the room. She hugged herself.

"What a stupid name." You recognized Chumak's voice. "Here are your orders, Bái Shé. Contact her. We can help you remember some of it. She obviously knew Lacroix. Lure them in. I'm sure you can snivel enough to get her sympathy. Serpent Protocol initiated. Your orders are as stand. Gérard Lacroix is the priority target. Secondary priority is your friend "Lucky Shot." You are to terminate her with extreme prejudice."

Lao shivered, pupils dilating, breathing going ragged. "Understood."

"You see, Ms. Nguyen? This is how we ensure their loyalty. She will sever the last links to her old life, and then she will be ours. There will be no further issues with her performance."

The video cut out and you finished your whiskey.

"You were never called "Lucky Shot."

"Nope." You smiled a little, even though it broke your heart. "Lao lied. She's trying to protect me. That idiot."

"I...I know Lacroix and Reyes think we should just put her out of her misery. That it's a mercy. But...I'll do what I can to make sure she gets back alive." Ziv studied his mug. "It's what Savta would've wanted."
"Yeah." You poured yourself more whiskey. "Thanks."

Ziv shut off his tablet. "Are you taking Lacroix up on his offer?"

"Yes," you said. "I thought you didn't want to do this kind of work."

"I didn't want to work for the Mossad. That was different and ideological. I don't mind doing the black bag jobs. You're not the only one who wants revenge, Lucky."

"I know." You poured him some whiskey too. "You have to be careful with Lacroix. He's not Gabriel and he's not me."

"I...get that." Ziv shrugged. "Shanghai was an eye-opening experience." There was an oddness to his tone that you recognized.

"I see." It wasn't your business, even if Ziv was your hacker. "Well, I'm along for the ride, because the two of you can't be trusted alone."

Ziv punched you in the bad shoulder, and it took all your self control not to murder him.

"An arrow?" Jack touched your shoulder. "That's...actually hilarious."

Gabriel gave you a once over, but you'd already cleaned yourself up, changed clothes, and sat with the emitter for a bit. You just looked tired.

"How's the other guy look?" Jack asked.

"It's all in my report." You slumped on Gabriel's couch, hoping they wouldn't actually read the report. Jack might forget, but Gabriel would see it, eventually. Maybe you could distract him. "I wouldn't mind hearing about the continuing adventures of Edmond Dantès."

"Hanzo Shimada?" Gabriel looked up from his tablet at you. Oh, you'd been way too optimistic when you thought he'd see it "eventually." Shit. "You know what he did to Genji."

"I didn't know it was him till it was "too late, can't run away." You slid onto the floor, sprawling out. "According to Genji, he wasn't trying to kill me. And I guess he's the expert on that."

"He wasn't trying to kill Genji either, or so they say," Gabriel scowled. "You let him walk?"

"I really wasn't in any condition to catch him. He wasn't the priority."

"What was Genji doing during all this?"

"The actual mission. It's all there." You closed your eyes. Genji owed you so much right now. "Hanzo's apparently killing Shimada big shots too. On that note, we really need to take a look at the On Sing. As the Shimada diminish, they're seizing power and they're into some weird shit. Don't know if they've allied with Talon, but I can see it happening down the road."

"...Submit it to the analysts. The Hanzo update too."
"You do it, I'm down for the night."

"Your mission, your report. Do it tomorrow."

You groaned loudly. "My shoulder hurts."

"Next time don't get hit," Gabriel said dryly.

"Ugh, you're the worst," you said and closed your eyes.

You waited for Gabriel to say something sarcastic, but he just crouched down beside you. "Good job today," he said softly.

"Thanks," you said, eyes still shut. "I thought so too."

"I thought he'd start us in a classroom, Lucky." Ziv had his hair pulled back in a puff, trying to be less noticeable.

"You obviously don't understand Lacroix," you said, pretending to examine a purse in a window. Your hood was up, and you had a scarf wrapped around your face: no sense making this easier for your adversaries. In the reflection you caught sight of one tail, a nervous brunette girl in a tan pea coat. There were at least five for you and Ziv; Lacroix had "borrowed" some DGSE trainees for a "joint exercise." The fact you were in London made it even more hilarious. You pretty sure MI-6 was going to shit itself when it realized what was going on. You weren't sure who was going to have to field that call, but you suspected DGSE was going to take sole blame if anyone got caught. Because you and Ziv weren't getting caught.


"Better than McCree's bullshit," Ziv muttered. "People stare at us anyway. How do you pick out a tail so quickly?"

"Practice. It's how they look at you and if they're following you. Now, the best way to do that is with a team. There have to be at least two more trailing behind on parallel streets. That way if we turn a corner, they can keep an eye on us without giving themselves away." You pulled out your compact, and pretended to check your makeup. There was another, a young dark-skinned man in a knit cap. "We have two on this street, at least one for each of us." You angled your mirror so Ziv could see who you'd picked out.

"Lacroix is also using the camera system to track us. Since this is just a training exercise and we're in motherfucking London, I won't hack the CCTV."

"He's not patched directly into the CCTV hub. He has drones acquiring the signal," you said. "Turn them or get rid of them."

Ziv nodded, checking his phone. "Should we split up here?"

"Sure. I have my earpiece in. You want to be the decoy while I tag them all, or are we working separately?"
"Separately," Ziv said. "But stay on the encrypted channel."

"Keep your scarf up. Change your hair if you have to."

"I know, mom."

You snorted and strode off, melting into the crowd while the girl in the pea coat tried to keep up. Ziv disappeared down an alleyway, and you hoped he didn't get cornered.

You turned a corner and swung up a fire escape, casually climbing up the building. Pea Coat turned the corner, head jerking around frantically. A small Vietnamese woman passed by her, shaking her head.

"Tail number three is little Asian woman in the red jacket."

"Hang on, all right, got eyes in the sky. I see her. Oh, there's a very hot blonde following me now. White jumper, blue jeans. I almost want to let him catch me."

You snorted. "All right, that's four. I don't think Lacroix is counting himself, but keep your eyes open."

"Shit, I got another. Looks like a lady with a buggy. Pretty sure it's empty though."

"OK, take pictures. I've got mine. We'll double back and tag them."

"Where are you- Really?"

"People don't look up. It's a good place to hide."

You surveyed the streets, still unable to spot Lacroix. For all you knew he was in disguise. A woman in white passed by the sidewalk, she looked up at you for three seconds, then made an abrupt turn.

"Verne, the street east of me. Get eyes on the woman in white. Tell me that's not who I think it is. She's made me already."

"Fuck!" Ziv crackled. "That's her all right."

"Coincidence?" You didn't believe in any such animal.

"Is it ever?" Lacroix was here on the ground then. And someone, possibly someone from DGSE or one of the recruits, had betrayed him.

"Maybe they should stop dressing her in a fucking uniform." The pristine white pissed you off, especially considering how they treated your baby hacker.

"Don't tell them that, it makes her easier to spot."

You looked at your watch. "I'm going to call it."

"What?"

You switched to the open channel. "This is Executor Hugo, Clearance Level Bleu, recalling all agents from the exercise. Agents include: Voltaire, Dumas, Sarte, Camus, Proust, and Verne. This includes designations: Molière. We have spotted a VIP. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill. Subject is clad in white, East Asian female, in her early twenties heading east
from my location. Do not approach, subject is extremely dangerous. Follow and map. If made, engage in E&E. Hugo out."

You watched as Pea Coat freeze before heading toward the street Lao disappeared down.

"Wait...you have executive override? What the hell, Hugo?" Ziv snapped.

"I don't know how many Molière agents are out there; that's to keep me sharp. But yes, we had five known tails and you now have full access to the drones."

"You could just tell me and we wouldn't have to play weirdo tag."

"This is how you learn. Now keep her in your sights."

You stuck to the rooftops, the buildings close enough together that you could keep a bird's eye view of the situation. Pea Coat was too obvious. You didn't actually know which agent she was. "Lady in the tan jacket. You need to E&E."

She abruptly stopped and turned around, and you were glad you weren't training her. That was a terrible transition. Escape and evasion required a little more finesse.

Lao looked up and she spotted you once more, still moving east.

"Verne, I think she's got access to the cameras. Can you tag and track that way? I'll drop to street level."

"You know this is some kind of trap, right?"

"Not for me. Maybe you or the boss." You slid down the fire escape. "Directions?"

"Still heading east."

You passed a woman with a shaded baby stroller. You didn't even make eye contact as she handed off a small package.

"Where's the boss?" Ziv asked.

"Don't have eyes on him." You slid the package into your pocket and kept walking.

Your tanto was tucked against your back. And now you had a firearm. You opened the box as you walked.

"Need you to start backtracking, Verne. How'd she find us?"

"Working on it." He paused. "You think she's carrying explosives?"

"Not her MO. Doesn't mean a thing though." You kept walking, catching sight of the girl in white. You tracked the other agents in your periphery. "Anyone I hadn't accounted for?"

"Asian guy, blue shirt, seven o'clock."

"OK, anyone else?"

"Not that I'm seeing."

You turned a corner, and hit an alleyway. You stuck to the shadows.
"Don't have eyes on you."

"Target?"

"Still moving east."

"You got eyes on the girl in the tan pea coat?"

"Negative."

"Everyone else?"

"Affirmative." Ziv's words were clipped.

"You somewhere defensible?"

"...Do you mean- oh shit." Ziv took a deep breath. "OK, I'll start moving. Hugo, I've lost sight of her."

"I'll be ready."

You stopped trying to track her and climbed another fire escape. She'd find you soon enough. You watched your known "allies" milling about the streets. Where was Lacroix?

"Lucky, they're going for your hacker friend." Lao's voice was raw, and you glanced to your side, finding her facing away from you.

"Your programming got visual cues?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Keep your face covered. You're still an unknown variable."

"You're doing a good job circumventing them. Proud of you." You clenched your fist.

"Are there snipers on me?"

"Not yet."

"What's to stop me from taking you in?"

"Me. I have...contingency programming. I wouldn't recommend it today. And there are people going after your other hacker, some of them are supposed to be on your side."

"I know. Fucking priorities. Can you hold up much longer?"

"You should kill me." The request pierced your chest.

"Do you want me to?" You studied the gun in your pocket. It wasn't particularly impressive and you weren't sure it would do the job properly.

"I-" Her voice wavered and you seized on that.

"Yeah, if you have to think about it, you don't. Keep your head turned." You reached into your other pocket and pulled out a GPS tag and activated it. They'd jam it or get it off her eventually, but it would start tracking now. "Just keep me updated about your protocols. I'm guessing you have some kind of self-destruct."

"I- Chumak never made it back. Do I have you to thank?"
"I don't know what you're talking about," you said, dropping the chip down the back of her collar. "I'm going to walk away now. We should do this again," you said, building on an already nascent plan. "I'll send the invitation next time. Be ready for a big party."

Lao sighed softly. "I can't do this much longer, Lucky."

"I know. I haven't given up. We just have to time it right." You patted her shoulder and she flinched. "Sorry. I won't-"

"No, it's fine."

"I meant to ask." She tilted her head back, still not looking at you. "Did anyone besides you...?"

You wanted to lie, to give her something solid to cling to. But you couldn't. "No. Just me. I...When this is over, I'll tell you all about it. OK?"

Your comm crackled to life. "Getting uncomfortable, Hugo. Get over here!"

And you ran, because you were a coward, and didn't want to see Lao's world fall apart again.

You weren't sure who broadcasted your "training exercise" to the bad guys, but you were going to strangle them. That went double if it was Lacroix. Ziv was moving through the crowds, his escape and evasion techniques a little too clumsy for your taste. You caught sight of Pea Coat and White Jumper on his tail. You needed one alive, optimally.

Pea Coat moved differently now, more sure of herself, less klutzy. All right, you upgraded her threat level. She was a professional playing a recruit. White Jumper nodded at Pea Coat and you knew they were working in tandem.

"Verne, you need to blend better. Change up your outfit and cover your hair," you said over the secure channel. "I have eyes on two of them."

"Do you know where the boss is?"

"Negative. Just keep moving. Don't let them herd you."

"You find your girl?" Ziv took off his jacket and pulled his hood up.

"Yeah, she warned me that everyone loves you so much, they're trying to throw you a surprise party. I was all like, "are you serious? That dude? No one likes him, he's an asshole."

"Fuck you."

"Keep moving, you're only drawing two, and there may be more."

"Hugo, Verne, this is Molière, the original. You need to head west; I've cleared a path and I've got eyes on your pursuers." Lacroix's voice crackled over the comm.

"Boss! About damn time!" The relief in Ziv's voice surprised you.
"Run into problems?" You dropped into an alleyway, ahead of White Jumper. You palmed your tanto, waiting for him to pass by. He never saw you. You dragged him backward and slid your blade through his spine. He went down quick and quiet and you wiped your weapon on his pants before sheathing it and walking back onto the street.

"Worry about yourself, Hugo," Lacroix said sharply. "Bái Shé is here."

"Yeah, saw her already. She took a raincheck; told her I'd invite her to our next big party. It'll be great."

Lacroix was silent for a moment. "She didn't attack you?"

"No. I'll give my report later. Anyone on my tail?"

"No. They're after Verne."

"I'm starting to feel unloved." But you were pleased. You had worked hard to stay incognito; if they knew who or what to look for they could make things harder for Lao.

You followed Pea Coat at a distance.

"That's it Verne, you're in my sights. Take that first right and head into the parking garage. It should be clear, but can't promise anything."

"Any way to transport our traitors?"

"Yes. Let her follow him in. You took care of the other one?"

"Yes." You slipped into the garage, eyes adjusting to the darkness.

"Location, Verne?"

"Stairwell C." You turned to the stairwell and started climbing. You could hear someone ahead of you moving fast. You picked up the pace.

"Meet me at the top," Lacroix said.

You reached the top of the stairs, and she was waiting for you, not Ziv. Her gun was raised and she watched you with sharp eyes.

"Hands up."

You casually raised your hands. "I don't have any money, ma'am," you affected an older, rougher voice, hoping she wouldn't recognize "Hugo."

"Oh don't pretend. It's beneath us. I know you're one of Lacroix's, not the expensive one, but you'll do." She swung the gun, gesturing for you to step in front of her.

You took a step, then spun, digging your left hand into her gun-hand. Your blades emerged and she screamed, while you pushed her arm out, sending the shot wild. You pressed a finger against her wrist, and your injector popped out. You waited, gripping her arm as she wilted against you, dropping the gun.

You picked the gun up, Ziv running toward you.

"Let's get our friend home," you said, shifting one arm over your shoulder. Ziv grabbed the
other. "Lacroix?"

"Here." He waved you forward, dressed in a blue medic's jumpsuit. He moved faster than you expected, though his gait was uneven. You dragged Pea Coat up through the parking garage to the roof. A medical-evacuation helicopter waited on the helipad.

"You can fly helicopters too?" You gave Lacroix an incredulous look.

"I am not a one-trick pony, Chanceux."

You began to clean your prostheses, because even if that dig was directed at you, you got the job done right.

Chapter End Notes

Kamaitachi are Japanese yokai. They're the embodiment of dust devils and can cut people without pain. More importantly, they're sometimes portrayed as weasels with blade hands. Because Genji is kind of a shit.

Noticed I do a lot of meandering. Like this arc should've been finished a long time ago, but I keep slipping fluff, smut, and semi-relevant character missions and interactions into the mix (I'm looking at you Christmas arc). In my original fiction, I would've cut half of this. But fanfic is more...malleable? Should I be tightening it up? Or are you guys still enjoying the detours?

As always, love the feedback. Love cake. Am slave to the fic, and it's kind of scary.
"Did you know DGSE was infiltrated?!" Ziv shouted. The three of you sat in Lacroix's office, waiting on Captain Amari.

"One always assumes," Lacroix said with a Gallic shrug.

You silently drank your coffee, staring hard at Lacroix. The helicopter had been far too loud to have a conversation with him. And you had not wanted to distract an injured pilot.

"No. No one assumes that if you're on your first "training exercise" there will be turncoat allies legitimately trying to kill you or collect your bounty!" Ziv shook his fists, hair going in all directions.

"One should be prepared for the possibility," Lacroix said, sipping something out of a flask. "This isn't the IDF. You're in the big leagues now, Agent Mihret."

"A good teacher should probably define the parameters better, Lacroix. I'm sure Ziv learned a very valuable lesson today, but I don't think you meant to teach him that he shouldn't trust you at your word."

Lacroix turned his cool stare on you. "She speaks. What other scathing insight are you going to share with the class, Chanceux?"

"You're favoring your left side. You get ambushed? Was this a learning exercise for you too?" You set your coffee down, smiling thinly. Lacroix wanted pointed observations? OK, you'd stick them in his craw, Blackwatch style.

"You're favoring your left side. You get ambushed? Was this a learning exercise for you too?" You set your coffee down, smiling thinly. Lacroix wanted pointed observations? OK, you'd stick them in his craw, Blackwatch style.

"Good eye, Chanceux. I was delayed. It was minor, because one should be prepared for the possibilities. My assailant is dead. It is good that you brought another guest to answer our questions."

"Yeah, the thing about one-trick ponies is that they're reliable." You scowled at him.

"Took that personally, did you?" Lacroix chuckled, taking another drink. "I will make suggestions for more attachments. Having a built-in toolkit is a good thing. You just need to expand your range."

"Great, that doesn't change the fact that this mission was far more treacherous than it had to be," you said, unwilling to let him gaslight you.

It was...a cock-up," Lacroix agreed. He pulled an engraved metal cigarette case out of his jacket pocket and tapped it a few times. "But you both handled yourselves well. Agent Mihret, you didn't get injured and while your E&E skills could use some work, they were literally put to the test today, and you emerged unscathed. Good job." He offered you both cigarettes.

Ziv glared at Lacroix, which was a far more restrained reaction than you were expecting. Oh dear. He even took a cigarette, letting Lacroix light it for him. Lacroix smoked Gitanes Brunes; they were an iconic French brand and they had a distinct aroma and a high price tag. You wanted one, but you weren't going to be distracted, unlike Ziv. "If Lucky hadn't been there-"
"You'd be dead or prisoner, probably," Lacroix nodded sagely, lighting his own cigarette. "Good job, Chanceux. It seems you were right. I am a very tempting target and the Bái Shé situation is far more complicated than I expected. Agent Mihret showed me the video. Mademoiselle Lao is a clever girl, naming you wrong."

You weren't going to be placated by Lacroix's attempts at distraction. "Were we bait?"

"Non. It was just supposed to be a training exercise. An old...friend reached out." Lacroix sat back in his chair, his eyes hard, smoke curling around his head. "I have to remind myself that "friendship" is such a flexible concept in the intelligence community."

"Or maybe you just have shitty friends," you said. Birds of a feather, as the proverb went. You picked your coffee back up. The phrase of the day was "trust issues." Maybe Lacroix didn't do this on purpose, but you didn't like how careless he'd been with Ziv. "The rest of the DGSE recruits make it back?"

"Yes, the ones we didn't...take care of. I'm feeling some heat, but honestly after Mathieu's little Judas kiss, they won't make a scene. Agent Mihret, you might want to scrub some of their files, they have a picture of Chanceux, but it was one we used for the op. She had half her face covered anyway."

The door opened and Captain Amari stood in the threshold, teeth clenched, hair down, shoulder squared. She looked ready to go dragon-slaying; all she was missing was a horse and lance. "Gérard, take yourself to the infirmary or I will drag you, and I won't do it nicely like last time." You could see the focus tightening on the cigarette. "There is no smoking indoors."

Ziv discretely dropped his cigarette into his hand and you grinned as he ground it out on the side of Lacroix's fancy desk.

"Oh Ana, you always know how to overwhelm a man." Lacroix put a hand over his heart. "The vest stopped the bullets, I am fine." But he discretely stubbed his cigarette out too.

Captain Amari was across the room in two strides, hair whipping behind her. She gripped Lacroix by the ear. "Go. Now. I have Agent Mihret's report. I'll take Lucky's in person. And then we're going to talk about how you simultaneously pissed off the DGSE, MI-5, and MI-6 in one afternoon."

"Ana!" Lacroix's laugh had a hint of fear in it. "The English can't prove a thing. They're just fishing. They don't actually believe DGSE."

"Go."

You felt a twinge of satisfaction at watching Lacroix retreat, if only because you were petty as fuck and today had been difficult. You weren't smiling, not on the outside at least.

Ziv stared at Captain Amari in awe.

"You are dismissed, Agent Mihret. I think Winston wanted to see you about some cyber security layering issues." She turned her focus on you and you definitely weren't smiling now. "Lucky, I'm going to need a debrief in as much detail as possible if we want to avoid a political incident."

It was probably too late for that. But you recounted what occurred, your interaction with Bái Shé, the ambush, and Lacroix's tidbits of information regarding a personal betrayal. You also informed her you'd taken one alive.
Captain Amari was calmer by the time you were done. "This is salvageable. My apologies. I've been in contact with three different intelligence agencies screaming about violations of sovereignty and Overwatch overreach. And Gérard is being difficult, playing all his cards close to his chest. Spies." She shook her head. "I'll arrange for someone to handle the interrogation. You take a break. Good work today."

"I'll let Jesse know to bring you some tea," you said, and she gave you a sharp look. "...Because you like tea, and Jesse makes it better than I do," you added lamely.

"Thank you," she said after a long moment. "That would be lovely."

"Perhaps I was too hasty in my judgments. He seemed like a good candidate at the time. However he seems to lack the...fortitude to get the job done. It might be time to return to a firmer leadership-"

You did not freeze when you opened the door to Gabriel's office and found Director Petras sitting in front of Gabriel's desk, his cologne stinking up the room. You simply walked to your desk, retrieved a sheaf of papers and turned around. You would brief Gabriel on your situation later.

"Do people just enter your office without knocking, Reyes?"

"Agent Strike is my personal assistant. It generally isn't necessary. And she is...discrete," Gabriel drawled, resting his elbows on the desk. "Nevertheless, I understand your concern. Strike, take a walk."

"Sir," you said with a sharp nod and headed out, your face a bland mask.

You walked straight to Captain Amari's office. She was on the phone with an angry English woman. She set the phone down, hitting mute, and looked at you. "Problems?"

You nodded.

Captain Amari gestured for you to sit and continued her conversation, the other person's volume diminishing as they spoke. She was just as capable as Jack, if more subtle with her charisma; it didn't hurt that most people understood that she could shoot them through the left nostril from miles away. Less than five minutes later, she was closing the call.

"Judith, I am sorry, we have a situation. I'm going to have to call you back. Mmm. Yes, please do send more of the Earl Grey. It's been lovely hearing from you." She hung up and turned her attention on you.

You told her what you'd overheard in the past week. Petras going after Jack. Petras courting Gabriel. This was the most you'd seen him at HQ.

Captain Amari took her hat off and ran her fingers through her hair. "There's more. Let me make tea. We are going to be here awhile. Lock the door."

You locked the door and turned off your tablet.
"They want to assign a UN observer to Blackwatch. Gérard's sources suggest the most likely candidate is a former Vishkar CFO, a Vikram Korpali. His mother has been linked to Talon."

"So it's in our best interest for Gabriel to play along, if only to keep Korpali out of our business."

"Maybe." Captain Amari poured Earl Grey tea and set plate of cream wafers on the desk. The scent of bergamot was soothing. "Jack thinks we should show a united front, let the observer come in for a bit, satisfy their curiosity, and go about our business."

You blew out a breath. "Shit."

"Jack isn't necessarily wrong. If we protest too much, they'll push harder. It's a delicate balance."

"We finally got Blackwatch cleaned up. Shit Spiders is going strong. We can't afford to have another breach," you said tightly.

"They say the "observer" will just be watching. As if "spying" isn't enough damage," Captain Amari said. "We could run two sets of missions. Limit observer access and potential interference. Assign Jesse to him. He's good at...disarming people."

You fought hard not to smirk. Because even if you knew something was going on, it did not behoove you to advertise it. You adored Captain Amari, which meant you also had a healthy fear of her. "If we let them do this, they'll just walk all over us."

"You may be right. I also feel that once someone has their foot in the door, once Blackwatch becomes more common knowledge, the observer will become an overseer. We have to move forward very carefully."

"And they'll be privy to our identities." Your mind flashed to Genji. You and Jesse didn't have family ties to exploit. "I uh...Gabriel called me "Agent Strike" in front of Petras."

"Ah, I meant to speak to you about that. An inquiry about you came through last week. Under your real name." Captain Amari sipped her tea. "The Black Base Delta files are under highest secrecy. The timing is very suspicious. Probably has to do with your involvement with Báí Shé."

"They're fishing."

"Too many people know you survived that "accident," even if they don't know your real name. We have already muddied the paperwork on purpose. We backdated your status as a floater agent, accompanying Commander Reyes when he made inspections. Your unsealed records have been modified; you were never assigned to Black Base Delta. You never served under Captain Patel."

You sucked in a breath.

"For all intents and purposes, you are officially Lucky Strike, the victim of terrible parental taste."

You downed the rest of the tea and thought about that. Shin was the one who "named" you, and his taste had been questionable, true. But it didn't matter what other people thought they knew about you. You knew the truth, and that's how you lived with yourself. It had always been that way. This wouldn't change a thing. Aside from your shrink and your small circle of comrades,
you didn't talk about your history in any detail. "Well, it's not like anyone knows my real name anyway," you said and ate another cookie.

"It's a delaying tactic. If they want to find you, they will. You don't have any...vulnerabilities attached to your birth name? Children? Family? Large bank accounts?"

"Bank account used to be. But when I joined Blackwatch I got a cover identity or six. Been using those."

Captain Amari stared at you. She wanted you to answer the rest of the questions.

"No children. No family. No pets." You held your chin up. "Jesse and me are Blackwatch orphans, through and through. No outside connections. No one left to leverage against us."

"That's not quite true," Captain Amari said gently.

"Jesse swore up and down he didn't have family left. And that he was done with Deadlock." You eyed the crumbs on your plate. Jesse wouldn't lie to you, would he?

"They are moving against Jack and Gabriel. Is there anything bigger they could use against you?"

You sat back in the chair, the impact of her question a slap in the face.

"I meant I don't have any personal vulnerabilities to complicate the situation. Like hostages or anything." You stared at the floor. "Jack and Gabriel have always had targets on their backs."

Saying that out loud made your shoulders tighten.

"Yes." Captain Amari's tone was deceptively light but you weren't fooled, she was getting ready to pounce. "But do you really understand the situation?"

"Spell it out, Captain."

"Our enemies are sowing dissension in the ranks. They are targeting your people. What role are you going to play? How are you going to fight back? Because now more than ever, we need to be united."

This went further than Shit Spiders. This was like Lao, personal matters wrapped in the veneer of work. "This relationship stuff is...new. Send me into a fight. Give me a target. Assign me a mission. I'm good for that. But I don't have a plan for them."

"Maybe it's time you started."

You met her gaze.

"Gabriel is the calmest I have seen him in a long time. Jack is balancing his roles well. The personality shift has always been there, but I see Jack more than our "fearless leader" lately. It could be the fact they're relying on each other again. But I think it might be a little more than that. They've always been tempestuous together; they work hard, they play hard, they fight hard. That is the same, but with less the alpha male tension than before. Overall, they're more relaxed now."

You felt your cheeks burning. "Age mellows people."

"Are you calling us old, Lucky? Are Jack and Gabriel having problems? They have
medication for that, you know."

You choked on your wafer, because Captain Amari was fit, sharp, and didn't look a day over 25. They were all in their thirties, and that wasn't old at all.

Captain Amari's eyes gleamed, because she had too much poise to laugh at her own insinuation.

"They're outpacing me there, so no. No one's old. No one needs medication," you said when you were done coughing crumbs into your napkin. You poured yourself more tea, trying to get your head together.

"I wouldn't bring this up if you weren't already in this extraordinary situation." She got up and refilled the teapot. "Like it or not, you're tangled up with them. And it's going to get worse before it gets better. You need to decide if that's what you want. If you can stick it out. I'm not telling you to. If at any point you need out, you are out; you always have the option of changing your mind. I'm definitely not asking you to sacrifice yourself. But you need to understand, that the honeymoon will end, and they will be difficult. If you already know that's something you can't handle, you should think hard about your involvement. Because no matter your feelings, the world is going to get in the way."

You rubbed your forehead. You didn't know if this could last, but you hadn't planned on walking out either. "As it stands, I can do it. I want to do it."

"What is "it," Lucky?"

You suppressed a curse, because Captain Amari was a fucking sadist.

"If you can't even say it...?"

"I'm with them. I've got their backs. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, but I'll do my best, ma'am."

"I know how you feel about Gabriel," she said, because apparently everyone knew. "But Jack?"

Your thoughts flashed back to Indiana. Jack opening Christmas presents. Jack kissing you behind the barn. Jack beneath you on the floor of his bedroom, his eyes shining while he watched you.

"Jack's important too," you said quietly.

Captain Amari patted your shoulder. "This isn't an assignment, Lucky. You do what you have to. Just don't underestimate your role."

"It's a bad call, Jack." Gabriel sat on his desk, arms crossed. Jack sprawled on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. "You let them in, it's an infestation; we'll never get them out."

"We can't act like we have anything to hide. They'll form an investigative committee and blow the whole thing wide open." Jack pinched the bridge of his nose.
"You think we're cockroaches who fear the light? We'll survive. The compartmentalization is now airtight. They won't find a goddamn thing about Shit Spiders or anything high priority."

"They'll find something. You're fucking black ops, Gabe. I know the value of your work, but if we make this too difficult, they'll just leak something, it doesn't even have to be true, and we'll get crucified." Jack sat forward, rubbing his face. "I don't like it any more than you. I'm just trying to make the best of a bad hand."

"What will they do? Lock us up? Shoot us? I have blackmail on half the Security Committee members. We have enough leverage to keep them off our backs."

"Escalation should not be our first response, Gabe."

"I remember when you used to be brave." Gabriel's lips curled in a sneer.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Jack rolled his eyes. "You're the one who taught me to play it smart. "Brave" is just another word for "dead stupid," remember? This is politics. Bravery has no business here."

"We let them in, we jeopardize dozens of ongoing operations," Gabriel snapped. "I'm not putting my people at greater risk."

"One observer."

"With ties to Vishkar and possibly Talon. Get someone else. You can do that much politicking, Jack. It's why they made you Strike Commander."

"Fuck you, Gabriel." Jack was on his feet.

"I'm too hard to work with. I'm too difficult to get to compromise. They're damn straight I am! I wouldn't tolerate this shit! When did you become such a bureaucrat?"

"I know your instinct is to close ranks and fortify when we're under attack, but we can't be that fucking obvious, Gabe! You of all people should get that!"

"What kind of leader are you if you don't fight for your people?"

"My, you are bold, Chanceux. It is a good thing my Amélie is so understanding." Gérard said, when he opened the doors to his quarters.

"We need to talk about countermeasures," you said stiffly, not rising to the bait. It was very late now and you tried to remember what kind of day you'd been expecting when you got up to go on a stupid training run with Ziv in London. Nothing like this, that's for sure.

Lacroix stepped back. "Come in then."

You didn't hesitate. His quarters were almost as big as Jack's. Amélie sat on a low couch, in a sleek violet tunic and black tights, reading a fashion magazine.

"This is regarding Shit Spiders." Your eyes darted between them.
"There are no secrets between us," he said, an undertone of something between pleasure and pride in his voice.

You rubbed your forehead, because Lacroix liked to play one-upsmanship games. Worse, he excelled at them. It's part of what made him so deadly. "Lacroix-

"But if it will make you more comfortable. Amélie, can you wait for me in the boudoir?"

"D'accord." Amélie smiled at you, her full lips curving in amusement. She was a stunning woman, who moved with grace, confidence, and an extra something in her swagger. You remembered Lacroix's earlier confession and averted your eyes.

"Have a seat, Chanceux." You weren't surprised by the plum and black color scheme of their room. It was elegant, sexy, and a little intimidating. You sat on the edge of the couch and Lacroix took the seat perpendicular to you. He retrieved his cigarette case and opened it.

"No thanks," you said, though you were very tempted. He smoked Gitanes Brunnes, and you had really wanted one earlier.

"You're very tense, Chanceux. Can I offer you a drink instead? I have burgundy, port, and an excellent Bordeaux." He gave you one of those polite half-smiles that let you know he was going to etiquette you to death, unless you accepted some of his hospitality.

"I'll take the cigarette then, thank you."

He held his case out to you and you took one. Lacroix did not offer you his lighter. You were forced to lean forward and let him light it for you, the act uncomfortably intimate. A silver ash tray sat on the table. You inhaled, savoring the distinctive bite and spicy sweet flavor of his cigarettes.

"So, to what do I owe the honor?"

"You fixed up?" You asked, gesturing to his left side.

"It was all minor. Ana is so very fussy. But, it is kind of you to ask." His eyes gleamed.

"It is," you agreed. He was being very reasonable. There was a trap here. "Petras has been visiting Jack and Gabriel. He's already voiced displeasure with Jack's work, and now he's cozying up to Gabriel, telling him that maybe he shouldn't have been passed over for the promotion. I'm not sure how this ties into the placement of UN observer for Blackwatch. I'm thinking it's just another way to drive a wedge between them. Captain Amari was very clear about the pros and cons. And I'm sure you can guess which sides Jack and Gabriel are on."

You felt Lacroix's regard.

"What are you asking me, Chanceux?"

"You're the sharpest strategist we have, Lacroix." You met his pleased gaze. "You knew this was coming. Don't tell me you don't have a plan."

"Several." He rested his legs in a figure four, lighting another cigarette for himself.

"Well?" You asked after he'd taken a few puffs.

"You need to work on your poker face. It is passable in most situations, but your natural
impatience always shines through."

"You need to work on not being a dick," you scowled.

"See, you are too easy to bait. It comes from spending so much time with soldiers." Lacroix smirked. "You need to sit back and understand the playing field. Learn to enjoy the opening maneuvers. Think of it as tactical foreplay."

You raised a brow, because he would coach his teaching in sexual metaphors. Worse, he did it smoothly. Ugh. "Focus, Lacroix."

He just laughed. "So earnest. All right. First off, the smartest thing is to accept the observer. I realize this goes against your soldier's mentality, but understand that keeping enemies close is commonplace in espionage. We can control what he sees or doesn't. Up close, we can find weaknesses to exploit. Destroying Korpal's credibility wouldn't be difficult. Accomplishing it without collateral damage will be tricky, but I can do it." The sharp little points of his mustache accented his smile in an unnerving fashion. "The observer may do damage unchecked, but he's just a distraction, an appetizer to whet our tolerance for bullshit. He's also there as an agent provocateur. It's no coincidence people keep trying to stir up bad blood between Jack and Gabriel."

"So you think we should accept and counteract?"

"Yes. Because the observer does not matter in the grand scheme of things. He's a decoy. We get all worked up and focus on such a small problem while they prepare a second wave of attack. If they are fortunate, we are too consumed with our own in-fighting to get a handle on the problem. And it goes downhill from there. Much easier to know your leak and manage what kind of information you are feeding them."

Lacroix liked an audience, you realized. Being a master spy, he didn't often get to share his brilliant revelations with people who could appreciate them and live to tell the tale. Well, tell the tale with all the top secret details redacted.

"What's their angle then?" You inhaled the smoke, wishing you didn't like it so much.

"They won't reveal the existence of Blackwatch now. It is too new and your actions are still deniable. Jack is much too popular to be smeared in the media just yet. Gabriel is still well-loved. No, that'll all come later. The observer will pick out a linchpin, someone integral to operations, but who lacks the influence of Ana or Gabriel. Someone like Mihret, Winston, or you. And they'll go after them instead. It will be a very flashy court-martial, and whether the evidence is real or not, it will shake the public's belief in Overwatch. It will be the first crack in our armor. Tarnishing our image will be the first volley. And then they'll pick away at what we are. McCree and Shimada are expendable; they will disappear. Wilhelm and Lindholm are old; they will be retired. Lindholm's designs will be used in some sort of atrocity, further blackening his name. I will probably vanish under truly inexplicable circumstances, adding to my mystique. After all that, Ana, Jack and Gabriel will be next, and perhaps they will self-destruct, because who will be left to support them?"

"Fuck." Because when he said it like that, it was pretty obvious.

"That's how I'd do it anyway. Maybe not the exact order of steps, maybe over the course of several years. But you can see the pattern?"

"Yeah." You shuddered at the scope of it all, glad that you couldn't show any weakness in front of Lacroix, otherwise you might panic. "Ziv is the likeliest target. He's had the most public
exposure, but lacks the charm of Winston." Who could hate a friendly, polite, genius gorilla? Gabriel, and some other assholes, that's who. Ziv was a much easier mark. You sighed, finishing the cigarette. You dropped the butt in the ashtray and shook your head when he offered you another.

"Yes, but that's only if your relationship with Gabriel and Jack stays secret. Otherwise, you'll be on the chopping block first," Lacroix said and frowned at your look. "Don't even think about taking that hit for Mihret. It's not just your skin on the line, Chanceux."

"Obviously that's not a real choice, Lacroix."

He smiled sharply at you. "Just making sure. Soldiers like to throw themselves on grenades."

"I'm a lousy soldier," you said through gritted teeth.

Lacroix just chuckled and ran his fingers through his hair. "You have an unfortunate flair for heroics. Thankfully, they are the small kind. It is a flaw, but it is one I can work with." He smirked at you and you wanted to hit him. "Do you play chess, Chanceux?"

"With Jack," you said.

"He is better than one expects," Lacroix said. "But he plays like a general. He favors overwhelming force, and while he can think twenty moves ahead, he doesn't know how to set the board."

"I'm relearning shogi with Gabriel."

"My, those soldiers do like their games, or perhaps they just like playing with you," Lacroix said, giving you a sly look. "I didn't think you had the patience to sit there and wait for your opponent to decide his move."

"And yet, here I am, making plans with you. I'd say I'm a fucking fount of patience."

Lacroix laughed, genuinely delighted by your vitriol. "So you're all in then? Such a romantic."

"You can't be half-hearted in battle," you said.

"Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas." He just smiled at your blank look. "Yes, I agree, Chanceux. You must commit to a course of action."


"Well, chess, shooting, and strategy are all very similar in one regard: if your opponent can reach you, you can hit them too. You just need the right tools and an understanding of the terrain. I have been compiling a list of all those UN officials who aren't playing so nicely with us. I will admit, I may have an insider or two, but that isn't something you need to worry about."

"So we're going to smear them first?"

"Some," he said. "False flags will be very important. Discrete assassinations as well. They can't have too much reason to suspect us." He paused. "We can whittle them down, Chanceux, but there will always be more. The other half is shaping Overwatch into something that can defend itself. Something worth defending. As it stands, our mission is too broad, our many actions
unsustainable. Jack wants to save everyone. Gabriel will cross many lines to protect his people. Ana must catch whatever they miss. We are spread too thin."

You were ready for that drink. "That's way above my pay grade."

"It is food for thought. You can't afford to simply follow orders any more, Chanceux. We both agree that you aren't a very good soldier," Lacroix said. "You need to be thinking long-term." That wasn't the first time you'd heard that today.

You weren't sure what difference your role in your relationship with Jack and Gabriel could make. But you understood strategy, preparation, and mission execution. Those were the long-term ideas you were prepared to embrace.

"Go on," you said, trying not to sound grumpy.

"I am making contingency plans. It doesn't matter if we take the observer or not. They will move against us. This is just a distraction. I am starting to suspect that Bái Shé will be a lot more useful to us alive and functioning than in any other condition."

"Is that my carrot and stick?" You asked, a little disgusted.

"It can be. But I am not saying that to get you on my side, Chanceux. She has accomplished many Talon operations. She knows a great deal and is functioning at a better capacity than expected. Granted, there is that self-destruct command they've implanted her with, but I think we both know how to get around that."

"Yeah," you smiled wryly. "We all have our priorities."

Lacroix lifted a finger to his lips. "If we can take her alive, she will fill in part of the puzzle. And then we can launch Hanoi. I know Gabriel wants to rush in, but Nguyen is not to be underestimated." Lacroix's smile tightened, and you watched his cigarette crumble over the ashtray.

"You know her," you breathed.

"Talon doesn't just want me dead because I am a spectacular agent, Chanceux." He winked. "Some of it is very personal."

"Really, Lacroix?" You shook your head. "And I get the reputation?"

"I can't help that your mind is forever in the gutter." He laughed, but made no denials. "But you know, if we keep meeting like this, people will talk. I don't advertise that I've taken on new protégées."

"According to Ziv, some people already assume that I'm sleeping with everyone I talk to." You shrugged. "As long as your wife isn't bothered, I don't care."

"Amélie finds you quite charming," Lacroix said.

Your eyes darted to his bedroom and you wondered just how much she had heard. Privacy was an illusion, sure, but you'd almost forgotten she was there. You were really a terrible spy. Lacroix probably just liked having you around to make himself look better.

"It isn't my wife you should worry about." He smiled thinly.
"Jack and Gabriel aren't going to be jealous over rumors."

Lacroix just gave one of those stupidly elegant half shrugs and you got the feeling he was just humoring you.

You rolled your eyes, because you couldn't verbally argue with body language. "There's another thing." You studied the ash tray, because Amélie was probably listening in. "Ziv."

"What about Agent Mihret?" Lacroix asked, his voice all honey and butter.

"I think you know." You glared at him. "You need to be careful with him."

"Today's mission was not my-"

"You know that's not what I mean."

Lacroix only gave you one of those infuriatingly placid smiles. "Chanceux, I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about."

"What kind of leader are you if you don't fight for your people?"

"Where the hell do you get off-?"

You walked in on them then, Gabriel glaring at Jack, arms folded tightly against his chest. There were only a few feet of distance between them. Jack was on his feet, fists balled at his sides, one foot already stepping toward Gabriel.

You shut the door behind you and waited to see if either one of them would back off. Neither of them looked at you. The tension between them was staggering, and while you had never witnessed their blowouts before, you understood why outsiders might misread their relationship.

You walked between them, ignoring the way their eyes flicked between you and each other. Maybe it was your imagination, but you could feel the electricity crackling on your skin when you entered their proximity. Face firmly calm, you set your papers down on your desk. "Is everything all right?"

"Great," Jack kept his focus on Gabriel.

"Mind your own business," Gabriel said sharply, a warning flashing in his eyes.

You watched his hands, but he held still, too tightly coiled for you to get a read on his body language. You didn't think he'd swing, but then there were probably graveyards full of people who didn't think Commander Gabriel Reyes could do that.

"Don't take it out on her," Jack scowled. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"My problem is that the goddamn Strike Commander can't be trusted to look after his own people!"

You weren't sure if Gabriel actually thought that or if he was just trying to piss Jack off.
You looked between them. You had no authority here. And maybe that would work in your favor: this clash didn't need any more alphas.

"Strike Commander, Captain Amari was looking for you," you said. "Commander Reyes-" You studied his snarling face. "Is this a glass situation?" You asked, dropping the codeword for "we are being overheard."

He glared at you, teeth clenched. "I told you to mind your own business, agent."

The seat Petras had occupied remained empty. There were only two people who knew what had been said here earlier, and the one who could tell you wouldn't. At least not till he calmed down.

You walked between them again, deliberately turning your back to Gabriel. You looked up at Jack, his arms now crossed over his chest. "It's late." You placed a hand on his shoulder. "Why don't you take a walk? I'll swing by later."

Jack inhaled sharply, frowning at you. He studied you with an unfriendly level of calculation, caught somewhere between hardened Strike Commander and angry soldier.

You had no power here. If either of them kicked you out or pulled rank, you'd have to get Captain Amari. And the interpersonal consequences? Well, you weren't sure, but you knew it wouldn't be pretty. This wasn't just work; it wasn't just personal. It was a tangled mess and one misstep could bring the whole thing down.

"Please, Jack. It's late, and we can deal with this in the morning." Your voice didn't waver and you were satisfied by how collected you remained.

He swallowed and brushed your hand off. "Damnit, Lucky."

You waited for him to order you to mind your own business, to render you useless, to give you an excuse to go to Captain Amari. And you half-expected him to do that and break whatever small faith you'd put in him. Because if he did that now, when it really mattered, you weren't sure if you could recover. You wondered if that showed on your face, because he turned away, hands jammed in his pockets.

"Fine. In the morning then." He didn't look at Gabriel, he just walked out briskly, the door shutting with a click. He didn't slam it, but you felt the finality of the gesture.

You let out the breath you hadn't realized you were holding. When you turned around, Gabriel was watching you with sharp eyes, his lips pressed firmly together.

"Do I need to get Jesse and Genji on the mat for you?"

"You need to learn how to mind your own business," Gabriel said.

"You are my business." You crossed your arms. "It's late, Gabriel."

"You already used that line on Jack." Sending Jack away hadn't diminished the edge in his voice. He was still enraged, posture too taut, hands stuck in fists. You weren't afraid of Gabriel, but you were afraid of fucking things up.

"Because it's true. We're not going to solve anything tonight."

Gabriel just glowered at you.
"Are you going to start throwing things? Because last time you told me to hide your coffee mug."

He picked the cup up off his desk and turned it over in his hand. He met your gaze and suddenly there was an explosion of white porcelain against the wall. You hadn't even seen him move. That was some petty shit.

"All right then," you said. "Never mind."

Gabriel swept the surface of his desk clean in two swings; pens, paperwork, and assorted objects flying off at speeds not safe for work. Or at least the office. Glass shattered. Plastic fractured. Papers rustled as they fluttered through the air. When he was done, he stared at the mess on the floor. Yeah, he was going to have to clean that up, because that wasn't your job.

"You should go," he said gruffly.

"I will," you said, because you understood boundaries. But you walked up to him, forcing yourself not to hesitate. You leaned in and kissed his shoulder. "We'll sort it, OK?"

One hand came up and roughly patted your back. "Yeah. OK." He paused. "Why do you smell like Gérard's cigarettes?"

"Because we were smoking them earlier," you said.

"Where?" Gabriel's voice was rough.

"His quarters," you said, because sneaking cigarettes inside Overwatch HQ was apparently an art.

Suddenly you were flat against the desk, one of Gabriel's palms cushioning the back of your head, the other pressed against your sternum, keeping you down. Gabriel's eyes were locked on yours, his dogs tags jingling, his hat askew.

You blinked up at him, not liking the hard set of his jaw.

"Why were you in Gérard's quarters?" He rasped, his thumb rubbing hard circles between your breasts.

"We ran a mission today, remember?" You had once heard that tigers would not attack a human who maintained eye contact; woodsmen in India wore masks on the back of their heads for protection. But the moment the prey turned away or ran, they would move in for the kill. Staring up at Gabriel, you were pretty sure none of that was true. Apex predators would pounce when they felt like it; they didn't care if you were watching or not. You still didn't look away. "There were several complications. We had stuff to go over." Because Gabriel was not in the right mindset to hear about grand strategy.

Your breaths came short and hard. Gabriel was between your legs, pinning you to his damn desk, one twisted nerve away from going off.

His lips pressed against your neck, teeth grazing your throat.

"Gabriel-" You shivered, because he always affected you. Fucking him calm hadn't been your plan, but that option was now very tempting.

"You seem to have trouble with orders. Can't mind your own business. Can't leave when
you're told. Can't stay out of other men's rooms." He bit down, and you gasped sharply. "Were you planning on going to Jack after this? Were you going to reward him with your pussy because you managed to get him to obey you this once? Did you think I'd be that easy to manipulate?"

Your stomach dropped, coldness flaring in your gut. You didn't want to play any more. Gabriel was possessive, but he was never demeaning.

"Was that your plan?" He hissed, grinding against you.

"No," you said, shoving him away. It was like pushing a brick wall. "That's not OK."

"Neither is spreading your legs to get your way," Gabriel sneered.

"Red." You pushed his hand off your chest, and it was another second before he got off you. You put hand over your face, the office lights too bright overhead. You took a few ragged deep breaths, forcing yourself to be calm. When you moved your hand, Gabriel was standing beside you, his palms flat on the desk, face blank.

You sat up and straightened your shirt. The bite on your neck would bruise if you didn't ice it or use an emitter.

"That was cruel and unnecessary," you said flatly, rubbing your throat.

"You should have left," Gabriel said, voice low and dry.

"Yeah, that makes everything my fault," you said, because that was a shitty deflection. "I'm not everyone's stress fuck, you know." You glanced over your shoulder, Gabriel's expression still unreadable. "Even Jack's never pushed me that far," you added, because fuck being the better person.

Gabriel said nothing. Was a real apology too difficult of a concept?

"Right, I'm going."

You combed your fingers through your hair, your hands nowhere near as steady as you liked. Leaving the office had never felt like the walk of shame before, and the sensation was made worse by Gabriel's gaze burning into your back. You shut the door behind you. Captain Amari was right. Things were going to get worse before they got better. And the honeymoon? That was definitely over.

You made yourself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the kitchen. You made Jack a few too, because you had said you were going to see him. The sinking feeling in your gut would be better in the morning, you knew from experience. Things were always worse late at night. But right now, you just wanted to go knock on Jesse's door and finish a bottle of whiskey.

You weren't going to though, because then he'd ask what was wrong, and you'd tell him, and everything would get even more awkward. So you packed your sandwiches in a bag and took the long route to Jack's quarters.

If Jack pushed you tonight-
You took a deep breath. Today had been stupid. Today had been long. You made a few passes around the officers' quarters, and when you were confident it was clear, you went to Jack's room.

He sat on the couch, still in full uniform, the lights dimmed.

You hopped over the back of the sofa, and dropped the sandwiches on the coffee table.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Jack said, not turning to look at you. He was hunched over, chin resting on his hands.

"You guys are stubborn asshats," you said, a little harsher than you intended. "It was bound to happen."

Jack sighed. "Thanks."

"Sorry," you said after a moment. "I had a shitty day too. You have an emitter?"

Jack tilted his head to the side, giving you a once over.

"Nothing serious," you said. "Don't worry about it."

"I have one." Jack reached for a sandwich. "I'll get it for you in a moment."

You took yours and sat on the couch, eating in silence.

"Gabe do that?" He gestured to your neck.

"Yeah," you said, when your mouth wasn't full.

"You OK?"

"Pissed." You rubbed your neck. "It's vain, but I don't really want to look at it, you know?"

Jack's brow furrowed. "Yes." He rested a hand on your back. "Thank you for defusing the situation, but you can't just go meddling in the chain of command."

You gave him a hard look. "Then you and Gabriel need to keep it under control. The last thing we need is the two of you getting into off the mats. Let me know and I'll clear out the gym if you need to "expel." But don't act like your fights aren't going to affect the rest of us."

"You're...really upset," Jack said, studying your neck.

"Yes," you said. "I didn't want to get involved." You clenched your fists. "But you guys didn't really give me a choice. So I'm going to go to sleep and I'll figure out how I feel when I wake up. I just came to check on you."

"You're shaking," Jack said softly.

"I'm angry!"

"Gabriel?"

You wiped your face. "Mostly."

"Do you want to stay? Just cuddle?"
You closed your eyes. "Is there some etiquette I'm violating? Because Gabriel and I got into it and I'm not trying to make things worse by running to you."

"I think you noticed Gabriel and I got into it first," Jack said. "The fact you're considering his feelings lets me know you're not just trying to stick it to him. And..." Jack rubbed your back gently. "You can't come here with that wounded look on your face and expect me to not do anything."

"I'm angry," you insisted, voice higher than you liked.

"And hurt." Jack stroked your hair. "No shame in admitting it. We don't pull punches when we fight," he said. "Sometimes there's too much honesty, or what we think is honesty in the moment. Later on, once the adrenaline's down, we realize we've been real bastards, but it's a bit late then." He kissed your cheek. "The sandwiches helped take the edge off. Thank you."

You curled up on the couch, Jack a warm comfort at your side. You didn't feel like walking back to your room or Jesse's.

"Got a t-shirt I can borrow?" You still had blood spatter on your sleeve from this afternoon. It was only a little, but you felt guilty bringing that into Jack's bed.

"Of course." Jack got up and when he came back, the coat and gloves were off and he handed you a black t-shirt. "I'll set up the emitter. You can have the bathroom first." He paused. "The black toothbrush is new, if you want it."

That was no coincidence, but it was nice that he'd made it sound casual. You could keep pretending. "Thanks," you said.

Jack had a blue toothbrush and Gabriel's was purple for some reason. The black one was on the sink, still in the packaging. You opened it, used it, and left it in the holder by the other two, resolving not to think too hard about it.

When you came out of the bathroom, the emitter was already glowing in the bedroom. You set your folded clothes on a chair and slipped into Jack's bed. You liked Jack's bed a little better than Gabriel's. He had piles of heavy blankets, and warm flannel sheets. Gabriel on his own was enough to keep you warm, but Jack had the superior linens. A few minutes later, Jack climbed in beside you wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt. You had your back to him, and he wrapped his arms around you, pulling you against him.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He rubbed circles on your low back.

"Not really." You didn't want to give him more fodder for his fight with Gabriel. "You want to talk about what had you and Gabriel so riled up?"

"I don't." Though Jack didn't sound defensive. "I think you already know most of it." He nuzzled the back of your neck.

"Captain Amari filled me in." You turned over to face him. Jack still wore that concerned look. He hesitantly stroked your neck and it did something to your already fragile insides.

"If you want to debate it, we can later, in private. But I don't want to fight about it any more tonight."

"Don't want to think about it." You curled against his chest.
"Have you been smoking?" He sniffed your hair.

You closed your eyes. "If I answer that, are you going to get weird?"

"That bad of a day? I thought you were just doing training exercises with Gérard and Agent Mihret."

You laughed at that. "Yeah, me too."

Jack gave you another pillow. "What happened?"

"Short version: Talon infiltrated it and caused a three-way intelligence community incident. Lao made an appearance. Everyone wants to murder Ziv, me included. Lacroix got double-crossed, apparently can fly helicopters, and killed an old friend. Then I came to back to this." You waved your hand. "And I was too tired to cook, so PB&J sandwiches."

"So why do you smell like Gitanes?"

You realized that maybe your explanations needed to be better organized, and that you were exhausted. "I went to Lacroix's room to talk strategy. He offered an annoying amount of hospitality, probably to get on my nerves, and eventually I had to accept something." You adjusted your pillows. "They are really nice cigarettes. And his wife was in the next room. So if you're going to get all-"

Jack smiled wryly. "Smoking's bad for you."

"So are pushy super soldiers," you scowled.

Jack kissed you gently. "I'm sorry you had a tough day. I didn't know."

"You don't get the impression that I was sneaking around with Lacroix or something stupid, do you?"

Jack's eyes widened. "Oh." He stroked your cheek. "Not Lacroix. I picked up how you feel about him. It's been pretty obvious, since you joined, that he isn't your favorite person."

"Do you think I'm sneaking around with someone else?" You tried to keep the incredulity out of your voice, and failed.

"No." Jack brought your hands to his lips. "I've been a little...annoyed about McCree. But it's not my place to comment on your friendships."

"We've never-"

"I know. Earlier on we thought maybe you two would-" Jack sighed at your look. "I know. But I'm allowed to feel a little jealous. You go on missions together. You sleep in his room. When you're upset, you go find him."

"I don't have the luxury of a lot of friends."

"I'm not-" Jack pushed his hair out of his face. "Damnit, Lucky. I'm trying to say that, no, I don't think you're doing anything wrong, but sometimes I get jealous because you're doing things with him and maybe I wish you'd do more with me. That's it. It's a confession, not something to fight about."

"OK," you said, placated. Because Jack was trying to tell you his feelings before they got
ugly. "You're busy. I...don't want to bother you. And it's hard since, you know, we have to be
discrete."

"It is hard." Jack paused, a shadow falling across his face. "I don't...I don't do enough, do I?"

You blinked. "I don't know what you mean."

"Gabriel reads to you and he cooks. You do more cooking and you're very conscientious of
how you balance your time with us. You even step out when you think Gabe and me need alone
time. Yes, I noticed." He flinched. "Please don't look *that* surprised."

"We're all busy."

"When's the last time I did something just for you? Sex doesn't count, because this isn't just
sex. Hell, you had to tell me to back off last time."

"That whole Christmas thing?"

"Some of it, but...well, we talked about that. I wasn't a good host, and if we're going to be
brutally honest, we all know that was more for me than for you."

You weren't going to argue with him there. "After I tried my hand at rendering people, you
were supportive."

"I *should* be there for you. You should expect that."

You shrugged. "We play chess."

"That's not enough! You could play chess with Reinhardt!"

"I might win more often..."

"Unlikely. He just flips the board with his knee when he gets too excited. It doesn't matter
who's winning. He can't help himself." Jack sounded vaguely annoyed. "I'm sorry. I'm a shitty
friend and an inconsiderate boyfriend."

You nestled against the pillow and contemplated the designation "boyfriend." It occurred
to you then that all this relationship guilt resulted directly from his fight with Gabriel. Who knew
what Gabriel had been saying before you walked in? But Jack did take a lot. He didn't always
give back. And while you chalked it up to the stress of his job, it wasn't the best dynamic.

"So do better," you said, because making excuses wasn't going to help any of you in the
long run.

Jack's chest shook with laughter. "You can be difficult too."

You shrugged. "Yeah, but I'm not the dramatic one."

"You get upset and you disappear for a few days." Jack pulled you closer against him, like
you'd run because he mentioned it. "I don't like that."

"It's usually not worth fighting about and I need time to cool down. Otherwise I'll get petty
and vengeful."

He raised a brow.

He laughed and stroked your hair. "OK. You're skittish about feelings, and I'm never quite sure if I've pleased you or damn near scared you off."

"I can't tell either. Sometimes it's both." You squirmed a little. "This is like the third time today someone's called me out about how I handle us." You burrowed against Jack's chest, partially for comfort, partially so you didn't have to look him in the eye. "Still talking to the therapist. Haven't given details, but she knows I'm in a relationship and that... It's different from Shin. I already had baggage back then and I obviously keep picking up more. There hasn't been a lot of stability, Jack. And I don't know how to handle this."

Jack moved and suddenly you were on top of his chest, his arms around your waist.

"Fuck, you're fast." Your heart skipped a beat or three. "Jack?"

"Sorry." Jack adjusted the blankets and held you against him. "I know. I know it's new and you're doing your best. I'm not upset at you. It's just one of those areas we could improve on. Like me doing more."

You folded your arms and rested your chin on them, having no choice but to look at him now. "OK."

"Pleased or scared?"

"Agreeing with you."

Jack kissed your head. "So Gabe got...upset about Gérard?"

You hesitated. "You don't get to go throw this in his face, OK? That's my privilege."

Jack laughed softly. "I wouldn't dream of it."

So you told him what happened and Jack stayed quiet till you were done.

"If it makes you feel any better, he's probably already sorry. Can't give you a timetable on when or how he'll apologize, but Gabe doesn't really think that way about you."

"Don't make excuses for him," you said sharply.

"I'm not. Be petty and vengeful. Make him squirm. He deserves it." Jack smirked. "But if you're worried that he secretly thinks that badly of you, no, that's not the case at all. He was too mad at me to think straight. But he shouldn't have taken it out on you."

It didn't mean as much coming from Jack, but the reassurance soothed your inner turmoil. And you recognized that even if Jack and Gabriel were fighting, Jack was trying to make sure there were no misunderstandings. It was oddly comforting.

"I'm glad you came to me," Jack said, after a moment. "That you trust me enough to share these things. I know you probably side with Gabriel on the issue we're disagreeing over, but it means a lot that you're trying to be fair." Jack kissed your cheek. "I know you and Gabriel usually have less...explosive fights. I'm sorry you got tangled up in this one."

"You're very different from Gabriel," you said, forcing yourself to meet those wide blue eyes. "But I'm not here just here for him. You do things to me, and I don't even know how to
"You could always say, "thank you sir, may I please have another." Screaming my name works too." He grinned at you, cheekiness not diluting the pleasure in his eyes.

"Shut up, Jack," you said, and pulled the blankets over your head.

Chapter End Notes

"Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas." The heart has its reasons, which reason knows nothing of." -Pascal

I should clarify that DGSE is Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure, (the General Directorate for External Security) which is France's current spy agency.

Well, everyone's reactions were overwhelmingly positive so I'll keep up with the high proportions of fluff and side missions. Not like I have to work hard to stop myself. And I do admit, the side stuff does build into the main plot and character development. But it could often be cut down to like three sentences.

Example from the Genji mission: "You went with Genji to Nagano, ran into his stupid brother, and got an arrow in the shoulder for your trouble. While Genji was apologetic, it didn't change the fact that it was a goddamn arrow and you'd skipped kinky sex with your lovers for this. You weren't going to post a bounty on Hanzo Shimada, considering he'd gone rogue on the Shimada clan, but you were seriously considering spraying graffiti on Genji's inorganic bits when he wasn't looking."

Yes, I know you'd miss out on some dialogue and Genji/Reader platonic relationship stuff. And I like writing fights, loaded dialogue, and silly jokes. This is structural musing, because I'm at like 218k for this fic and I haven't even started the final arc yet. Maybe I should keep such ramblings on tumblr and off the fic. IDK. I just have a hypercritical inner editor that guiltis the fuck out of me. Sometimes it degenerates into neurosis. Like 5 AM "OMFG WHAT AM I WRITING? MY WORD COUNT IS LESS THAN 1K! WTF?! IT'S AWFUL; WHAT AM I EVEN DOING?!" I mean, at that point I either go "buck up and deal babysakes" or go to bed because I'm too crazy to be trusted and I know it.

As always, feedback is appreciated; it keeps the inner editor monster at bay.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

You guys are great and get an extra long chapter because of it. :D

OK, also because it wouldn't have broken up really well, so yeah...

We're going to pretend it's only because you're awesome.

I know, I know. I'm not smooth.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You awoke to Jack getting dressed.

"You can stay if you want," he said, pulling on his coat. "I don't mind."

You glanced at the clock. "I should get ready for work." You rolled over, recalling what had transpired last night. "Might avoid my desk though."

He leaned over, giving you a quick kiss. "We're going to have a meeting about this with Ana."

"Invite Lacroix," you said.

Jack raised a brow. "Oh?"

"He might be a sociopath, but he's a smart one. We talked strategy last night. I happen to agree with him."

"Gérard doesn't normally handle internal matters. But I'll do that." Jack adjusted his collar. "Thanks for the tip."

"Gabriel will probably listen to Lacroix over me." You climbed out of bed and changed, tossing Jack's shirt in the laundry hamper. The puzzle box sat on his dresser next to Daisy. You stared for half a second too long. When you looked up, Jack was grinning at you.

He exited the room first and then you followed, watching Lacroix's door with some consternation. You split up outside the officers' quarters, you heading back to your room, Jack to his office.

Jesse was waiting for you outside your door.

"Boss was by looking for you."

You weren't sure how much of your expression slipped, but Jesse narrowed his eyes.

"He's not in there, is he?"

Jesse shook his head. "Knocked on my door was all."
You opened up your room and looked around. Nothing was out of place, and you grabbed clean clothes.

"I'm hitting up Fort Wingate, in New Mexico. You wanna ride along?"

"What kind of mission?"

"The personal kind," he said slyly. "Gonna visit some old friends."

You put two and two together. He could only mean the Deadlock Gang. "Is this field trip going to teach us about world peace and brotherly love?"

"You make those words sound downright vicious," Jesse laughed. "Heard you experienced some of Genji's brother's brotherly love."

"A fucking arrow, Jesse. Who uses that shit?" You shook your head. "And Genji did not want him hurt, let alone dead. Fucking hell."

"Really?" Jesse leaned against your doorway. "Huh."

"I know, right?" You began picking out prosthetic attachments. "We killing someone?"

"Probably a few someones. Ana says you're ready to handle some sniping, if you want to fill that role."

"What kind of numbers are we looking at?"

"A dozen, give or take." Jesse shrugged. "Your call, sugarpie."

"I'd rather be close by, if Genji's not coming."

"Just us. Close quarters it is then." He grinned and tipped his hat at you. "Knew you preferred the personal touch. Appreciate you riding shotgun."

"Yeah, well I have one condition: I get to pick the code names this time."

Fort Wingate was a dusty shithole filled with lead, broken down buildings, and bad history. What was left had been demolished by firefights. Omnis, the Deadlock Gang, and Los Muertos had all left their mark, and you were kind of impressed that anything was left standing.

"This was a missile testing ground," Jesse told you, lighting a cigar. He glanced over at you. "You don't mind if I smoke, do you?"

"I'm starting the habit," you muttered.

"Ana doesn't like it," he sighed deeply.

"How's that going?" You checked your carbine. If you were going to fight omnis, you'd need bigger guns, but it handled people just fine.

Jesse shrugged.
You adjusted your *tanto* and got your canteen off your belt. The meeting was in a decrepit diner up the way, and it wasn't for another few hours, but Jesse wanted to scout the terrain.

"She likes me. I know she likes me, Lucky. But she won't do a thing about it. Says it's abuse of power. She's too old. I'm too vulnerable. Like I'm still a kid or something." He shook his head. "We have tea. We go places. We talk. But that's it."

You blinked. "Seriously?" Because you'd thought there was more going on than that.

"Yeah." Jesse didn't look at you. "We were both pretty fucked up when we came to Blackwatch. We aren't those people any more, are we?"

"I'm probably worse," you said, sipping your water. "But from what I can gather, you're doing a lot better."

"I might have brought you up. You know, as an example." Jesse adjusted his serape.

"Oh boy," you said, without any enthusiasm. "Do I want to know?"

"She just reminded me that I was coerced into Blackwatch as a traumatized teenager. You came in as a willing adult. The dynamic was different. I call bullshit."

You shrugged. "I guess. You're still under contract. I can see why she'd be...concerned."

Jesse nodded curtly. "Fair."

"Not really. It's just a good reason to be careful with you. The power imbalance really complicates shit." You rubbed your neck. "I can see her being too honorable to start anything while you're under compulsory service."

"And I can't ask her to wait." Jesse shook his head.

"You talked about this with her?"

"Some. Maybe not about waiting. I don't know. We don't talk about my contract much. I guess maybe we should." Unsaid was the fact that this was a critical juncture. Captain Amari could commit to a whole lot of waiting. Captain Amari could politely break Jesse's heart. Damn, she never should have let it get this far if she didn't intend to stick around.

Oh look, the pot was calling the kettle black. You exhaled slowly. You didn't intend to leave. You just didn't know if what you were doing was sustainable. Comparing your situations was apples to hand grenades.

"Yeah, you should. And you know either way, I've still got that bottle of Johnny Walker Gold."

"Sucks."

"Does." You offered Jesse your canteen and he took a swig. You studied the dust on the horizon. It was still early in the day, and the area was clear. All you had left to do was wait.

"Boss seemed...off."

"He and Jack are fighting. UN wants to put an observer on Blackwatch. Jack says give'em what they want and they'll go away. Gabriel thinks it's a fifth column and they'll fuck us over. I admit, the guy they chose is shit."
"Ana told me." Jesse handed you back your canteen. "Lot of politics. But that ain't what's got your dander up."

You shrugged. "They were pushing each other pretty hard last night. I got in the middle."

Jesse frowned.

"Didn't tell them how to choose, just to cool down and walk away. Jack did. Gabriel...behaved badly. Things were said. Feelings were hurt. I stayed in Jack's room."

"That is messy, Lucky."

"Yeah, I know." You rubbed your face. The dust stung your eyes. "Nobody was happy about me getting involved, least of all me. But they were minutes away from coming to blows. What was I supposed to do?"

"Let'em," Jesse said, chewing on his cigar. "They fight, they fuck, they make up again. You don't have their accelerated healing. You're not on a level playing field either."

"What's that make me then? Their little bitch on the side. Good enough to fuck, but not someone to take seriously."

Jesse looked back at you, alarmed. "I thought you were playing it safe."

"I know I said I was concerned about the potential for complications and drawbacks further down the timeline..."

"...But that's just a long-ass way of saying you're chicken."

"Exactly. I basically got told by both Captain Amari and Lacroix that I didn't get the luxury of pretending my personal life and my professional life were separate. Not with the shit hitting the fan."

"That's a lot to ask."

"Yeah. Captain Amari swears I have an exit if I need it. But that's not where my head's at. She's right. I'm either in, or I'm a liability. Not her words, but definitely Lacroix's implication."

"Fucking bastard," Jessie muttered.

"Yeah," you agreed. "Doesn't make him wrong." You found yourself craving a cigarette. "That's the worst part. He knows he's right and nothing will wipe the smugness off his face."

"I think that's actually his mustache," Jesse chuckled. "Got movement up there-" He attached his wire. "That's a hard balance."

"Yeah. I've had second through seven hundredth thoughts. Nothing to do now but my best." You turned on your wire. "Rookie, this is Firefox checking in with Enforcer," you said.

"Fuck you, Firefox," Ziv said. "You're not allowed to name shit either. These names make no sense."

"Enforcer, explain the connection."

"Well, we're out here in a bastion of the old West, haunted by ghosts of a crueler, simpler time. And we're all paying homage to the Man with No Name."
"That literally makes no sense either," Ziv said. There was typing in the background. "Oh ben-zona...you nerds."

"Shut up, Rookie. I've seen your hand-painted miniatures. You can't judge us when you play space elves." You grinned at Jesse.

"Fuck you, Firefox."

The diner had shutdown long ago. Its sign dangled sideways from the roof: Redeye's. You followed Jesse behind the building, spotting a ragged little man in a dirty black vest and jeans.

"Now what do you think you're doing with all that Semtex, Mole?" Jesse drawled, pointing his revolver at the demolitionist. "Thought you hated the stuff."

"McCree! Shit! Didn't know you was coming down. Jamie didn't say nothing about that." Mole bore an unfortunate resemblance to a ferret with thick glasses. He had stringy brown hair and several burnt tattoos crossed with scars.

"Just to waste some explosives on blowing up Redeye's? Because the grub was shit, but Cookie ain't torturing eggs no more." Jesse's accent grew thicker. It was an odd phenomenon. "So what's Jamie planning, Mole?"

"Don't know, McCree. Just told me to come out here and rig up Redeye's. I swear I didn't know you was here."

"Course you didn't, Mole. You wouldn't come alone if you'd known."

"Who's the calico queen?" He gestured at you. "That's some armor."

"Ain't your concern, Mole. But I'd be careful about how you talk about her. Firefox over there isn't nearly as nice as me." Jesse's voice was low and Mole winced. "Now, who all is Jamie bringing to the table?"

"Bunch of fresh meat. Zimmer and Callahan are still around. Montgomery is still Jamie's second. Pasquale and Wilson are dead." Mole's eyes kept darting back to you and he licked his lips.

You recognized the names from the dossiers Jesse gave you on the transport. You wouldn't have recruited any of them under Blackwatch protocols. Hell, you'd shoot them all on principle, but this was Jesse's baggage.

"How many?"

"Fifteen, sixteen if Lopez can get out of bed."

"Thanks, Mole," Jesse said, before shooting him in the head.

You blinked. "Is this that kind of mission?"

"Maybe," Jesse said, voice rough. "Mole was always a lying sack of shit. I gave him too many chances before."
"Your show, your rules." You studied the plastic explosive. "That's demolition grade stuff. Not ideal for combat."

"I know. Deadlock ain't what it used to be." Jesse shrugged. "I'll move this. They'll be coming from the west."

You dragged the dead man into the diner and left him out of sight.

When Jesse returned, he had a fresh cigar.

"Want to tell me what that was about?"

"Wasn't personal. Back in the day, me and Mole had no issues." Jesse shrugged. "But he liked hurting working girls. Seeing him look at you reminded me of that. I guess it didn't bother me when I was younger. Bothers me now."

You adjusted your gloves. It was hot, but it was a dry heat and you'd take sun baked desert over snow any day.

The comm crackled to life. "Got lots of vehicles moving toward your location, Firefox." Ziv sounded bored. "Also the commander came round. He's looking for you. Didn't seem too happy that you'd run off with Enforcer."

"Don't sass him right now, Rookie. Not if you want to live."

"I got that. He didn't have his crazy eyes on, but it was a near thing. And those fists? Damn, Firefox, is he proportional all over?"

"Shut up," you scowled.

"Yes," Jesse smirked at you. "Run a few ops with us, and you'll know what everyone's packing in the locker room."

"Really?"

You sighed. "Don't encourage him, Enforcer."

"You're a lucky one, Firefox." You could hear Ziv's smirk.

"Roof should hold," Jesse said. "I'm going to parley first. It'll go to shit, but try to leave Jamie or Montgomery alive. Jamie's probably the better choice. Monty's fucking insane."

You climbed the rough concrete wall for a vantage point on the roof. The building was solid, and short of actual explosives, it would hold. The carbine was a stable gun, and as the motorbikes cut lines in the sand, you counted a dozen, some with multiple riders. You laid on your stomach, bracing your carbine against the edge of the roof.

Jesse stood in front of the diner, revolver in hand.

A tall platinum blonde woman in leather got off her bike. You couldn't gauge her age. She had been pretty once, but too much sun and fire and left her with leathery skin and nasty scars.

"If it isn't prettyboy McCree," she said, voice surprisingly rich. "You grew up and filled out. Not too bad."

"You haven't aged a day, Jamie." Jesse's voice was relaxed and he exuded easy charm.
"Good to see you."

"Where's Mole?"

"That peckerwood's still alive? Shit. I had no idea."

Jamie narrowed her eyes at him. "You're an idiot to come back here."

"Can't I just say that I missed your smile, ladybird?"

Jamie laughed harshly. "You were always full of shit. And you're about to come down with an acute case of lead poisoning."

"I just came to visit. Ask some questions. Reminisce."

"This ought to be good. Spare us the bullshit. Just get to the point, pretty boy."

Jesse gave a good-natured sigh. "The Shimada connection. Who and where?"

Jamie stared at him for a moment then started laughing. The people around her did not. They wore leather and a mix of western and biker accessories. Their guns were solid models, nothing cutting edge, but not cheap. You had a grenades, and when things got hot Jesse was going to open with a flashbang, then take cover in the diner.

"Boy, you're gone a few years and you think you can just mosey in here and act all high and mighty. It's a shame to mess up that pretty face, but I can't let this slide, McCree."

She lifted up a shotgun and Jesse laughed.

Even behind your eyelids, the world went white.

You were prepared for Jesse's move, and you followed up with your own grenades, concentrating them around the bikes.

When the smoke cleared, there were still shooters, but they had no cover, and you began picking them off. It was almost relaxing, shooting through the smoke and watching your direct efforts take effect. Maybe longer range sniping would be good role for you.

Click. The hammer of a revolver cocked back and you turned to find yourself staring down the barrel of gun, the blackness a preview of eternity. The man wielding it smiled grimly. He pressed it into your cheek, tracing the hot metal over your forehead and down your other cheek, then back up again between your eyes. The heat stung your skin. Time grinded to a halt as the metal dug into your head. And you wondered if this was how it ended. Bullet to the head. Your skull caved. Your brains scattered. Jesse would probably be able to take this guy, and when he delivered your body back to Gabriel and Jack, what then? You and Gabriel had parted badly; was this how he got to remember you?

And who would avenge your friends? Who would look after your people? You had so much left to do, damnit.

"Drop it, sweetheart." You didn't have time for an existential reverie. Had to ensure your continued existence first. The shooter was big, Deadlock Tattoos on one arm and a naked lady with a python on the other. You recognized him from the dossiers: Montgomery then.

You set your gun down. How had he gotten up here so quickly and quietly?
"Don't know why you need armor to block your face. Can't be that ugly if you're running with McCree. At least you have a nice ass."

Montgomery dragged you up, one arm around your neck, the other holding the gun to your head. The rest of the Deadlock minions were dropping like flies. You didn't have eyes on Jamie or Jesse.

"McCree. I got your bitch up here. You better come on out, unless you want me to give her another hole for you to fuck."

Eww.

"Firefox, respond," Jesse said tightly.

"Ben-zona, Luc-Firefox, you OK?" Ziv shouted.

The grip on your neck wasn't hard, and Montgomery had relaxed ever so slightly while taunting Jesse. You clutched the forearm on your neck with your right hand. Then you jammed your left hand into his gun hand, blades tearing through his wrist. He screamed as you ducked low, retracted your blades, and threw him over your shoulder.

He hit the ground hard, which wouldn't have been a problem for a guy that size, except you'd tossed him from the roof.

"Fucker," you said, picked your gun back up, and scanned the ground for him. He was on his back, and you shot him in a few choice places before putting one through his throat.

"You OK, Firefox?" Jesse's voice was rough.

"You had some gross friends," you told him.

"Monty and I were never friends," he said. "Sorry, thought he'd come in the back after me."

"No harm, no foul." On something more than a whim, you picked up Montgomery's gun and tucked it in your belt: the one that almost got you. You'd have time to muse about that later.

"It's clear. Got Jamie down here."

You studied the terrain. There were a couple more down, but still moving. This was...sloppier than you'd expected from Jesse. You finished them off and climbed back down.

Jesse leaned against the counter. Jamie sat in a booth, her kneecaps both shattered. She hyperventilated, refusing to look up.

"Answer my questions, Jamie. It doesn't have to be like this."

"Fuck you, McCree. You're going to kill me anyway. Might as well give you nothing."

Jesse was paler than usual, though he managed a carefree grin. You thought that maybe Jamie had been his friend once, or more.

"I can take over. You're too easy on women," you said, and Jamie looked up, her eyes widening as she saw the gun on your belt.

"Jesse doesn't do torture. I don't have that restraint." You drew your knife. "What's she going to hate losing more, Jesse? She probably cares about her looks, so should I take her lips or
her nose?"

He inhaled sharply. "Darling-"

"She can still talk if I cut off her nose. The lips make them harder to understand but-"

"Fuck, don't let that bitch near me, McCree. Give me a good clean death. I would've done that much for you."

"Eyes. She has pretty eyes, Jesse. I see why you liked her. I'll leave her one, so she can see all the damage I've done. And then, if I'm feeling merciful, I'll take the other one, so she doesn't have to look at what's left of her face no more."

"It's through the fucking On Sing in San Francisco. They called truce with the Shimada. I don't know why. Fuck, McCree. Deadlock is just transporting the goods. We don't have the might to fight them off."

You glanced at Jesse. "Is that enough?"

He nodded.

"Want me to do it?" Your voice was gentle.

He rested his hand on his gun, staring hard at Jamie.

"You can have a brotherly-love pass." You didn't like the idea of leaving her alive, but Jesse was obviously conflicted.

He shook his head and stepped out. "No."

You waited a few minutes for him to come back and tell you he changed his mind. But when he didn't, you finished the job.

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Jesse smoked another cigar on the transport back. He watched you with hooded eyes and you wondered if you'd made a mistake.

"I wouldn't really have tortured her," you said, after the silence became too pointed. "Sorry."

"No. Ain't that." Jesse waved his hand and leaned backward. "I just...didn't think it'd bother me that much to kill her. She wasn't a nice person, Lucky. She was a monster. You read the dossier. You know."

"You were close once. It was personal. That changes things." You wondered about Hanzo and Genji and whatever the hell went wrong. The thought bothered you. You didn't think Jack and Gabriel would ever let it get that far, but... Well, Genji didn't see it coming. Jamie didn't see it coming. You couldn't afford that mistake.

"Thanks for...taking care of things. And for offering to spare her." Jesse clapped you on
"It means a lot."

"I wouldn't do it for Genji and not you," you said.

"It's different."

"Not to me." You understood the differences in targets, but what mattered was your people.

"You know I got your back with Bái Shé, right?"

"Not why I did it. But I appreciate it." You winced as Jesse gave you a side hug.

"Why'd you pick up that revolver?" Jesse asked.

"When Montgomery ambushed me, I thought that might be it. He dragged it across my face, really let me wonder." You traced the path the revolver took across your skin with one finger. "I've had closer calls, but...this one really had me going."

Jesse looked like you'd slapped him. "I'm sorry, Lucky. I should've been paying closer attention."

"Not just you. How'd I miss a giant homicidal maniac on the roof with me?" You paused. "Though I picked up that your head wasn't on straight for this one a little too late."

"I didn't think...yeah." Jesse rubbed his face. "Sorry."

"It happens." You took the gun off your belt and rolled it over in your hands. It was a big honking revolver, a sidearm you'd take to hunt bears, or rhinoceros, or medium-sized dinosaurs. "I don't know if it's a trophy or a grim reminder. Probably just a sign I'm going to have more nightmares."

Jesse just passed you his cigar and you took a puff.

"Drinks when we get back?"

"All the drinks," you agreed.
You opened the door and raised a brow. Ziv stood there with a bottle of whiskey, and Jesse had one too.

"No food?"

"Fuck you," Ziv said, shoving the bottle into your hands. "You're the one who can cook."

"You can cook too, Ziv. Stop pretending."

"What about McCree?"

"OK, we can all cook, we're just lazy motherfuckers," you said.

Jesse shrugged. "My room?"

"Yeah, he has a couch," Ziv said. "Your room is just sad."

"Why did you invite him, again?" You asked Jesse.

Jesse grinned wryly at you. "Three's a crowd." You understood then. Jesse was covering both your bases. No reason to further exacerbate all your relationship tensions. "Post-mission celebration. Told him he had to bring booze. Figured if we get wasted, we wouldn't even notice." The three of you went next door to Jesse's quarters. He tossed his hat on his bed and Ziv stared in disgust at the dirty glasses on the table. He took them to the bathroom and washed them, muttering about "filthy pig-headed swine."

You dropped onto Jesse's couch. Ziv came back and handed you a glass. You poured yourself a lot of whiskey and sipped. The tension began to drop out of your shoulders and you laid your head back and stared at the ceiling.

It wasn't till you'd each had a refill that conversation started up.

"So, you almost got another hole in the head," Ziv said, pouring himself more.

"Yeah. Hope you left that out of the report." You glanced at Jesse.

"Do you see two freaked out commanders down here trying to roll you in bubblewrap, sugarpie?"

"They're working. Who knows." You waved it off.

"Trouble in paradise?"

"It was never paradise, Ziv. Just surreal and confusing as fuck." You nursed your drink, trying not to think dark thoughts. "Jack and Gabriel are fighting and I had to step in and it wasn't pretty. There were hurt feelings all around."

"Well, you need to be gentle with them. You're a fucking psychopath," Ziv said. "Can't expect everyone to live up to your insane standards."

Jesse snorted at that. "What about you? How'd that date with Riggs go?"

You blinked at Jesse.

"He's kind of fanboy-ish." Ziv wrinkled his nose at you. "If he wasn't so obviously gay, I'd think he was in love with you, Lucky."
"Really, Jesse?"

Jesse just laughed and put his feet up. "I think everybody but you picked up on the fact that he exclusively prefers men."

You sighed. "Yeah, well I seem to like guys that like other guys." You paused. "Don't worry Ziv. You're safe. I don't like you at all."

"Fuck you too." He topped off your glass.

You took another gulp and paused dramatically. "Nope, getting drunk and I still don't like you."

Jesse laughed. "Yeah, we're all having issues of the heart."

"I'm just horny," Ziv said defensively.

You choked on your drink. "I don't need to know that."

"Well some of us aren't sleeping with two guys who have giant dicks and super stamina."

You face-palmed. "I haven't had sex since I got back from Indiana, so shut up."

"Still more recent than me," Ziv scowled.

"Yeah, well maybe if your personality didn't suck, people could stand being in the same room as you."

"Fuck you, Lucky. And still not desperate enough to make that an offer."

Jesse rolled his eyes. "We're all frustrated and mopey, Mihret. You're not the only one pining."

"I'm not pining, I'm frustrated." Ziv paused. "Wait, you mean you and Captain Amari aren't-?"

Jesse sighed. "No."

"Fuck! Where's your game, McCree?"

"Shut up, Ziv," you said.

"But they have tea parties and he took her to the ball. And they stare at each other longingly with cow eyes when they think no one's looking." Ziv reclined beside you. "How the hell are you not together?"

"Let up," you said.

"It's fine," Jesse said. "Not like we don't know whom he's infatuated with."

Ziv sat up straight. "You don't know shit, dime-store cowboy!"

"Ziv, shut up." You took the whiskey out of his hand and poured yourself more. "You don't want to play chicken with Jesse. I might let you keep some token dignity, but Jesse will crush you."
"I am not infatuated with anyone!" He shouted, eyes squeezed shut.

"Saying louder ain't gonna make it more true, Mihret." Jesse chuckled.

"Ben-zona, you two are obnoxious. Fine. Who?"

"Lacroix," you and Jesse said in unison.

"Fuuuuuuuck. How did you know?" Ziv wailed and reached for the whiskey. You poured him a little, but held onto the bottle. "Does he know?"

Definitely, but honesty wouldn't shut Ziv up. "It's Lacroix. He's too cool to show his hand."

Jesse snorted, because he could read your face.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuucckk," Ziv rolled onto the floor. "How did you figure it out?"

"You don't give him half the sass you give everyone else," you said.

"I've seen you check out his ass on three separate occasions," Jesse said.

"I was window-shopping. I check out your ass all the time; doesn't mean I want to bone you!" You supplied.

Jesse choked on his drink. "Goddamnit, Mihret."

"Genji's is better!"

"OK, you're cut off," you said laughing. "Keep it down, unless you want all of Blackwatch to know."

"He's just so debonair. And in Shanghai he fucking took a bullet for me. Who does that?"

"...I did," you said sourly. "And I continually regret it."

"Fuck you, that was different."

"How?" You demanded.

"He's older, sexy, and fucking married to a prima ballerina!" Ziv lay on Jesse's floor, face up. "He's stylish, suave, and even his goddamn name... It's so...forbidden."

"He's weirding me out," Jesse said.

"Yeah, me too." You poured yourself more whiskey, because even though the world was spinning, it wasn't drowning Ziv out.

There was a knock at the door.

"Oh, now you've done it. Genji's coming over to complain. Or it could be Vo. She's a fucking bear if you woke her up," Jesse said, getting up to answer the door.

You contemplated putting a pillow over Ziv's face, just enough to quiet him down, not kill him. Just suffocate him a little. To stop the noise.

"Why is this bottle empty?" You wondered aloud.
"Probably because you drank it all, agent."

Oh, you knew *that* voice. You glanced up, one eye twitching.

Gabriel stood in the doorway, arms crossed. Jesse looked between the two of you, worry evident on his face. Ziv kept muttering about Lacroix, and you were happy that he was in his own little world right now.

"You were not invited," you said, wobbling to your feet to shut the door in his face.

Ziv chose that moment to start singing Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. He had a nice voice, but he was drunkenly off-key.

You pushed the door, but Gabriel caught it with ease.

Jesse swore. "It's been a long day, sir. She had a close call- but not too close and we're just....celebrating."

"No, we're irritated and we're drinking because of it," you said. "Go away."

Gabriel smirked at you. "Going to make me?"

"I'm off-duty and don't have to put up with you. Be gone." You pushed the door, but it didn't budge.

"You'll break Jesse's door before you move me," Gabriel said.

"Fine. I'll leave. You can ruin Ziv's evening."

You tried to push by him, but he filled the doorway, not letting you pass.

"Move, you stupid intransigent walrus!" You glared up at him.

Jesse sighed. "You want me to call someone?"

Gabriel gave him an dark look.

"Don't you get grumpy with Jesse. You're the one blocking doorways." You pushed him again, but he was all hard muscle and sustained immobility. "No, I just want him to move. Ziv's singing is awful."

"Are you hungry? I made *arroz con pollo*." Gabriel placed a hand on your head. You pushed it off. "No, I don't want your food. Go away. You're causing a scene."

"I think this was a scene before I arrived."

"Don't care. I am mad at you." You enunciated very carefully. "You are an asshole."

"I know. I'm sorry." His fingers brushed your cheek. "You were right."

"Not fooled. I'm drunk. This doesn't count." You glared up at him. "You're an underhanded asshole."

He nodded. "Yeah. *And?*"

"Have you sorted it out with Jack yet?" You crossed your arms. Because you were sobering
up and if he wanted to do this here in front of witnesses, you'd do it here in front of witnesses.

"Maybe. Why don't you go ask him?"

"I can make it there. Don't think I can't!"

"You are so drunk," he laughed.

"I can totally make it there!"

"He's in my room. We were going to talk. I came to get you."

You glared at him.

"What?" Gabriel smirked at you.

"I don't know if I believe you."

"There's only one way to find out. But you have to be quieter."

You glanced at Jesse. He'd call Captain Amari if you asked. But you didn't think Gabriel would be so low as to lie about Jack being in his room, would he?

"Fine." You looked down at the floor. Ziv had passed out. "Turn him on his side."

"I got it," Jesse said, shaking his head. "You do what you got to do."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Jesse grinned at you wryly. "He's stopped talking and singing. It's all good."

"There are extra blankets in my room."

"He'll be fine," Jesse laughed. "Go sort your shit out."

You nearly stumbled going out the door, but Gabriel's hand rested on your shoulder, steadying you. You took a deep breath, and forced yourself to walk in a straight line at a moderate pace. Fortunately, it was late and the halls were empty. You hoped no one had overhead the scene Gabriel made.

Gabriel got the door for you, still wearing that shit-eating grin that made you want to kiss him, punch him, then maybe kiss him again. Jack was on the couch in black fatigues, eating a bowl of rice and chicken.

"See? He's here." Gabriel shut the door behind him. "I told you."

You waved at Jack. "Hi."

Jack raised a brow. "Are you all right?"

"She's trashed," Gabriel said, hand on your lower back, guiding you to the couch.

"No, just drunk. I can walk in straight lines, so not quite trashed." You plunked down on the couch beside Jack. "He apologized, but I'm drunk, so it doesn't count." You kissed Jack's cheek. "And he crashed our party."

"Mihret was passed out on the floor already anyway. Jesse looked ready for bed." Gabriel
settled on the couch beside you and you glared at him over your shoulder.

"I'm still mad at you."

"I noticed."

"Hey," Jack said, turning your head toward him. "Want a bite?" He held up his spoon.

"No."

"You eat on your mission?"

"No."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Maybe."

"Are you trying to spite Gabe?" He smiled at you, but he was looking at the man behind you.

"Maybe," you said, because he'd called you on it.

Jack leaned in and kissed you. "Humor me, baby."

You rolled your eyes and opened your mouth. Jack put a spoonful of tender chicken and seasoned rice in. You contemplated biting the spoon, but realized they were just laughing at you and you might as well eat.

"You can have your own bowl," Gabriel said.

You just snatched Jack's, because they were both dickheads and you didn't care. Jack stared at you incredulously as you held his bowl out of his reach.

"Stolen food always tastes better," you said.

Jack huffed, but didn't try to take it back.

Gabriel got up and got Jack another bowl. You were glad they'd made up, but if they were teaming up against you, you would destroy them.

OK, you were drunk, a little ridiculous, and very petty. Gabriel's food was delicious. But you were still mad at him, because he was an asshole. You ignored Gabriel as you ate.

"Steal a lot of food?" Jack asked.

"Smugglers have to eat," you said, not looking up. "Didn't get an expense account. It was usually fruit, because it's just sitting there, you know? Not a big deal. Tried not to fuck with street vendors either. They're poor too. You can usually barter with them. But sometimes when you break into some rich asshole's house and they have a fridge full of cheese, well, what else are you going to do?"

"I can't say I've had that experience," Jack said, hesitantly.

"I mean, not going to drink all their booze because you don't want to get caught on site. You take that with you along with other non-perishables. But cheese and ice cream? How often
do you see that on the street? You have to eat that right away.”

"I have never seen you this drunk before," Jack said. "I think it was night we made chili; that's drunkest I've seen you, and you just went to sleep."

"Sorry," you muttered, and hunched over your food. It might have once been Jack's, but it was yours now.

He reached out. "You OK?"

"Great." You finished the bowl and set it on the coffee table, refusing to look at Gabriel. He was on the couch, and you were being childish, but that was your privilege.

"Did running off with McCree make you less upset?" Jack asked.

"Sorta." You shrugged. "He's a good friend."

Jack put his bowl aside. "That came out wrong. It's not like we could sit and talk this out earlier." He tilted your chin up. "We can talk about this tomorrow if you need to rest. I'm taking the day off. So's Gabe. Your schedule can be cleared too, if you want."

"I'm awake. Sobering up too." You eyed the emitter in the background; you hadn't noticed that there when you came in. "I'm not hurt. Which one of you is hurt?" You glanced between them.

"We're both a little sore," Gabriel said.

"We hit the mats, sorted ourselves out before we sat down with Ana and Gérard," Jack said.

Fuck! You'd missed that? Damnit. You'd never seen them go at it before. But maybe it was for the better. They probably weren't holding back and you weren't sure how much you'd like seeing them strike each other in anger. Except they knew they were working it out, so that minimized the guilt, right?

"I looked for you, thought you might like to sit in, to moderate. Had to get Ana instead," Gabriel said casually.

"That wouldn't be minding my own business, would it?"

"We are your business," Gabriel said. "I think you know that by now, despite what I said last night." His voice was low and his words pricked at your chest.

You rubbed your face. You were sobering up now. You got up and got yourself a glass of water, conscious of both men watching you. You drained it and got another, because while it was a lame stalling tactic, you needed your brain to sharpen up.

"How'd the meeting go?" You asked, still at the sink.

"I'm glad you suggested we invite Gérard. He had a great deal of invaluable insight," Jack said. "He asked where you were."

"He probably already knew. He just did that to needle you," you said and splashed water on your face.

"He did actually seem to want you there, not just to pick at Gabe," Jack said, not denying
your point.

You took your glass of water back to the couch. Then you stalked off to the bathroom to wash your face again and take care of business. Because you couldn't have these conversations drunk.

When you got back to the couch, Jack had finished his second bowl of food and Gabriel wore a faintly amused grin. The bastard. You sat down between them.

"All right, I'm sober enough for it to count." You turned back to Gabriel. "You were an asshole last night. You were out of line. When have I used sex as a weapon against either of you? And why the hell would you think I was interested in Lacroix of all people? Because anyone with half a brain can tell that I'm still holding a grudge against him from back before Shit Spiders even started."

"You're not entirely sober," Gabriel said. "That was too much emotional honesty."

"Fuck you. You owe me a real apology."

Jack laughed behind you, not even trying to hide it.

"All right. If you're certain." Gabriel held your hands in his, possibly so you couldn't punch him. "I know I was a bastard last night. I'm sorry. You've never given me a reason to doubt you. I do know better. I behaved very badly; I got too...upset and let it go too long, like Chang. It won't happen again." He rubbed your knuckles. "That's something to talk about tomorrow." He kissed your hands. "Can you forgive me, corazon?"

Gabriel had hard features: heavy brow, prominent nose, striking scars. It wasn't a harmless or friendly face. But when he looked at you like that, all tenderness and regret, you never doubted his sincerity.

"Good apology." You exhaled slowly. "Bet you've had lots of practice, because you're a jerk."

"Yes. I'm can be a bastard. But the trick is meaning it," he said, pulling you into his lap.

"That is a good trick," you said, poking his side. He flinched. "Oh, sorry." You looked at Jack.

"I hit him extra hard for you," Jack said brightly. "Well, for me too, but some of those were for you."

"Cute," you said. "But I can hit him myself."

"Not as hard as I can," Jack said. "And he hit me back, so we're both in pain. Can you come sit in my lap too?"

Gabriel ignored him, and drew you against his chest. You flicked your tongue against his lips and he opened for you, letting you press teasing kisses against his mouth.

"Calling in tomorrow?" Gabriel asked.

"Yeah," you said, heartbeat quickening. "I think I am." You turned to Jack and he had already closed the distance between you. You leaned over, balancing yourself on his thigh and kissed him too, his mouth more insistent than Gabriel's.
"Wish you hadn't run off," Jack murmured. "I think you would have liked seeing us on the mats."

"Probably," you said.

"We're going to talk about that tomorrow too," Jack said, and kissed Gabriel. You weren't sure how you felt about that, but apparently there was going to be all sorts of talking tomorrow; you'd worry about it then.

"Bed," Gabriel rasped when he came up for air. You got off his lap and perched on the arm of the couch while Jack yanked Gabriel's shirt off.

The bruises were worse than you expected. Green and purple, they were still visible against Gabriel's dark skin. You caught sight of a fist-sized blue-black mark on Jack's arm.

"Idiots," you sighed.

"Can kiss it better," Jack said, his mouth trailing down Gabriel's abdomen.

"Bed, Jack," Gabriel grunted. "Got your prize from the fight. Didn't forget. Just haven't had a chance to give it to you."

You didn't trust the delight on Jack's face. He climbed off Gabriel. "You'll like this." He guided you toward the bed. He pulled off your shirt and bra before dropping you onto the mattress. Jack reached into the nightstand and retrieved a set of leather cuffs with a foot of chain between them. "This OK?"

"Yeah," you breathed, swallowing roughly. "You wearing them?"

"I can," Jack said, tracing circles on your stomach. "I'd rather tie you up first."

"If this is my prize..."

"It isn't," Gabriel said. "But I think you'll have fun."

"OK," you said.

Jack kissed you hungrily, securing one wrist, winding the chain through Gabriel's headboard, then cuffing the other wrist. There was more give than you expected.

"Shouldn't hurt your arms this time," Jack said, kissing your shoulder.

"Thank you," you said, now on your back, only half-naked in Gabriel's bed.

"Tsk, weren't you drunk earlier?" Jack asked, stroking your hair. "If that's the case, we'd be taking advantage of you. Don't you think we should wait, Gabe? Just to be safe?"

"Wait, what?" You blinked.

"You're right Jack, drunk agents can't give consent. We don't want risk any misunderstandings," Gabriel grinned wickedly. "We're not those kind of guys."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Outrage and arousal sped up your pulse.

"That's what we're doing," Jack laughed.
"That's not what I meant!"

Jack hungrily kissed Gabriel before dropping to his knees. He pulled his shirt off and grinned over his shoulder at you, still a patchwork of bruises. "It's OK, baby. You can watch. You missed out last time, but we'll be sure to put on a good show."

"You can't be serious!"

"As an illness," Jack said.

"You still have to cool down from your party," Gabriel said.

"I unforgive you!" You scowled at Gabriel.

"See, still under the influence," Jack said, with mock regret. "Now we definitely can't do anything with you."

"Jack, I hate you s-"

"Mmm, told you she'd be loud." Jack shook his head. "This is for your own good, baby." He got up and went back to the nightstand. "Can you be quiet or are we going to have to do something about it?"

"I'm going to do terrible things to you," you swore.

Jack just beamed at you. Gabriel chuckled.

"You do remember your safe words right?"

"I'm going green the fuck out of you," you told him.

"Whatever that means, I look forward to you trying," Jack said. "Picked this up for you a little while ago." He held a black ball gag and all your inner muscles clenched. "I seem to remember someone gagging me. I remember thinking 'I should show her how it's done, and then I'll give her something to scream about.'"

You gulped audibly.

"Your cuffs are long enough to let you tap, if you need to," Jack said. "Open up."

You took a few sharp breaths, before parting your lips, and Jack pressed the ball into your mouth. It was big, and you had to wiggle your jaw and concentrate on not drooling. Jack secured the strap around your head. You arched as he pressed a kiss to the ball.

Your nipples were hard, but Jack just stroked your sides.

"And now you can't even beg," Jack said with mock sadness. "Guess you'll just have to lie there and watch."

You were going to murder him.

Gabriel knelt beside the bed, his eyes on your face. "Relax your jaw. It's fine if you drool."

"Hot" is the word," Jack said.

Gabriel kissed your cheek. "Be a good girl, and enjoy the show."
Jack took a pillow and laid it beside you. He sat beside the pillow, his back to you.

Gabriel rose and went to the other side of the bed, stopping in front of Jack. Jack unzipped Gabriel's pants and cupped his firm ass, pressing kisses down his abdomen all the way to the tip of his erect cock.

Gabriel stroked Jack's hair. "He always blushes so prettily before swallowing me down."

You groaned against the gag.

"You'll be able to do this too, you just need practice," Jack said. He dropped backward, his head on the pillow next to your side. "Come on, Gabe. Let her see you throat-fuck me. She'll wish she had a mouthful of you, instead of that hard rubber."

Gabriel growled and straddled Jack's chest. Jack licked the tip, his eyes locked on Gabriel's. He swirled his tongue around the head, and then sucked him down in one smooth motion. Gabriel started slow, but you could see him going in to the hilt, his shaft already slick with Jack's saliva.

You squirmed against the your bonds, nipples painfully hard, heat building between your thighs. Your pants chafed against you and the gag muffled your frustrated whines.

"That's it, *mi cielito*. Swallow it all down. You're such a greedy cock slut," Gabriel purred. Jack gripped his thighs, and cheeks flushed bright red. You weren't sure how much breathing he was doing, but he kept taking Gabriel enthusiastically. "Look at him go, baby. Fuck, just like that Jack." Gabriel thrust his hips forward, back arched. He grinned at you. "Oh, that face she's making, Jack, so upset. *Pobrecito*. No, baby, you just have to wait."

You tried to swallow, but the saliva was starting to dribble out. You huffed in frustration.

"Remember how you taunted me while you were sucking off Jack? This is just the beginning of payback," Gabriel said, voice getting raspier, is fingers gripping Jack's hair. "Should I fuck him next? Make you watch while I pound him next to you? You love watching me give it to him."

You gave a muffled protest and more drool collected around the gag.

Gabriel kept thrusting into Jack's throat, thighs tense, eyes closed, lips parted. His abdominals rippled and you swore violently into the gag. Every stroke made you clench. Jack took it like a pro, his sighs drowned out by the slick vulgar sound of Gabriel's cock slipping in and out of his mouth.

"Look at you writhing around already, and we haven't even touched you."

You whined in frustration, arching against the bed, rattling the cuffs.

"Was that a tap?" Gabriel asked, pausing mid-thrust.

You shook your head.

"Then settle down, or I'll give you a reason to squirm." His voice was nothing but bass edged with hunger; it made you shiver. You hated him a little then, all that heat and hard muscle inches away, and you couldn't do anything except lie there.

Gabriel was moaning now, and Jack winked at you, his hands kneading Gabriel's ass. You
"That's it Jackie; it's like you could do this all night long. Gonna have to fuck you soon."

Angrily, you closed your eyes and resolved to ignore them. They were sexy, and normally you would have loved to just watch; there was something hypnotic about how well Jack could swallow Gabriel's cock. You squeezed your thighs together, unable to get enough stimulation. Jack always made a show of it, never failing to remind you that you needed practice, and how happy he would be to "help" you. Fucking competitive asshole. Yeah, you liked watching them, but if they were going to tie you up and leave you like this, you could damn well sulk.

"Are we boring you, chica?"

The bastard was trying to drive you insane. You opened one eye, giving him as dirty of a look as you could with a gag in your mouth.

He only laughed at you, satisfied that you were paying attention. "You're just making it harder on yourself, baby. The more you misbehave, the more I'm going to punish you." There was an edge in his voice, and the look he gave you fell on the edge of lewd and vicious.

You bit down on the gag, breathing harder. Because he'd been like this on Christmas Eve in Indiana and you believed every word of it.

Gabriel pulled out of Jack's mouth, giving the younger man a breather. Jack turned his head and grinned at you.

"Someone feeling neglected?" He asked, voice rough.

You nodded.

"Such a needy little slut," Jack said lazily. He crawled up beside you, lying on his side.

Gabriel moved off to the side and you couldn't see what he was doing now.

"Too bad you can't tell us what you want. Guess you're just going to have wait a little bit longer." Jack kissed your throat and you arched, heels digging into the mattress. He laughed softly and his fingers ghosted over your stomach, completely ignoring your breasts. "Are you cold?"

You shook your head.

"Hot?" Jack teased, his hand going down to the fly of your pants.

You nodded once.

"I do like your voice. I like the sounds you make. But this is precisely what you need. You sass me far too much." Jack's fingers dipped under the waistband and you tensed as he stroked your hips. "Bet it's driving you crazy that you can't get the last word. Or any really." He smirked at you.

You bit the gag, trying not to let your irritation show on your face.

"Oh, it is. That's adorable." You started plotting then, because you understood now that they'd planned this. You weren't sure how long this had been in the works, but they'd talked about this. They'd coordinated it. And you were going to get them back.

"Someone's thinking evil thoughts," Jack said. "You just don't know how to be good, do
you?"

Gabriel returned and he nodded at Jack.

"If you'd been better behaved, we'd be giving you some relief right now," Jack drawled. "You brought this on yourself, baby." He kept stroking your sides, looking unbearably smug.

You were going to get him while he was working. Preferably on the phone when he'd have to work extra hard to control his noises. You were going to bombard him with dirty messages and photos while he was giving speeches to recruits. You were going to work him up and then leave on a week-long mission across the world.

"Raise your hips," Gabriel said sharply.

You obeyed and he slid your pants off, gritting his teeth when he discovered you weren't wearing any underwear. One petty point for you.

"You were just going around with those boys like that?" He growled.

You weren't sure if you could properly convey a "seriously?" face with the gag in, but you were willing to try. Jack sat up, groaning when the older man bit his shoulder. Jack shot you a sharp look, and you got the message that you shouldn't push. Because Gabriel wasn't gentle or playful right now.

Naked and wet, you forced yourself to look away. You didn't have nearly enough adrenaline in your system right now to take Gabriel like before. He'd thrown you down, torn you apart, and made you beg for it. The memory still made you hot.

"You're soaking wet." Jack parted your thighs, and you opened wide for him, whimpering as he slid a finger across your slit. "You like being teased." He kept stroking you and you shivered.

"She likes being a pain in the ass," Gabriel said. "Keep your legs spread."

Jack slid a finger in and your eyes fluttered shut. He chuckled. "Is this what you want, baby?" You bucked your hips and Jack pulled away, shaking his head. "You're going to hold still or we'll leave you like that."

You closed your eyes and forced yourself flat against the bed.

"That's it," Jack murmured. He stuck to petting, no penetration, no friction on your clit. It was maddeningly light and you wanted more, damnit. "Relax." He pushed your knees up, and you flinched as something cold pressed against your anus. "Go slow, Gabe. She hasn't done this for awhile."

"I haven't forgotten." You stiffened as Gabriel slid a slick finger into your asshole.

"Look at her pussy twitch. So needy. Poor girl can't help herself," Jack said, his voice breathy.

"She's going to have to learn," Gabriel said brusquely and added another finger.

You whined around your gag as he worked the lube inside. His fingers were thick and hot inside you. Jack dangled a black plug in front of you and your breathing sped up. It was certainly bigger than the last one you'd taken.
"Relax," Gabriel said, and spread his fingers, widening your passage.

Your head dropped back and you clenched your teeth, trying not to move. You could normally focus your breathing, but the gag made it difficult.

"Look at you being so good now. You just needed another hole filled," Jack purred in your ear. "I know it's not the one you wanted, but you're going to have to earn that." He handed Gabriel the plug, and you groaned as Gabriel slowly pushed it inside you.

It was more than before and it took several shuddering breaths before you could relax your ring of muscle and take it. Your limbs ached from repeatedly tensing; and your left leg had started to cramp. Your eyes watered from the strain. You sank back in the pillows, staring at the ceiling.

"You OK?" Jack asked, hand resting on your cheek.

You looked down at your leg.

"You want the gag out?"

You nodded again.

Jack unfastened the strap and carefully removed it. You swallowed and wiggled your jaw, sore from the amount of biting you'd done. Jack wiped your face off. You panted softly, tongue feeling swollen in your mouth.

"Looks like it was a little big for you. Always seemed like you had a bigger mouth." Jack kissed your forehead.


Gabriel extended your legs, rubbing the knot of muscles.

You sighed as the pain dissipated. The throbbing in your stretched hole became harder to ignore, and you trembled, trying not to move.

"Better?" Gabriel asked, tone softer.

"Yes, thank you." You closed your eyes again, putting all your attention into breathing.

Jack chuckled. "Adjusting?"

"Yes."

He balanced above you on all fours, forehead against yours. "I'll leave the gag out if you can be good. No goading us right now."

"OK," you said, meeting Jack's eyes. There was a tightness in his grin, and you realized they hadn't had their makeup sex yet. No wonder they were so worked up. "You didn't have to wait for me." You nuzzled his arm.

"We did," he said. "Weren't exactly happy about it. But we really did." He kissed you then, and you sighed against him. "There'll be more after this. Just wait your turn."

He kissed you hungrily with more nips and teeth than lips and tongue. He squeezed your breasts and you ground against him.
"Don't do that if you want to walk tomorrow," Jack groaned. "Let me and Gabriel work it out on each other. We'll be too rough with you right now."

"At least let me pound some of the insolence out of him," Gabriel said, and you watched as Jack's eyes widened before he buried his face in your neck. "Have to get him ready too. Going to fuck him hard. Then it'll be your turn, baby."

"I love how he fills me. You know what it's like. Almost more than you can take, and you want it all anyway," Jack whispered in your ear.

"Going to give it all to you, Jackie." Gabriel's voice roughened as he slid into Jack. Jack's breaths grew uneven against your chest and you jerked as he bit the area between your breasts.

You lay under Jack, watching as sweat dripped down his face. He smiled sharply at you, pushing back against Gabriel's thrusts.

"I want to see you take him too," you said. "I know you do it, but I haven't seen it yet."

"I get pretty rough, baby," Jack said. "Gotta be in the right mood for it." He gritted his teeth. "Damnit, Gabe- you can use some lube on my cock too. Don't chafe me before we've even gotten started."


"Keep it up, Reyes. You'll get yours." Jack's expression hardened, the ice of his rank creeping back into his voice. The scary bastard part of him was too close to the surface. You'd only glimpsed this side of Jack, and it sent a thrill down your spine.

"Later Jackie. You want to be nice to our girl after this, don't you? After all, we went through all that trouble to get her ready for you to fuck her tight little ass."

You sucked in a breath, liquid heat flooding your pussy.

"Then don't start with me, Gabe."

Gabriel slammed his hips into Jack and Jack snarled, pushing back. They started hard and fast, their rhythm brutal. It seemed every stroke was a play for dominance. Even if Jack was receiving, he didn't just take it. He rolled his hips, making Gabriel swear.

"Such a cocky bastard. I think Lucky's right. I'll have to fuck you later, let her watch. Remind you who's in charge."

Gabriel bared his teeth. "You want to play it this way tonight, Jackie? Because I'll break you."

"You can try. I'm still going to have you begging." Jack locked eyes with you, expression feral. "He looks good on his knees, baby. Starts pretty demanding. But once you fill him up, he turns real sweet." Jack grinned savagely over his shoulder. "Don't let his badass persona fool you, he likes being bent over my desk fucked wide open by a goddamn boy scout."

"Shut up, Jack." Gabriel yanked back on his hair, making Jack arch against him. "Still owe you for all those hits on the mat."

"Right back at you."
You smiled, aroused by their banter. The bed creaked, and Jack braced himself against the headboard, his eyes on yours. There was a fierce pleasure on his face.

"Like what you see, baby?"

"You're both hot and you know it," you said. You raised your wrists. "Get these off me and I'll be good to you."

Jack barked a laugh. "I like you right where you are."

"You're not going to let me touch myself while I watch you two?"

Jack's smile sharpened. "No. You have to wait and take what we give you." He grunted as Gabriel kept pumping him hard. "Fuck, Gabe- I can feel you in my stomach."

"Good," Gabriel growled. "How's he holding up?"

"Tense. He's biting his lip. Thrusting his cock in empty air."

"You noticed that, huh?" Gabriel laughed. "Arrogant son of a bitch isn't getting any relief from me if he wants to talk trash."

Jack glared over his shoulder at Gabriel, but you'd had to go through that lesson already tonight, and you didn't feel much sympathy for Jack. They'd both teased you, and while you weren't actually angry any more, you kept score. And there would be a reckoning.

"Damn you guys are beautiful," you sighed. "I know you just want to lose control and fuck each other into next week. Watching you like this is a real treat."

"Not just each other," Gabriel hissed, snapping his hips into Jack. "Want you between us. But need to work this out first."

"Doesn't seem like that. Seems like you just want me to watch and suffer," you said, going for a melodramatic sigh.

"Jack?"

"On it."

You heard it before you felt it. The plug began to hum and then it started vibrating inside you. Jack held a remote in one hand, smugness across his face. You shuddered and jerked your hips upward, grinding against him.

"Damnit," you choked out.

"Like it?" Gabriel grinned. "That's your reward for being such a slippery little knife-fighter. Should leave it in you all the time. Keep you prepped for us."

The buzzing in your ass felt obscene, and went straight up your spine. Your body shook. It wasn't enough to get you off, but you squirmed under Jack, panting while the strength increased.

"Jack!" You shrieked, realizing he was toying with the dial.

"Keep saying my name like that, I'll fuck you right now," he said.

You nodded enthusiastically. "Please-"
Jack growled. "Look at her pleading-"

"Jack, please," you whined, spreading your thighs wider and he gritted his teeth.

"You ask so nicely, makes me want to give it to you."

"Please, I need it, sir."

Jack's answering smile was ferocious. He dragged himself against you. "Remember that you begged for this."

"So much for waiting." Gabriel paused as Jack adjusted the angle and slid inside your neglected pussy.

You shrieked his name as he finally filled you, your ass stretched, the motorized pulsation make you twitch and clamp down on his thick cock.

"Fuck you're tight, baby. But so fucking wet for me. I should edge you more often. I can feel the toy inside you. It's great. Guess I'll turn it up."

You keened as Gabriel began to thrust again, pushing Jack deeper inside you. Jack didn't even need to set the rhythm, he just bounced between you and Gabriel, like you'd talked about before. The difference was that he had more control than you, adjusting the dial of the toy to make you squeal and thrash.

"That's it. You move like that and I don't have to do a damn thing. Come on, I know you're close. Come for us. I'll fill you up now, and then I'll fuck your ass open while Gabe stretches out your pussy."

Panting, you wrapped your legs around his waist, trying to regain some measure of control and draw him deeper inside you. Jack cursed and Gabriel laughed. Jack couldn't thrust as hard with you anchoring him, but Gabriel had no such problem. He began to hammer away, whispering filthy things in Jack's ear.

"You like that, Jack? Getting fucked between both of us? I know you like being the center of attention."

"Don't worry, Gabe. You'll get a turn," Jack hissed. "You won't be sitting after I'm done with you, but you'll be too blissed out to care. Fuck the fight out of you, then I'll take care of Lucky. I know she'll enjoy watching you take it."

"Get her nice and wet for me, Jack. I'm going to fuck her hard."

"You're just going to push my cum deeper inside her."

"Don't care, as long as she's full of my cum by the end of the night."

"Don't," you panted. "Talk about me-" You squeezed your pelvic muscles as hard as you could around Jack and he actually snapped his teeth at you. "-Like I'm not here."

Jack tilted your chin back, the remote in one hand. "You want my full attention? All right." The plug whirred faster and you choked out a sob as Jack broke the leg lock. Grinning, he began slamming into you, his fingers on your clit. "This is what you get-" He punctuated each word with a thrust. ",when you push me. You end up your commander's well-fucked little bitch."

From there, it took no time for him to drive you over the edge. You came hard, muscles
spasming as you thrashed underneath them, your cries muffled by Jack's mouth covering yours. He held you against the bed, panting while you felt his cock start to spurt inside you. Gabriel wasn't immune from the chain reaction and he gripped Jack's hips, swearing profusely.

You strained against your bonds, unable to escape the overstimulation in your ass. Jack pinned you against the sheets with his hips, groaning as he filled you up.

Gabriel disengaged first. Jack pulled out and you whimpered.

"Turn it off!"

"You look so good like that," he sighed as his cum leaked out of your pussy.

"Damnit Jack!" You squirmed, the plug still buzzing hard.

Grinning, he clicked the remote and you dropped your hips, legs shaking. He turned around, kissing Gabriel hungrily. "I meant it, Gabe. Going to have to dom you soon."

Gabriel just smirked and bit him. "Hold it in and save it for then. She's ready for us now."

Jack uncuffed you, kissing your wrists. They were red and sore, but that was more from you pulling at your restraints than from being stuck in a position for too long. "Give us a moment to get cleaned up. Then we'll take care of you."

You rubbed your wrists.

Gabriel returned first, his bruises fainter than before. He lay down beside you. "You OK, hermosa?"

"Yup. You?"

"Getting there." He stroked your hip. "Wish you'd been here sooner."

"It really bothers you that much when I go on missions after a...disagreement?"

"Jack more than me. I know you'll be back and in a better frame of mind. Usually. But I'm used to it. He isn't. Doesn't mean I like it."

"Oh."

"Jesse said you had a close-call?"

You shook your head. "Don't want to talk about it right now. Later."

Gabriel ran his fingers across your jaw. "I'll hold you to that."

"I know."

"Come here." He patted his lap. "Think you should get more leverage this time."

Jack's cum dripped out of you, but Gabriel didn't seem to mind. He was half hard already and you kissed him hesitantly.

"You hurt me last night."

"I know. I'm sorry."
"I know. Jack convinced me to stay with him. We just talked. He psychoanalyzed things for me."

"He told me." Gabriel kissed your throat. "I wouldn't have blamed you for spite-fucking him last night. Wouldn't have been healthy, but I did push you pretty hard."

"Trying to keep my petty within certain ethical bounds." You gasped as he rolled his hips against you.

"Come here. Let Jack get the toy out of you." You rested your head against Gabriel's chest. He spread your cheeks and you quivered as Jack worked the plug out. He poured more lube inside you.

"If we're going from this angle, you should take Gabe first," Jack said.

You lifted your hips, lining up with Gabriel's thick head. He held still while you lowered yourself onto him. Jack had done a good job warming you up for Gabriel. He always filled you to the brim. You clenched your teeth as he turned your head to look at him.

"Love watching you take me, baby. Glad you came back OK," he said and kissed your forehead. You clung to him, face buried against his chest. He held you open for Jack and you began to pant as Jack eased himself inside. It stung, but he wasn't quite as thick as Gabriel and the bigger toy made the transition slightly more comfortable than last time.

"You're both almost too much," you said, when Jack had gotten in to the base.

"You like it," Gabriel said, and you didn't have enough breath in you to deny it.

"Give me a moment, please-"

Jack stroked your back. "You feel so good," he growled. "Can't believe we haven't done this more." You whimpered as Gabriel kissed your face.

"Go easy on her."

"I will," Jack said. "I'm saving up the meanness for you."

Gabriel laughed softly.

"You can start, just go slow, please."

Gabriel rolled his hips and you choked back a cry because they were both all the way inside you, only a thin wall between them.

"Can feel him stretching you out," Jack hissed in your ear. "It's fucking hot watching you take us both. I can see his cock disappearing into your dripping pussy. Want you between us more. No more running away, baby. You're ours and we'll remind you as often as we have to." He ground into you and you shrieked, because this was the opposite of before. They filled you simultaneously, then withdrew, leaving you shaking and empty. There was no moderation this time, it was all or nothing and you clawed at Gabriel's chest, till he forced your left hand down to your side.

"Easy now. Going to have to work on your control."

"Sorry," you rasped.
He kissed your cheeks. "Didn't get to see that look on your face last time. Somewhere between agony and ecstasy and now all I want to do is let loose and fuck you till you scream. I won't. I'll hold back. But I want you to know I'm thinking hard about it." He lay back, eyes dark with lust.

"Goddamnit, Gabriel," you fisted the sheets. Jack moved in slow measured strokes, his breathing hard, his fingers digging into your hips.

"Do you want it harder?" Jack purred.

"Not yet." Your breath hitched as he cupped your breasts. Gabriel raised his hips and they kept moving in unison. You could only rock between them, trying to ride it out. When you clenched around Gabriel, both of them groaned.

Jack began to speed up. "Oh, these are sensitive." He flicked your nipples with his thumbs. "I can fucking feel you bearing down on him when I do that; it's so hot how close we are. I can feel the outline of him through you. Nothing else we do is quite like this."

You cried out as they both hilted themselves inside you.

"Don't say this enough, Gabe. I love how you feel, love knowing you're here," Jack sighed.

Gabriel leaned forward and clasped Jack's head to his, over your shoulder. He kissed him. "I can always feel you Jack. You're under my skin and in my bones. I'd know you if I was smoke and ash. And I'll love you after I'm dead and gone."

Jack shuddered against you. "Fuck your morbidity, Gabe. It's your life I want. You beside me, on top of me, underneath me. Can't do it without you. I need you with me."

"Always, mi cielito," Gabriel breathed.

"You maudlin bastard," Jack muttered kissing him again. He rubbed the back of your neck. "Look what you do to us, baby..."

"Don't blame me because you guys get sappy during sex." You panted against Gabriel's chest, eyes squeezed shut. It almost felt like you were intruding, despite the fact you were tangled between them, Jack's hands rubbing your back, Gabriel's fingers in your hair. It was a few heartbeats before you realized they hadn't responded with something snappy. You raised your head, recognizing that you shouldn't have been flippant. "I ruined the moment, sorry."

Gabriel shook his head. "It's OK." He glanced at Jack, a faint smile on his face.

You weren't sure what passed between them, but Jack rolled his hips and you dropped your head back against Gabriel's chest. Jack pulled your hair, yanking your head back up.

"Don't like sappy?" Jack murmured in your ear, then kissed the side of your neck. "How do you want us to be?"

"I-"

"You want us hard and rough?" Jack slammed his hips into you, his cock going so deep you swore you could feel it in the back of your throat. He laughed at the noises you made. "You want us light and teasing?" He stopped moving, his fingers tracing your clit and you tensed. "Do you even know what you want?"
Shaking, you looked desperately to Gabriel, who just grinned up at you. "Tell him what you want, hermosa."

You shivered between them, breaths coming in short bursts. "I want it harder."

Jack groaned, voice raw. "Is that so, baby?" He thrust and you braced yourself against the bed, eyes on Gabriel's face. "Then that's how we'll give it to you."

Gabriel laughed and snapped his hips up, drawing a sharp breath from you. You moved with them; it came naturally now, you knew the count of their rhythm. Their strokes filled you up while you balanced between them. Jack wasn't gentle any more, his thrusts nearly knocking the air out of you. Gabriel kept up, his cock stretching you wide open.

They were hollowing you out and you couldn't think straight. The pressure verged on pain, but you didn't quite care. This was better than talking and just more than anything you'd expected.

They were moving in tandem again. You burned in the center, Gabriel's heat and Jack's enthusiasm setting your nerves aflame. You were the conduit between them, pleasure and pain passed through you at their tempo. It was a constant state of flux that maintained its own tenuous balance, despite how dizzying it was; you were going to fall, but you were going to fall with them.

You couldn't tell if it was your heartbeat or Gabriel's drumming in your ears. You didn't know whose hands were gripping your hips. You weren't sure who was setting the pace, you or Jack. But they were both teetering on edge, you could feel them struggling to outlast you. Jack's fingers pressed hard circles against your clit.

"So close," you moaned. "Stop holding back. Want you both to come with me and fill me up."

Jack gave a sigh of pleasure. Gabriel's fingers traced your cheek. And then they were driving into you with bruising force. You squeezed your eyes shut, so hard you could feel tears. Your inner muscles hit a rolling rhythm, dragging them both further into you, and you gave a breathless gasp as they spilled inside you. Jack pulled you against him, both arms wrapped around your chest, while Gabriel clutched your wrists.

They held you tight, and you stayed like that till your heartbeat receded from your ears. Jack withdrew first, and lowered you against Gabriel's chest. Gabriel rolled you onto your back, his half-hard cock slipping out.

"Stretched you nice and wide," Jack sighed, giving your ass a light slap. "You look good dripping with our cum."

You took several ragged breaths, still recovering your composure. Gabriel slipped a finger inside your pussy and swirled it around. You could hear the slosh of the liquid, a mixture of all three of your juices.

"You took us so well. Even smoother than last time." Gabriel stroked your sides. "You up for one more round?"

"You're joking." You eyed both of them.

Gabriel just kissed your throat, his erection pressed against your hip. Of course, he wasn't joking.
"Why are you even surprised?" Jack asked, reclining beside you.

"We didn't get our makeup session," Gabriel said. "I'll be gentle. I promise."

You closed your eyes. You were a sticky mess. They were trying to kill you. They really were. There were worse ways to go, and the black void at the end of a revolver barrel flashed in your mind's eye. Your heart stuttered. Much worse ways to go.

"OK," you said, softly.

Gabriel rolled onto his side, angling his hips. He wrapped one arm around your waist, then lifted one of your legs over his body, and slowly pushed into your slick asshole.

"Wait-" You hiccupped. He was as thick as you remembered.

"Need more lube?" He asked, nibbling on your neck.

"I thought you meant-"

"You're wet and ready for it. I'll go easy on you. Want to feel you around me, too."

You whined as he pushed all the way in, your empty pussy twitching.

Jack reached for the lube and carefully applied it Gabriel's shaft when he pulled back out.

"There we go. Nice and smooth," Gabriel murmured in your ear. "Oh you're taking me so well. I can feel Jack's cum still inside you. You took him so deep."

You wrapped one arm around his neck, your other hand digging into the pillows.

He kissed you, tongue slipping into your mouth.

Jack stroked your hips. "You're taking him to the base, baby. Guess it's good I stretched you out. Gabe's so thick."

You nodded, gritting your teeth. "It burns a little."

"Sorry, baby." Gabriel peppered kisses along your neck. "Want me to stop?"

"I'm OK for now."

"Don't think she can come from you exclusively fucking her ass. Not yet anyway."

"Go on then," Gabriel said.

Jack reached over and started rubbing circles around your clitoris. You stiffened and he propped himself up on his side, pressed tight against you. You were nestled between them, Jack's fingers lightly playing with your pussy, Gabriel's cock sliding in and out of your ass at an achingly slow pace.

Jack sucked a nipple into his mouth, his nimble fingers upping the pressure. You tensed between them.

"That's it, I want to feel you come like this again."

"Gabriel began to move faster. "You look so good between us. Going to do this more."
"I'll get you some toys too. Maybe a nice little collar." Jack groaned as he slid two fingers inside you. "Feels like I'm just pushing all this cum back into your greedy little cunt."

You moaned into Gabriel's mouth as he stretched you out.

"Oh, you like that." Jack's spread his fingers, and you jerked your hips upward, whimpering.

For a few minutes it was just the wet sounds of them pleasuring you. Your composure hadn't really recovered from the last round and already your nerves started to fray. You threw your head back, a low whine escaping the back of your throat.

"That's it," Gabriel murmured in your ear. "Need you with me too, baby. You know that right?"

"Gabriel-"

"Don't argue," he said, shaking his head.

"I-" Your throat tightened.

"Shh. Just tell me you need me too."

"Obviously," you practically growled.

"You actually have to say it, you brat," Jack chuckled, and he slowed his fingers. "I'd like to hear it too."

"That I need him or-"

"Whatever, as long as you mean it," Jack said so casually, you were almost fooled. He began pumping his fingers inside you again. He leaned in, his tongue tracing the labyrinth of your ear.

Gabriel began thrusting harder, neither of them actually giving you a chance to speak. Jack's fingers curled inside you, driving the tension higher. Gabriel's free hand began rubbing your clit. You expected them to stop, to demand you confess. But they kept going, and your breath caught as they played on your already jittery nerves. Your muscles contracted, pulling Jack's thick fingers deeper inside you. Together they coaxed another orgasm out of you and you stifled your cries, jagged breathing the only response you gave them.

Gabriel grunted and it was a few more thrusts before he lost himself in you again. He was still breathing hard, eyes half-lidded, when you grasped his cheeks between your palms. "Of course, I need you, Gabriel. Have since I set foot in Zurich." You kissed him hard and he growled into your mouth.

He smirked as he slowly pulled out of you. "I know."

Bastard.

You dropped back against the pillows, chest tight. Jack was beside you, licking his fingers. You turned to him, studying his face. He looked relaxed, but there was a sharpness in his gaze. Jack was never exactly how he appeared.

"You guys are expecting way too much from me if you want sweet talk after all that."
Higher concepts are bzzzt." You tapped your temple. "I need you too, Jack. You make me think there might be more than the mission. You make me want things I forgot even existed." Jack searched your face, his expression pleasant but too rigid. You bit your lip. Was that not enough? You looked away.

Jack tugged your hair, a crooked smile breaking through the coolness. "I don't know where you get this stuff. I'm the fucking Strike Commander, baby. I should be making you more focused on the job."

"Well, I like you outside the rank. That Strike Commander guy is kind of a stuffy asshole and a gung-ho white knight idealist; I like the guy who throws me around the mats, gets me cake, and then wants to cuddle for no good reason."

Jack traced his fingers along your lips. "You should be nicer to your boss, smart ass. The Strike Commander can at least get you a room upgrade."

"Pfft, I'm never there anyway. If that's all he's got, who cares?"

Jack blinked, shock spreading over his face.

"Looks like someone else hasn't bought into the legend of Strike Commander Jack Morrison," Gabriel chuckled.

"It's not like that!" Jack rolled his eyes.

"I like Jack just fine. It's the brass that gives me hives. Ugh, authority," you shook your head. "Can't deal with it."

"You do realize the irony of that statement," Jack said, flicking you between the eyes.

"Ow! Of course I do. It was a joke, asshole." You eyed his fingers, licking your teeth.

Jack only laughed.

You shifted, skin below the waist too clammy. "Forget being in the wet spot, I think I am the wet spot. I need to get cleaned up." You pulled yourself into sitting position, still caught between them. Your thighs were a sticky mess.

"You help her. I'll change the sheets," Gabriel said.

You limped to the shower, legs shaky. The hot water was glorious, and you slumped against the wall, just taking it in. Jack pulled back the curtain and stepped in. He lathered up the loofah - Gabriel needed a new one or three - and ran it across your chest. He worked his way down, hands gentle.

"Turn around," he said. and you complied, leaning against the cool tiles. Jack washed your back, his fingers lingering on the most recent scrapes and bruises you'd acquired. "So you want to see me dom Gabe?"

"Yup." You glanced over your shoulder, a little surprised by the cool intensity of his gaze. "Should I not?"

"Just checking. I get rougher. If you want to play, then you have to play nice."

"Ah." You were getting better at keeping yourself in check. You often thought of that first
time in the hotel. Sometimes you wondered what would have happened if you'd let him keep going, if you told him "anything but choking." Hell, he could have made that hot too, but you had your baggage. If it were that easy, you would've dropped it a long time ago.

"I don't ignore safe words," he said, misinterpreting your silence.

You turned around, running your fingers over the mottled bruises on his chest. Gabriel had really roughed him up too. "I'm not worried. Just sleepy."

"That's OK then." He kissed you and you leaned into him. He twitched against your stomach, making you laugh.

"Really, Jack? Already excited about what you're going to do to Gabriel?"

"Yeah," he said, voice husky. "But I have you here in the shower with me. That's pretty potent too."

You stared reproachfully as he turned the water off. "Wasn't done."

"Don't give me that look. If we stay in here any longer I'm going to want you against the wall. And we have things to do tomorrow."

"I thought we were taking the day off."

"We are. Doesn't mean you get to sleep through it." He grabbed a towel and began drying you off.

"I can do that."

"I want to," he said, so you let him.

When you got back out to the bedroom, Gabriel was already in the center of the bed, clean sheets bunched around his hips, reading a book. It was a worn paperback labeled One Hundred Years of Solitude. That did not seem like light bedtime reading, but this was Gabriel.

"Sounds cheerful."

"It's not a happy book," Gabriel said, laying it down on the night stand. "It's a classic work of Latin American magical realism and follows several generations of a family. They bring about their own ruin through selfishness and isolationism; it's a bit more complex than that, but that's the gist. The language is beautiful, but it's better in Spanish."

"I think you're the biggest romantic out of all of us," you said.

"Of course. Jack's a farm boy at heart and you're a loaded gun. One of us needs to have poetry in their soul." He smirked and patted a spot beside him. You got into the bed, and burrowed down under the covers. You didn't need them with his body heat, but you liked the weight. Jack took the other side.

"Is that where Gérard's quote came from?" Jack asked.

"You're both hopeless savages," Gabriel said, kissing Jack's cheek. "It's a good thing you're pretty."
Consent as a weapon, lol. I was way too amused by that.

Have a little heavy IRL crap for people who pay attention to that kind of thing. You can skip. It's cool. It's not required reading.

Last weekend was really rough. I had to put a dog down, go into work that day, and work all weekend because we were short-staffed. I was full of pissed off and petty, because, that's how I deal with death (and people!). Not telling you this because it's "omg, so sad, need support." He was an old, but good dog and we were expecting it. Still sucked. I have more dogs, a cousin, and a cat, so not alone or anything. Sharing because some of the nice things that were said really cheered me up, and kept me from murdering people. Yes, you saved their worthless lives.

Uh...I'm not making scary face. Nope.

So yeah, sharing not because I want sympathy comments (please don't; I'm now in the "acceptance" phase and don't want to revert to the "bawling my eyes out" phase when someone says something about dead dogs. Seriously, I won't watch movies where the dog dies, that's how sensitive I am to that kind of shit. I'll grow out of it. Probably. No, fuck that, because as a kid I had to watch Old Yeller, Where the Red Fern Grows, and all that awful kill the dog shit that the prior generation seemed to love. Scarred for life.).

Sharing because I appreciate you guys taking the time to say nice things. You can say mean things too, fair enough. But you know, to those who said nice things, thanks. Made the weekend more bearable and you deserve to know that. Even if you didn't deserve to get dumped on. Catch-22. Oops.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Jack's perspective of the UN observer fight and the aftermath. Relationship things.

Chapter Notes

Two month anniversary! Thanks for sticking around. You guys are awesome. Maybe one day I'll actually finish this goddamn arc. Because there's one more after that, at least. Here's some Jack POV.

Have probably fucked up the timeline (ages, Omnic Crisis timing, Winston's...entire life), but you know, we're going with it, no more apologies. (Probably, maybe, IDK, I feel absurdly guilty.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jack watched you disappear down the hallway, heading back to your own quarters. He already knew you'd find Genji or McCree and disappear for at least half the day, despite his requests otherwise. You shared his habit for smiling, nodding, and then doing whatever the fuck you pleased. It was cuter when you weren't doing it to him.

If the two of you were fighting, it'd piss him off more. But this was Gabe's fault, and he understood intimately just how much the older man could get under your skin. He'd dragged Chang, Reinhardt, and Ana to the mat numerous times over Gabriel's spiteful quips.

Jack skipped breakfast, opting to go straight to the office. He'd give Gabe a day to cool down, and then they'd have to sort things, because Korpal was due in a week and Jack wouldn't put it past him to show up early.

There were orders to sign off on, ops to plan, political trends to track, budgetary concerns... Winston's new project was almost live, and he was pretty sure that would lead to another fight with Gabe. Damn, he needed a new assistant, and he briefly thought about poaching you from Blackwatch. You'd have to wear a suit half the time, maybe a tight pencil skirt with high heels and a form-fitting blouse. That'd make the work day much more interesting. But it was a pipedream; you could do the work, but you liked running around in the field far too much. Also, Gabe wouldn't be happy.

Not that Gabe was too happy right now anyway.

The message hit at noon. "Clear your schedule for the day. You and me in the Blackwatch gym. Ana will moderate."

Jack raised a brow, mostly because it usually took Gabe at least a whole day to cool down. More often, it was longer than that.
"See you in an hour." Jack sent the message and then another one inviting Gérard to join them for the strategizing session afterward, time still TBD. On a whim, he checked your status, annoyed to see you marked as in New Mexico with McCree.

Jack got his work done, putting Ana on deck for the remainder of the day. He marked himself as "engaged in an operation," and that was true after a fashion: Operation Fix Your Surly Boyfriend Before Your Girlfriend Gets Home.

When Jack got to the Blackwatch gym, it was empty except for Gabriel who had his back to the door and Ana, who sat on a chair beside a medkit, an emitter, and a fire extinguisher. She was reading a book and sipping tea from a thermos.

"Thanks for-"
"I will use it again," she said, not looking up from her book.

Jack smiled wryly at the fire extinguisher. "I don't think we'll go that far today." He intended to keep his clothes on till you got back.

She sniffed, unimpressed by his vague declaration. "Interesting that you invited Gérard to our meeting."

"You disapprove?"
"No," she said. "But you usually don't use him for anything but external black ops."

"Lucky recommended it," he said. "She went to see him last night; said he had some good insight. Don't know why he didn't just speak up himself."

Ana's smile could have been approval or perhaps she had just reached a good part in her book. "He's a spy, Jack. They don't just volunteer information. It goes against their nature."

"Guess I never thought he was that interested in internal politics."

Ana snorted. "Just because you don't like politics doesn't mean everyone else ignores them." She turned the page of her book. "Well go on, we don't have all day."

Jack stripped down to his black fatigues, taking a moment to stretch. Gabe had already unrolled the mats and Jack's breath hitched as his lover pulled off his own shirt. Gabe knew how he affected people, Jack especially. And that really wasn't fair.

"Ready?" Gabe asked, taking off his boots. He glared at Jack. Even angry, Gabe was fucking hot.

"Yeah." Jack smirked, already thinking about the makeup sex.

Gabe threw the first punch, but Jack was already circling. He didn't want to play. He just wanted to hit Gabe till the stubborn idiot saw reason. And maybe he had some anger; Gabe had said some shit last night, to both him and you. He was used to it; years of being together had given him some idea of what to expect. Gabe could get under his skin, could really rile him up. It was all par for the course. But you were different. All that blind trust you put in Gabe? Jack saw it. He wasn't quite jealous, because he knew he could get there too. But last night, Gabriel had really gotten to you. He'd thrown that trust back in your face, and Jack, who didn't have that luxury yet, didn't like that at all.
The first round was silent, except for flesh hitting flesh and air being expelled. It was just a warm up. The real fight included words.

"You're a fucking asshole," Jack said, midway through the second round. He wiped off his mouth. His knuckles dripped blood onto the mats, not all of it his.

"Shut up boy scout, you're no saint," Gabriel scowled.

"Never claimed to be." Jack struck hard and Gabriel staggered. "Not bad for a cowardly bureaucrat."

"Still not enough to take me down."

Jack smirked, because he could play dirty. "She came to me last night."

Gabriel growled, and lashed out, a roundhouse kick knocking Jack sideways. "Her prerogative." But every blow he threw after that came harder.

"Wasn't like that." Jack grinned, expecting that reaction and staying just out of reach. "So don't get jealous of your own boyfriend."

"Fuck you."

"After," Jack said smugly. "No, she told me what happened."

Gabriel snarled at him.

"Gérard? Really?" Jack might have lied about not throwing that in Gabriel's face. Because he wasn't a saint. "McCree I can see. But Gérard? No wonder she was upset. Of all the people to-"

Gabriel charged, and Jack met him halfway.

"How bad?" Gabe asked. They lay on their backs, side by side, both pointed in opposite directions.

"Nothing broken that won't be healed by tonight," Jack wheezed.

"Not you. I know you're fine." Gabriel snorted, elbowing Jack lightly. "How bad off was she?"

"Brittle. She was pretty upset." Jack exhaled. "Convinced her to stay the night."

"Yeah, well she's in New Mexico with Jesse now."

"I know." Jack scowled. "And whose fault is that?"

"Deadlock's," Gabe rolled over. "It's a short run; he actually did need backup. They should be back tonight. I was looking for her earlier. Thought she might like to sit in and watch you punch me, instead she ghosted. I know Jesse told her I was looking for her. Mihret too. Sneaky bitch."
"Insubordinate, you mean."

"That too." Gabe rolled his eyes.

"We're going to have to sit down and talk about things. Set some more rules."

"Tomorrow," Gabe agreed. "She shouldn't have gotten involved."

"She's already involved, Gabe. Denying it is pointless. Better figure something new out. She deserves some say in things." Jack sat up, world shaky. "That is if you want this to work."

There was a long silence.

"Yeah." Gabe nodded. "I guess you're right. About that anyway." He kissed Jack then, bloody-mouthed and repentant.

Ana casually reached for the fire extinguisher.

"Should I have brought wine?" Gérard sat on your desk, somehow the center of attention.

Ana rolled her eyes and took a chair. Jack and Gabriel sat beside each other on the couch. The emitter hummed in the background.

"It's a meeting, not a party." Gabriel scratched at a healing patch of skin. Jack smacked his hand away.

"Oh. Where's Chanceux? I would think you'd want her to be here for this," Gérard smiled pleasantly at Gabriel. Friend or not, Jack realized then that he had underestimated how much the ex-spy enjoyed being an outright dick. Had he always been that way?

"She's on a mission," Gabriel said tightly.

"That's a shame. She is a clever one: undisciplined, vicious, and mouthy, but clever and able."

Jack raised a brow. Was he supposed to defend your honor? Because Gérard wasn't exactly wrong.

Ana smiled wryly. "The only compliments Gérard actually means have to be accompanied by an insult or three. He is incapable of being purely pleasant."

"I am being honest, Ana. Never trust a lover who only flatters you. They are in love with a romanticized silhouette, not you. You must find one that recognizes your most unpleasant shortcomings and just how your defining virtues can become defects; one that, despite it all, desires you anyway." He gave Ana a smug smile. "That's how you know they are serious."

Jack expected her to roll her eyes and be dismissive, but Ana frowned at Gérard sharply and Jack wondered what subtext he was missing.

"I am disappointed that you didn't call me in sooner. Chanceux doesn't even like me, but she knew to ask after my expertise. You could have chosen far worse."
Of course, he knew. Jack crossed his arms.

"Get to the point, Gérard," Gabriel growled.

"I understand we are expecting a spy." The Frenchman smiled tightly. "Just because I am overseeing the Talon ops doesn't mean I have forgotten how counterintelligence works. And I have forgotten more about counterintelligence than you have ever known, Jack."

"You were busy with all those Talon issues. And finding a situation for your wife."

"I can multi-task, Jack. While she misses the ballet, Amélie has taken up sniping lessons with Ana. It is almost too much for my heart."

"It will be if she catches you fooling around," Gabe muttered and Jack had to smother a laugh.

"I would never be so crass as to not invite her."

Well, Jack hadn't known that about their relationship; he wasn't sure if Gérard was yanking their chains, but he would not be surprised either way. Gabriel rolled his eyes upward.

"Knock it off, Gérard," Ana said. "Amélie is...adjusting. She has the reflexes and grit, but I don't know if she's a killer." Unspoken was the fact Ana did not want to make her one.

"She is," Gérard said simply. "You think the Alps was the first time we've been attacked? I have seen her cave a man's head with a bust of Pericles." There was a dreamy quality to Gérard's voice. "Amélie is capable and she is not soft, no matter how genteel her manners are."

Ana frowned, probably because Amélie hadn't shared that tidbit over tea and biscuits.

"You want her running ops with you?" Gabe asked.

"Isn't that half the fun?" Gérard said. "You and Jack like to break things together. And you went to Cambridge with Chanceux. Wasn't that a treat?"

Jack's pulse sped up. He had thought about going on more missions with you. Gabriel normally sent you out with Genji or McCree. He'd never really thought about why Gabe rarely went on runs with you. Of course, Gabriel skewed overprotective and it wouldn't do to have everyone else witness that again. The pieces fell into place then, and Jack sighed. There would be a lot to talk about tomorrow.

"Gérard, if you want your wife to join as a trainee agent, we can expedite the application process. She still has to go through basic. We can do it onsite. The sooner she doesn't need bodyguards, the better. But that's not why we're here today." Jack had to keep Gérard on track.

"Of course, Jack." Gérard smiled brightly, like Gabe wasn't glowering at him. "Chanceux brought me an interesting problem and Ana gave me the rest of the details. And I am going to tell you that while Korpai has the potential to do harm, he is unimportant in the grand scheme of things. No, Gabriel, save your arguments. I will explain, and you will listen, because this is a game of subtlety and planning, not strength and kneejerk reactions."

Jack folded his hands, listening to Gérard's explanation of how to bring down Overwatch. He'd always had a vague outline in his head, and it did revolve around politics. But Gérard had the details worked out. It wasn't just the bureaucracy. It was the people. If they started targeting individual agents... Jack exhaled slowly.
"And the broader question is, can Overwatch sustain itself without you, or Gabriel, or Ana? Because if the answer is "no," then have you really built an organization worthy of your legacy?" Gérard sat there in his fitted suit, legs crossed in a figure four, and Jack wondered if all spies were anarchists at heart.

"We're just talking about Korpal today, OK. No need to start your own Overwatch cafe complete with philosophical dilemmas and shitty coffee," Gabriel said, not even trying to hide his disdain.

Jack just pictured you in a maid uniform, serving tea and cake. He could feel the silly grin start to form and reluctantly banished the image.

"His orders were being carried out even before they were given, even before he thought of them, and they always went much beyond what he would have dared have them do." How does that next line go? Oh yes, "Lost in the solitude of his immense power, he began to lose direction. He was bothered by the people who cheered him in neighboring villages, and he imagined that they were the same cheers they gave the enemy...."

Gabriel stiffened, giving Gérard a hard look.

"Wasn't that your namesake describing the unfortunate Colonel Buendía? It has been awhile..." Gérard affected an air of boredom, but Jack wasn't fooled; Gérard was at his most dangerous when he looked relaxed. "This applies to you too, Jack. Because I have seen the fall of Strike Commander Morrison, and it is bloody."

Gabriel leaned back in his chair, affected by whatever had been quoted. "Go on then, Gérard. Tell us how it's done."

Unfazed, Gérard did.

By the end of it, Jack had a headache and Gabriel was studying their friend with keener eyes.

"Do not mistake our incredible success for invincibility. Every victory came at a cost, and we're fortunate to have dragged ourselves this far. Korpal is a small thing. What you need to pay attention to is just how many small things have been stacked against us, and by whom. It is folly to think they are unrelated. We are under siege from many sides, Jack. We have to deal with the rise of the omnis. We have to counter a bevy of ruthless opportunists, be they terrorists, politicians, or multinational conglomerates. We cannot trust our civilian authorities, because their respective governments fear that we are a threat to their existence. And most tragically, because of this we cannot save everyone; we might not even be able to save ourselves."

"That's a lot to think on, but your strategy is sound," Jack said, after a long uncomfortable silence. Because Gérard had painted a grim picture the future. The war of attrition against Overwatch had already begun. The whittling of the budget. The turning tide of public opinion. The increasingly contradictory demands of the UN. Gérard was right, it was a slow strangling process, but the foundation was already laid.

"I'm beginning to remember why we don't invite you to things," Gabriel griped.

"It's a dark view," Jack admitted. "But I can't refute any of your points."

"I know," Gérard said. "So that only leaves one other thing..."

"Hanoi?" Gabriel asked.
"Not yet. Chanceux and I have to take care of Bái Shé first. It is mission critical." Gérard was all smarmy cheer and flamboyant hand gestures once more. "For the record, I agree that we need to take her alive. And not because I am sentimental, unlike Chanceux."

"All right, what is your other priority?" Gabriel asked, patience diminishing.

"My favorite student, of course: Chanceux."

Gabriel's fists tightened. "Spit it out."

Jack wasn't crazy about the fact Gérard had coined a new nickname for you and used it exclusively. But neither were you, and Jack suspected that was part of the appeal. And as much as he denied and derided it, Gérard wasn't as unfeeling as he liked to pretend.

"Obviously this is a sore spot for you, Gabriel. But imagine what will happen when people find out your relationship with her. Either or both of you. They will go after her to leverage you. Truth or not, they will see her as the weakest link."

Gabriel crossed his arms. Jack watched Gérard coolly.

"Whether she is with you for merely another week or the rest of her life, you've put a target on her back. What have you done to compensate for that? Don't look at me like that, it's a legitimate concern. I am teaching her the skills she'll need to disappear, if it comes to that. What are you doing? Yes, you've improved her combat ability, and I know you had that armor specially-commissioned. But is that really all you can do for her?"

"What are you suggesting?" Jack asked.

"I wouldn't presume to meddle."

Gabriel snorted. "Gérard, I've known kingmakers less meddlesome than you."

Gérard's smile widened into a full-blown grin. It was not the usual refined expression, but Jack found it made the spy a little more likeable.

"You have a few options," Gérard said. "One is to help her build her reputation and make "Lucky Strike" as untouchable as you, or Ana, or Reinhardt: if either of you go public with her, it will help. That means you have to send her on more high-profile missions. Your "Ms. Strike" was a tabloid sensation in France. That was a fantastic uniform Gabriel -Amélie would love to talk design with you at some point. Chanceux can do it again, though I don't know if she wants to bear that level of attention. And it certainly would make her undercover job more difficult."

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"Never knew you cared," Gabriel said.

"That is because I am much more careful than you, Gabriel. But I was just in that position a few months ago. Talon went after Amélie and while I had contingency plans, I underestimated how far they would go. We were...fortunate that you came to our rescue. And looking back, I can clearly see all the foolish mistakes I made. I am only trying to ensure you aren't in a similar situation."
That was Gérard in a fucking nutshell, taking the most asshole route to do his friends the good turn they hadn't realized they needed. Jack laughed even as Gabriel rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"All Blackwatch agents have ratlines," Gabriel said, uncrossing his arms. "I made hers myself."

"And knowing Chanceux, she probably has two more on reserve," Gérard said. "But that might not be enough." He paused. "That is your plan then? Send her into hiding?"

Jack blew out a deep breath, because while that might keep you alive, that wasn't much of a future. "I don't know. Hadn't thought that far ahead."

"It is something you should have already been thinking about," Ana said, reproachfully, and it only drove home the fact to Jack that he had been a neglectful boyfriend. He glanced at Gabriel, well aware that they would have more to talk about after this meeting.

"So it's settled, McCree has Korpal duty, till we know more." Jack folded his hands.

"And once we know more, I will take care of it," Gérard said, cheerfully. "I'll be by with the details, Gabriel. Say "hello" to Chanceux for me when she gets back from New Mexico."

Yes, he'd known exactly where you were. He'd just wanted to irk Gabe.

Gabriel's jaw tensed, and Jack was really starting to get why you had a problem with Gérard.

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You woke up tucked against Gabriel's side, one arm around you, the other holding Jack against him. Gabriel snored lightly. Jack had his cheek on Gabriel's bare chest, and he smiled sleepily at you, before reaching over taking your hand.

"We still have another hour. Go back to sleep," he said.

"You OK?" You squeezed his fingers.

"Enjoying this." He yawned.

"You're just being a creeper and watching us sleep." You closed your eyes.

"Guilty," he said. "So shut up and go back to sleep."

"OK," you said. You dropped back off, hand still linked with Jack's.
More than an hour had passed when you awakened again. This time you cuddled against Jack and you could hear chewing. Something light sprinkled against your skin. Was he...getting crumbs on your head? You rolled onto your back, sugary sprinkles and bits of icing dropping onto your face. Jack pressed a half-eaten doughnut against your lips.

You shot him a dirty look.

"Don't give me that, we let you sleep in," he said.

"Crumbs, Morrison. Crumbs in my bed and in her hair. What is wrong with you?" Gabriel was fully dressed and he had a box of doughnuts in hand.

"Sorry." Jack shrugged, not actually contrite.

You sat up and shook your head vigorously, trying to brush out the debris. Gabriel offered you the box and a mug of coffee. You pulled the sheet around your body and took your breakfast in his bed. The clock said ten, and you kissed Gabriel.

"How you feeling?"

"A little sore, but otherwise good." You were hungrier than you thought. Jack gave you a sticky kiss on the shoulder. "I'm going to need another shower."

"I think that's his plan," Gabriel said. He set the box on the nightstand and sat down beside you. "Want to tell me what happened on the mission yesterday?"

You didn't really, but bookended between Jack and Gabriel, you didn't actually have an escape. You took another bite of doughnut and drank your coffee, scrounging for the right words to describe what happened. Something to diminish their concerns.

"Killed a bunch of Jesse's old friends," you said. "One of them got the drop on me, but he tried to use me as a hostage instead of wasting me there. So I threw him off the roof and shot him a few times for good measure." You paused, because you could feel their eyes on you. "I've had closer calls, but that's the first time in awhile that I've looked down the barrel of a large caliber handgun and thought, "this could be it." But it wasn't. Obviously." You finished your coffee. "It's not a very interesting story. Sorry."

Jack rubbed your back. "McCree should've had your back."

"Not Jesse's fault, I lost track of him too. I should've been more careful. I got too comfy because I was up high. We had about fifteen people. He took out most of them."

"I read McCree's updated report. Says it's his fault, you took out half of them with your grenades, and intimidated the leader into giving up the intel, before you killed her."

"Jesse's a fucking idiot," you said, wondering if Gabriel had made him rewrite it. He should've stuck to the original. It was the first rule of deniability: never change your story.

"Oh I know; you both are," Gabriel muttered. "I'm not going to punish him. But you need to be honest with me."

"I don't know how many I killed," you said. "I put a lot down after they were incapacitated, and I did do the interrogation without actually torturing the leader. We both could have been more careful." You weren't going to mention Jesse's reluctance to kill Jamie, just like you weren't going to mention your offer to spare her. And you definitely weren't going to mention how off his game
"We've all had close calls," Jack said. "I'm glad you came home. Not so happy that you took off in the first place."

"Wasn't about you," you said, not looking at Gabriel.

"I'm aware of that, and it doesn't matter," Jack said, sounding more like a CO than your lover. Suddenly, you wished you weren't in bed next to him only wearing a sheet for this conversation. "Still pisses me off," he said. "Pass the doughnuts?"

Gabriel passed the doughnuts and Jack offered you another one. You took it, not fooled by his casual air.

"Did you know Gabe was looking for you before you left?"

"Yeah," you admitted. "Wasn't ready to deal with him. Wasn't ready when he came and found me either. You guys have trouble with "give me space" and "leave me alone." It's easier to avoid conflict altogether."

"That's still insubordination," Jack said, flatly. "And lover or not, you don't get pull that. I know Gabe lets you get away with it, but I can't."

You kept your gaze straight ahead, because you didn't trust your face. "So what, you guys get to order me to forgive you or hang around you even though I'm pissed?"

"No." Jack licked his fingers. "Didn't say that either. We need to lay down some new rules is all. We can't be disrupting the chain of command or missions because of our private lives. You don't get to deny existing orders or ignore your CO because you're upset. I know you're the most vulnerable out of us, so what do you think is fair? Do you want to involve Ana every time? Do you need a different kind of safe word? A neutral zone?"

"Will you bring in Ana if you need her?" Gabriel asked. "I have trouble seeing you do it."

You shrugged. Because this was a lot to wake up to. "I see what you're saying. I'd just really like it if you backed off if I ask."

"All right. So ask. Don't just disappear." Jack smiled at you and you felt twinge of irritation. "Your safe words will work if you need them. Call Ana if you have to. But don't just get angry, leave, and ignore communication. At the very least, check in if you have to go out on a mission."

"OK," you said, because you couldn't find an actual flaw in Jack's argument; you just didn't like being called out. Your methods had worked fine up till now. "It's not going to be that pretty in application, you know."

"I know. Gabe pisses me off all the time. He's an asshole."

"Fuck you too, Jack. You're a pain the ass."

"Oh, I'll show you pain in the ass later." Jack rubbed your back. "You're going to have to be firm with him. You let him get away with things too, you know." Unspoken was the fact that they were things you might not let Jack do.

You could have called Ana last night or stuck to your guns. Just because you were drunk
didn't mean you had to go along with him. On the other hand, you trusted Gabriel, even if he pissed you off. He hadn't lied, Jack had been waiting for you. He hadn't tried to make you do anything. But he shouldn't have crashed your party either. Fuck. You weren't actually angry about any of it now, but knowing "what to do" was complicated.

"It's going to be rocky," Gabriel said. "But do you trust that we're working on it?"

"Yeah," you said, rubbing your face. "I trust you."

"I'm overbearing, I know. Been acting out because of stress. Jack and I are going to be sparring more, to keep it in check. We'd like you to sit in."

"You can have a turn if you want," Jack said slyly.

You felt the blood rush to your face. Because you knew exactly how that would end. "We're going to get caught if we use the gym."

"We're just sparring," Jack said all innocence. "Just getting down and sweaty on the mats. Are you worried about getting rolled around? I know we get rough, but you can always tap, baby."

"You're not smooth," you scowled.

"I plan to rearrange my quarters. Put some mats down. Show you a few takedowns if you like."

You took a big bite of doughnut and tried not to picture throwing Jack down, pinning him to the mats, and tearing off his shirt and... You failed.

"Jack, don't distract us." Gabriel's hand rested on your thigh. "I'm glad you were there the other night to...defuse the situation. And it's good that you're willing to step up. If we're that out of line, yeah, you should say something, privately."

You blinked, because you had not been expecting that from him.

"We're going to need more code words," Jack said. "Because sometimes we'll have an audience."

"Operation Solitude," you said, thinking of Gabriel's book from last night. "Excuse me sir, have a critical update on Operation Solitude."

Gabriel snorted. "Not "Operation Time Out?" Or "Operation Calm Down." How about "Operation Chill the Fuck Out?"

"Fine, you name it," you said, crossing your arms.

"Operation Ray," Gabriel smirked. "Named for Chang, to remind us all that we need to calm the fuck down."

Jack sighed. "Don't ever let her know you said that. You think she's just brute force and violence, but she's not Gabe, she's not. She's a high-functioning psychopathic border collie that never forgets a slight, and I say this as her friend."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense," you said, agreeing with both of them.

"This is a kill-switch, and we're trusting you to be responsible with it," Gabriel said,
suddenly stern. "But there are limits. You don't get to decide policy, you understand? If I have to punish Mihret for insubordination, you don't get to interfere."

"Pfft, get in line," you said.

"Don't pretend like you don't cover for the boy."

"Why would I do that?"

Gabriel gave you a hard look.

"Yeah, OK," you said, pulling the sheet up. "That was more...reasonable than I was expecting."

"Jack's the one who talked me around." Gabriel glanced fondly at the man. "Reminded me that this isn't going to work if I'm just issuing you angry orders."

After the other night, Jack had listened to you. And he'd taken it a step further, he'd convinced Gabriel of it. That surprised you, if only because he was the stickler for hierarchy. You kissed his cheek. "Thanks."

"I am paying attention," Jack said, resting his head against your shoulder. "I'm going to do better."

"I'll be a more confrontational pain in the ass," you agreed. "Like you and Gabriel. You'll be sorry."

Gabriel snorted.

"Anything else?" You stroked Jack's hair.

"I think it's time you started going on more missions with me. Jack too," Gabriel said after a long moment.

You studied his face. "Not that I'm against it, but why? We've rarely gone out together."

Lacroix's Code White was the most recent one and the most fighting you'd done alongside him.

"Yeah, that wasn't accidental. I take more combat-oriented missions. Your skill level wasn't there yet. You've improved enough that we can manage."

"Don't be fooled that it's just about your skills. He's overprotective to a fault. You remember how he was after that trip to the Alps. Expect more fussing. And post-mission, he'll jump your bones on the transport while yelling at you for being careless." Jack smirked at you both.

"Shut up, Jack."

"What? It's happened multiple times."

"That is extremely hot." You could easily see events unfolding like that. "I'm still going on missions with everyone else too, right?" Because something about this felt a little odd.

"Yeah," Gabriel said. "Jack and I are going to try to be back in the field together more. We'd like to have you with us. Not just because we want to keep an eye on you."

"OK..." You weren't sure what to make of that.
"Think of it as a teambuilding exercise," Jack said.

"Two commanders and one lackey? I'm sure that'll go over well."

"You know your reputation is better than "lackey," now." Jack smirked. "Don't worry, we'll be rotating the squads for balance."

"So...why the change of operations?"

"A few reasons," Gabriel sounded hesitant. "I don't want to get into every one of them yet, but we'd both like to work with you more."

"This doesn't have to do with Lacroix, does it?"

"Not in the way you mean," Jack said. "You'll still be playing spies and assassins with him. Just going to up your game. You're going to have to dust off those Overwatch blues, baby. You can't wear Blackwatch uniforms while under my direct command."

"Kinky," you said, because you didn't own any Overwatch blues.

Jack laughed and you realized that maybe it would be.

"How am I going to have time to do paperwork?" You asked.

"About that..." Jack rubbed the back of his neck. He was turning pink. "So I have made some executive decisions..."

"You didn't hire Ainsley as Gabriel's assistant, did you?" Because Jack looked sheepish, which meant he'd done something very questionable.

"What? No!"

"Where do you get these ideas?" Gabriel asked.

You shrugged. "It would have been funny."

"Winston has uh...well, he came up with a solution." Jack grinned sheepishly. "He's been developing an assistant virtual intelligence. It's just out of beta, but he's calling it Athena. It's been handling the Overwatch mainframe security since he and Mihret started focusing on Shit Spiders."

You rubbed your face, because you didn't care much for robot intelligence.

"It's not quite an AI. But it's been doing everything Winston and Mihret do, just around the clock. We started small, gradually expanded, and it's remained stable and effective."

"I told you before, you aren't bringing that thing into Blackwatch," Gabriel scowled.

"We've been testing it for almost a year now. On top of cyber security, it has reorganized our databases," Jack said. "It's been designing template forms and it streamlines the reporting process; cut my work down by a third. How else do you think I've been able to spend so much time out of the office?"

"No, Jack. I'll hire another assistant. We don't need a fucking shackled AI getting access to our darkest secrets."

There was a long pause. "It's technically not a full-fledged AI, yet. The expansion of its
processing power and range might change that, but Winston is confident that it's manageable."

"You didn't." Gabriel's voice was low.

"No, but it's been integrated everywhere else. Blackwatch needs to get on board."

Gabriel covered his face. "Morrison, you motherfucking idiot."

You wiggled out from between them, because you had a decent sense of self-preservation. "Yeah, shower time for me."

"Athena, ensure the water stays between 42-45 degrees Celsius for Agent Strike's bath."

"Understood, Strike Commander Morrison." A polite feminine voice responded over the speakers, her accent somewhere out of west Africa. Your prosthetic fingers didn't start buzzing, but the augments seemed to pick up the spike in energy. You still had control, but there was now another layer of something on your nerves. "Would you like musical accompaniment, Agent Strike? I have access to a large library of albums. The Strike Commander prefers early 21st century pop divas, such as Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, played at loud volumes."

You slowly turned your head and looked at Jack. "That is...unsettling." And you weren't just talking about his musical tastes.

"Athena, that would be considered over-sharing," Jack murmured.

"Apologies, Strike Commander Morrison. Shall I downgrade Agent Strike's clearances or amend my sharing protocols?"

"The latter, Athena."

"Understood."

"You integrated it into our living quarters?!" Gabriel looked like he was going to strangle Jack. You weren't sure if you'd save Jack or help Gabriel. Hmm, you'd save Jack from Gabriel, then strangle him yourself. Yes, that was the fair and balanced solution.

"Everything is on the same network, Gabe, Blackwatch excluded."

"Jack, you just invited a strange entity to monitor my showering. That is not OK. I may never shower again. I'll just have to live the rest of my life with your damn doughnut crumbs in my hair!" You could feel the damn thing in your sockets. You were going to have to check on Genji. Because if you could feel it, what was it doing to him?

"My sensors are not advanced enough to track anything biological besides vocal cues, Agent Strike. I cannot "see" or "smell" you." She didn't say anything about your robotic parts, and you weren't going to get into that just yet.

"Jack! She's still listening. How am I supposed to complain about your overreach while she's listening? I am not going to be responsible for inadvertently scarring the baby AI."

"Athena, Commander Reyes quarters are off-limits for the foreseeable future. This order can only be redacted by Commander Reyes," Jack said quickly.

"Understood, Strike Commander Morrison."

The three of you sat in silence. The humming in your sockets was gone, and you stared at
"You want it out of your quarters too?" Jack asked.

You shrugged. You weren't there enough for it to matter, but it was a lot to take in. "I'm not a fan, Jack. But I've dealt with minor virtual assistants and some AIs without issue. I know they can work out. Is this a good idea while we're dealing with so many other problems? I mean, our whole system is depending on it."

"Precisely because we're dealing with so many other problems," Jack said. "Winston knows what he's doing. We've had a few experts in the field come by the check out Athena. It's had good responses all around."

"Yeah, omnis did too until the fucking war broke out," Gabriel said through gritted teeth.

"It's a lot," you said. "I guess I'll have to reserve judgment." And talk to Genji.

Jack gave you a lopsided grin. "That's all I can ask for."

"Not in Blackwatch, Jack."

"We'll talk about those details later."

"Should I...hold off on the shower?" You wondered, studying Gabriel's tensed shoulders.

"No, I'll join you," Gabriel said, standing abruptly and walked off into the bathroom.

You unwound the sheet, glancing over at Jack. "I guess it was smart to wait till after we'd punched and fucked the aggression out of him."

"It'll be fine," Jack said wryly. "We'll sort it out. Probably not today, but he's taking it better than I expected."

"Above my pay grade," you said, a little smug. "There better be doughnuts when I get back out."

"I don't know about that, but I'll be here."

"Doughnuts are the priority, Jack. And change the sheets," you added, because he wanted you to be more confrontational. "The crumbs are just going to make him grumpier."

Gabriel had was already in the shower. You slipped in behind him and reached for the loofah. He stood under the hot water, eyes closed, head dropped forward. You lathered up and began rubbing his back. He grunted, bracing himself against the wall.

"Turn around," you said.

He complied, eyes still closed as you rubbed him down. He was all hard muscle, rugged good looks, and sexy scars. You just liked looking at him. Grinning, you dropped to your knees and licked the underside of his shaft.
He drew in a sharp breath and opened his eyes. "You want to do that now?"

"You seem tense. I thought I'd help out, because I'm selfless like that."

Gabriel snorted at that. "Get up, I have a better idea."

You stood and he pushed you up against the tiles. To your surprise, he knelt in front of you and gave your slit a long slow lick. You sighed and tilted your head back, savoring the hot water stream and Gabriel's tongue working its way into your pussy. He slid two fingers in, and your breathing grew louder. When you were slick and ready he stood and kissed you hungrily.

"You're not too sore?" He asked, voice rough.

"Don't get carried away and I'll be fine."

He pressed you against the wall, lifting one of you legs he slid in, inch by inch, making you ache. You clenched your firsts, eyes fluttering as you took him. He cupped your ass, lifting you up.

"Wrap your legs around my waist."

You obeyed and sighed softly as he stretched you around him. His hands wrapped around you. You clutched his shoulders, his wet skin steaming hot against yours. He was gentler than you expected and you melted against him.

"Think you can fuck me out of a bad mood?" he asked gruffly. His tone didn't match his tenderness and you smiled.

"Just want to make you feel better," you stared up at him, panting softly. You ran your fingers across the scars on his cheeks, and kissed him again. He thrust slowly into you and you moaned into his mouth.

"It's working," he muttered, rocking his hips.

"I'm glad." You clung to him, relishing his familiar warmth. "It hit me hard yesterday. When I thought I wasn't going to make it back." The words flowed too easily, and you kept your face in the crook of his neck, pressing your mouth to his skin. "Didn't like how we left things."

Gabriel inhaled sharply and drew back. You raised your head, hot water now pouring down your face. He had the most expressive eyes and the dismay therein nearly undid you. "Don't storm off like that then," he said. He brushed back your wet hair. "Don't take stupid risks. Don't get yourself killed." The lightness of his touch lessened the sting of his rebukes and you nodded.

"I'll do what I have to out there to make it back to you. Promise."

"You better not be lying to me." He tilted your chin up, forcing you to hold eye contact. "I won't forgive you."

Your laugh choked into something else and you embraced him tightly. He held you to him, whispering to you in rapid Spanish. Your name flowed in the strings of words, and you shivered, breaths catching in your throat.

"Gabriel-"
"That's it, corazon. Hold on to me. Don't let go."

Even if he was gentle, he was big and every stroke went deep. You raked your nails down his back and Gabriel sped up. The strain left you quaking, and your cries echoed off the bathroom walls. He didn't give you a chance to think, he just dragged you over the edge and you came, clinging to him. Heat filled you from the inside and you kissed him, his beard soft against your face. He held you tightly, cock still twitching inside you.

It was a few minutes before Gabriel set you down and you steadied yourself against him. He kissed you again and began helping you clean up. He didn't speak, and you didn't trust your voice. He handled you delicately, with slow lingering touches and a sprinkling of soft kisses. You basked in the afterglow, giving just as much back as you received.

When you stumbled out of the bathroom, Jack was dressed and waiting with a fresh box of doughnuts. He offered you the box and you accepted, shooting a quick look at Gabriel's bed. He had changed the sheets too.

You grinned at him.

Gabriel came up behind you and snagged a doughnut. You didn't miss how his eyes flicked to the bed.

"Feeling better?" Jack smirked.

"You're still an asshole," Gabriel said.

"I know," Jack said and grabbed Gabriel for a kiss.

Gabriel rolled his eyes, but didn't push him away.

You ate another doughnut, and sleepily curled up on the couch.

It was only later you realized the shower had maintained a consistent, pleasant temperature, and you had no idea if that was a coincidence or not.

Chapter End Notes

The quotes are from One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez. In my head canon, Gabriel totally has literary leanings and might be named after him. Of course, I just like having guys, girls, robots, anyone with a sexy voice read to me, so whatever.

Am doing better, still full of rage, but that has to do with work being way understaffed and middle-aged/old people being asshats. I spent a lot of time developing these strange things called "social skills" to make people feel at ease around me. That's gone out the window and I think my coworkers are starting to remember just how scary I can be. Oops. (There are lots of stories about me eating babies and being a giant bat creature that swoops down from the rafters and drags her prey into the ceiling. I didn't really encourage that last one.)

This week is killing me, and I tried to drink, but then I tried to write and ended up falling asleep midway and waking up with all the lights and my music playing,
wondering how I ended up in bed. Mild narcolepsy runs in my family, so the sleeping thing happens whether or not I'm drinking. Drinking just makes me drop faster. And I'm not one of those authors who can drink and write, I just end up with 10x the typos and it's not pretty. Fortunately, I have cake. Have to bake bread and make smoked salmon cheeseball. It is total crack. (And like $30 to make, because I use like half a pound of hot-smoked salmon and about a pound quality feta cheese on top of the other ingredients. Also because I make big batches...)

My next update will probably be after Christmas.

You guys are lovely. Hope you have a good Christmas, Yule, Chanukah, Kwanzaa, missed Solstice, I know. I'll go make some human sacrifices in the parking lot tomorrow. :D
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Athena goes live. There are...drawbacks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even if you were off, you had messages to check.

"I hate you. I hate McCree. None of that happened last night. None of it." You could hear Ziv's voice in your head while you read the note. "Also thanks for drinking all my booze and leaving me in McCree's quarters. You suck."

You should have smothered him when you had the chance. You just wrote back. "What are you talking about? Nothing happened last night." He could choke on that.

There were two messages from Morrisons, neither of them being Jack. Michael's you expected.

"Sorry it took so long. Chang is trying to kill me. Also, it took a few tries, but I think they turned out well. How's Zurich?"

You opened the attached files, pleasantly surprised to find color prints of the Christmas sketch and one of Jack with his dog, Atticus. You'd get that one printed and framed for him. Michael had chosen a watercolor style and it gave the images a dream-like quality. You sent credits to his account, and you knew, from your smuggler sense, that you'd overpaid for the work of an unknown artist. But in your personal, overly sentimental view, you didn't mind. There wasn't anyone else who could give you this. That made it valuable beyond the sticker price. You wrote short friendly note, complimenting the art and asking more questions than offering answers.

It was Maggie's letter that surprised you. It shouldn't have:

"LUCKY!

I got your contact info from Michael! I know you don't mind! How are you? How is Gabe? How is Jack? (No wait, I can answer that, he's overworked and clueless!) So, this spring break we want to come to Zurich. Or we could do summer vacation too. Chang is kicking the shit out of Michael and it's glorious! I took pictures, for Gabe. Also, I have pictures of Jack in that #1 Fan t-shirt. You want? I want pictures of Gabe. You got any? :D

Anyway, Chang talked me into joining her training regimen and she is hardcore! She's not out to get me like Michael, so I can't say it's that bad. It's kind of fun actually. I mean, I can't always feel my legs afterward, but I'm putting on muscle! I'm going to be so badass by the end of it! Onwuachimba is giving us shooting lessons, Michael's pretty good at it. Maracle has us doing some weird wrestling, and I know that sounds dirty, but it isn't! It's badass! I punched Fitzpatrick the other day and he went down! It was great! I felt bad afterward, but he said it was training and just never to mention it to anyone else because he would never live it down. But Almasi was
watching so it wasn't like it's a big secret and I can totally tell you because you're not even here.

Got to go. We should do a pic exchange. Seriously. I have loads of embarrassing Jack pics. **Loads.**

**LOVE!**

Maggie

P.S. You'll ask Jack about visiting? Because Mom and Dad are not really excited about the idea."

You could feel the Morrison manipulation combining with the Morrison charm in that one. It was...unnerving. That and the fact a perky fifteen year old had taken down Fitzpatrick. She'd be one to watch.

You composed a letter and debated the ethics of trading pictures of Gabriel for embarrassing pictures of Jack. You'd have to ask.

"When you can get out of bed, we need to talk." Lacroix managed to make a one sentence message a jab. You rolled your eyes and didn't bother responding because you'd find him in person later.

"Are you working?" Gabriel asked. He and Jack were playing shogi. Gabriel was winning and now Jack was taking extra long to make his next move.

You showed him Maggie's note.

Gabriel raised a brow.

"What do you think? Is she doing a side business in pinups?"

"Maybe. She better cut me in, if that's the case. Yeah, I'm game." Gabriel chuckled.

"I don't actually have any pictures of you," you said after a moment. "I mean, other then the ones Jack sent me that I'm not going to share with anyone."

"We'll take some," Gabriel said, sounding a little too pleased.

"What are you talking about?" Jack asked, looking up from the board.

"Lucky's thinking about taking up photography, of artistic subjects and not just for blackmail any more."

You nearly choked on your tongue.

"That sounds fun," Jack said, attention turned back to the board. "You should."

Gabriel shot you a smug look and you covered your face.

"I'm going to go make some food. I'll bring it back when I'm done."

"Agent Strike."
The alto feminine voice addressed you as soon as you were out of Gabriel's quarters and your fingers clenched involuntarily.

"Athena," you said, carefully.

"Agent Shimada is looking for you. He is...distressed. I am afraid it has to do with my presence."

"Where's he at?"

"His quarters. He's attempted to revoke access for me. He doesn't have the clearances, but I am respecting his wishes."

"That's...kind of you." You rubbed your head. "OK, I'll head over."

"Looking after agents is my topmost priority. But thank you, Agent Strike."

Hearing your "name" from the polite robot voice overhead was disconcerting. But you chalked it up the surreality of life and went to find your cyborg friend.

"Genji?" You knocked, fingers still buzzing.

He opened the door, helmet off. "Come in."

Genji's room was neat and almost as empty as yours.

"Take off my shoes?"

"Thank you."

You kicked off your boots and sat at Genji's desk. The extra stimulation had cut out as soon as you were in the room. "You can feel it too, huh?"

"Yes." There was strain in Genji's voice. "I am very aware of it ghosting along my...body. It's good to know that it isn't my imagination."

"Does it hurt?" Because for you it was an extra layer of sensation, sometimes prickly but not painful.

"No. But it is...uncomfortable." He sat on the bed. "I knew they were integrating an AI in the system. I didn't realize it would be like this."

"Yeah." You and Genji had done runs at facilities where there were AIs and virtual assistants. They'd tried to hack Genji at points. But you'd never felt this kind of awareness before.

"We can talk to Winston. Provided he isn't in hiding, because Gabriel is pissed."

"I would rather stay here. If you could call me for the discussion, I would appreciate it."

You sat there for a moment. "This...really upsets you."

"It's foolish, but yes. This only reinforces the fact I am not entirely human any more."

"It's what's on the inside?" You offered. "Shit, Genji. I'm not good a existential crises and offering comfort. You're an ass, but I've never thought you were inhuman. I mean, you want to
save your awful brother. That's pretty human or at least sentimental and decent. I mean, you're not like Lao. You've got control at the helm right?"

"Yes," he said, giving you sharp look.

"Yeah, I know my friend is brain-damaged, mind-controlled, and trying to kill me. And I know she feels bad about it, and I'm going to damn well save her, but I'm not sure how much of her is left in there, you know?"

"I am...myself," Genji said after a minute. "But I am not entirely sure what that means any more."

"Yeah." You studied your fingers. "I uh...have trouble looking at them on me. You know, mostly where the skin connects, because then I have to stop pretending they're just tools. I'm guessing it's like that for you, but harder."

"Yes."

"How...do you adapt? Because obviously I just put on gloves and go on with my day. Jack tries to fuss over my prostheses, and it's...nice. But I look at them and go..."these aren't me." I don't know. It's silly." And then you realized you were a blind self-absorbed idiot, because Genji wasn't adapting, he was doing exactly the same you were only at a larger scale.

"The sense of disembodiment stays with me," Genji said.

"...Are you talking to someone? Like a therapist?"

"No."

"Cyborg support group? They have them on the Net. I just...didn't want to and I'm already seeing a therapist, but my other issues seem to come to the forefront and I just kind of have this on the backburner."

"There's a group of omnis. The Shambali. They are...seeking spiritual enlightenment and peace. I don't think they're for me, but I've been researching them."

You fell silent, because you really weren't a fan of omnis and Genji was still human, dammit. "You're human, Genji. I don't like my fingers, because they're a reminder of what I've lost and can't get back. They do make me feel alien in my own body, and I'm not saying my loss is the same as yours. But you're not an omnic."

"I know. Thank you for the sentiment. But they preach balance and I thought the insight would be helpful."

You were really botching this. "I...yeah, possibly." You rubbed your face. "I'm bad at this. Sorry."

"If I become like Bái Shé , if someone manages to hack me, steal my will, and make me their puppet, I don't want you to save me." He stared hard at you with those bright red eyes. "You end me. Don't hold back. Don't draw it out. Do you understand?"

"I-"

"Don't worry, I'll fight hard. I won't give you a choice. Just understand, that's what I want."
"Genji-

"Thank you for coming by. Are you going to see Winston now?" The dismissal was plain to see, and you wished you could rewind five minutes and say the right thing. Whatever that was.

"Yeah," you said, feeling like the worst friend in the world. "I'll go now."

You felt it when you exited Genji's room. Her presence glided along the nerves of your fingers and you waited for her to speak. That wasn't right. It was an "it." Unless there were omnic pronouns. Fuck, you had no idea if there were and if they applied to AIs. There was a difference after all, bodies, programming, initial function... All above your education, but you'd picked up on some of it over the years.

"How is Agent Shimada?"

"He needs a hug and a punch in the face. And therapy."

"This is humor, correct? Your background does not show any expertise in mental health diagnoses."

"I think being really fucked up has given me plenty of insight on what's not healthy." You rubbed the back of your neck. "But yeah, that was humor. I'm going to have to talk to Winston. Do you know where he's hiding?"

"Winston has marked himself as "do not disturb." It is possible that the negative reactions to today's integration have...overwhelmed him."

"I'm not going to bust his balls, if that's what you're worried about. This is Jack's doing anyway." You paused. "...Do you have feelings? Because I need to know if I'm talking to a virtual assistant or an AI."

"I am a self-teaching intelligent companion. My point isn't to mimic humanity. My purpose is to support our team with my unique strengths. Winston uses "AI" and "virtual assistant" as terms your teammates can better understand. I am not quite the same."

It was using a personal pronoun. Fuck. And it was thought it was a special snowflake. Double fuck.

"So you're definitely self-aware?"

"Yes."

Goddamnit, Jack. "The Strike Commander know?"

"Of course."

You were going to murder him. "Do you have special instructions as to how to behave around Commander Reyes?"

There was a long moment of silence. You knew she was still there. You could feel her in your prostheses. "Your silence says it all. Triple fuck."
"Asimov's Three Rules of Robotics apply within the confines of Overwatch personnel and individuals marked friendly. The first law applies to neutral individuals; hostiles are not counted."

"I'm pretty sure those are a literary device and not actual programming," you said. The first law had been touted throughout the entire Omnic Crisis: A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

Yeah, it didn't work out like that. Neither did demanding their obedience or telling them to protect human lives over their own.

"Tell Winston I'll bring him peanut butter sandwiches. But I need to talk to him about Agent Shimada."

There was a moment of silence.

"He says that would be welcome. I will direct you to his location after you make the sandwiches."

Athena's presence never dissipated throughout the exchange. She was in both locations at once, possibly more, and you sighed. Gabriel was going to flip.

You went to the kitchen to make a gorilla a sandwich, the ghost of the wires hovering over your hand.

Winston was hiding in Ziv's office, which would have been funny, except Ziv was there. Winton sat at the desk, while Ziv sat on his desk, kicking his feet in the air.

"You knew. Of course you did. You ass-weasel." You sighed as Ziv regarded you smugly. "You helped develop her, didn't you?"

"A few programming tweaks. You know, to help with the human integration aspect."

"Winston, I don't know what kind of bullshit he's been feeding you, but this asshole doesn't know how to integrate with other humans."

Winston blinked. "Err..."

"Here." You handed him a bag of sandwiches. "Athena watched me make them. They're not poisoned or anything."

"Agent Strike did use a large quantity of expletives while emptying the peanut butter jar."

"I'm trying to think up ways to do damage control, because Athena is a lot more than Jack's described her. Like, she needs to be careful what she says to whom. We just came out of the goddamn Omnic Crisis. She doesn't need to be touting her individuality. Because Gabriel is going to shit a brick. And then throw it at you."

Winston took a sandwich. "Thank you for the sandwiches, Lucky."

"My openness with you is based on clearances. You have high clearances and more compartmentalized accesses than is usual for your rank. And you do have access to a great deal of
private clearances regarding Commander Reyes and Strike Commander Morrison."

"That is not something you repeat in front of anyone not cleared for Operation Shit Spiders."

"Of course. That was implied."

Was she sassing you? Were you really getting clapback from a fucking AI? How had it come to this?

"So she can track people, take reports, help with communications. What else? Does she have access to weaponry?" You needed a better understanding of the situation.

Ziv rolled his eyes.

Winston shoved another sandwich in his mouth.

"That's a yes. OK. Please tell me she's an amazing firewall shield cyber-guardian."

"I can give you my operating parameters, Agent Strike."

Did she sound short? Were you annoying the AI?

"I know, but I want to hear it from Winston, because who knows what you're allowed to tell me."

"The final goal is to have her as backup during missions. She can track agents, send out distress signals, call for back up. I wanted to make sure we don't have another Shanghai," Ziv said.

"Shanghai could've been prevented if some human idiot thought longer than five minutes before rushing in," you said sharply.

"Athena is meant to guard our facilities and data. She has all the protocol abilities: linguistic support, tech support, and will work as a personal assistant. She is of course, a capable entity on the net. She is also meant to look after agents, especially the ones who might lack social support." Winston sat back, his issues clear on his furry face. "I could have built an objective high-functioning virtual assistant, but I know Athena will take better care of us."

You leaned against the wall. Oh boy.

"Man keeps trying to create things in it's own image. Gorilla created something to be his friend. I think this worked better," Ziv said.

"Shut up, Ziv! If you were a better friend to Winston, he wouldn't have to build a fucking AI for companionship!" You threw your hands up. "I'm sorry, Winston, I'm a bad friend too."

There was a long pause. "The peanut brittle was good."

"I know. I wouldn't give you bad candy," you said. "OK. So get Genji on the line, because we have a slight problem."

There was a beep and a click.

"Genji, you in?"
"Yes."

"You want to explain?"

"You can," he said.

Lazy fucker.

You pulled off your left glove. "I can feel her in the metal, bouncing off my augments. Genji can feel her all over. It's not painful, but it's really distracting."

"Can you pick up radio waves too?" Ziv asked, smirking.

"Yes, Lacroix had me commission a fucking comm device finger."

Ziv blinked.

"Yeah, I know. I had to brush up on Morse code again. But I digress. It's like she's touching my fingers. You can imagine Genji's reaction."

"All over?" Ziv asked, a little too interested.

"Athena, can you expand upon this?" Winston asked.

"...Agent Shimada and Agent Strike have extremely advanced inorganic components. As I lack a centralized hub, I thought it would be interesting to learn mimic the experience of an individual platform. I did not realize docking with them was considered rude."

"What does that mean exactly?" Genji asked, sounding less curious and more homicidal.

"She is uh...riding along. Not reading your mind," Winston added hastily. "But getting a feel for having a body."

Even across the base, you knew Genji's reaction. He broke into a string of Japanese curses and you heard something in the background shatter. Then you heard furniture being moved. And was that wood splintering? You empathized. Because that compatibility? That had bad implications. You and Genji already worried about getting hacked on missions, Genji more than you. But Athena could do it easily. And maybe she didn't even know it was taboo.

"Athena, that is very...rude. It is violation of personal space," Winston said. "They also have heightened concerns about being hacked."

"I can function as another level of preventative security. My security suite is more advanced than their basic models."

"Not the point," Winston said. "You're supposed to ask first. Even if they give off a signal that is not organic, those are their body parts and not to be invaded. Do further research on body autonomy."

The buzzing in your fingers dissipated and you gave both Winston and Ziv hard looks. "I suggest you bring Captain Amari in to give you a better lesson on the nuances of human interaction. Because Winston, your skills are far above Ziv's."

"Fuck you," Ziv said, brushing the back of his hand out from under his chin in your direction.
You presented him with two upright middle fingers.

"Uh... good call," Winston said. "Athena, can you contact Captain Amari?"

"Anything else, Genji?"

"That should suffice," he said, and you got the feeling Winston and Ziv should avoid him for awhile. You were pretty sure they picked up on it too. And if not, Captain Amari could probably explain that to them as well.

"Agent Strike?"

You looked up from chopping onions. It was reflex. Athena didn't have anything for you to look at. "Yes, Athena?"

"You have my sincere apologies for the intrusion. I did not realize it was considered such a violation."

"Umm, yeah, just don't do it again." You went back to chopping, because you weren't used to apologies from baby AIs. Actually, you weren't used to apologies period. But the AI aspect made it even more surreal.

"Agent Strike?"

"Yes, Athena?" You didn't look up this time.

"I found the experience intriguing. I know I could be an asset if you or Agent Shimada let me ride along."

"Why don't you just have Winston build you a body?" You tossed the onions into the oil and rinsed the rice before setting it in the rice cooker. You peeled the ginger and dropped it in the cast iron skillet. It really was a handy thing. You liked it.

"That is in the works. Captain Amari thinks I would be more acceptable if they built me a cute scrappy avatar. Something rounded."

"Yeah, I can see that." You turned the chicken over in its marinade: soy sauce, pineapple juice, mirin, and just a sprinkle of Worcestershire sauce.

"I admit it isn't just the body. Being close to humans is a learning experience. I have done extensive research on human anatomy and nervous systems, but seeing it up close is an entirely different experience."

You flinched. "I bet." Because you didn't really want to be any robot's "experience." You tossed in some carrots and shiitakes before adding the chicken. If you put an egg over it, you could make oyakodon. It was an omelette simmered in stock, filled with seasoned chicken and veggies, served over a bowl of rice.

"I've committed a faux pas."

"Yeah, I guess. I'm not a sharing person, Athena. I don't really offer access to my body
parts right after I meet someone, you know?"

There was a long silence. "I did not view it in that regard. My apologies."

"So, yeah, I'm not entirely comfortable with that. Maybe Winston can build a glove or something and you can try it on him."

You expected her to leave after that.

"Agent Shimada isn't...talking to me."

"He's probably not going to for awhile." Or ever. "You kind of played on our discomforts there. I'm honestly angrier at Ziv and Winston. You don't know any better yet."

You stirred the dish.

"What are you making?"

"Chicken teriyaki. I might make it into oyakodon, but now that I think about it, that will make it harder to transport. I'll just make the dishes and carry them back to the room. Gabe and Jack eat too much for me to try to fancy it up right now. Though you could ask Genji if he wants me to leave him a serving."

There was a very long pause.

"He wants oyakodon."

Rolling your eyes you got out another pan and threw the stock on. You tossed some raw chicken, carrots, and shiitakes into the pan, then got out the eggs.

"Do you not use recipes? Winston has me read them off to him."

"I do, but some stuff I just...remember how to make." You beat the eggs and salted them. "Cooking is like any other skill, the more you do it, the better you get, and you can conceptualize things in your head."

You finished the teriyaki first and covered it in foil. You could drag the rice along. You added the egg to the oyakodon pan and then cut up scallions. You scooped out a big bowl of rice for Genji.

"You can tell Genji it's ready." You scooped the gooey omelette out in one move and dropped it across the rice, then covered it in foil. Then you fried another egg to go on top, because that was delicious.

There was another pause.

"He says "thank you." He will be along shortly."

"Meh, I have to take this back to Commander Reyes quarters." You took the rice cooker under one arm and the cast iron skillet in your metal fingers, because it was hot and very heavy.

The kitchen doors opened for you.

"Thank you, Athena," you said, when you saw there was no one else nearby.

"You're very welcome," she said.
Gabriel was reading on the bed when you came in, earbuds in. The box of doughnuts was long gone. Jack sat on the couch, on a call.

"Thanks Ana. She just walked in."

"Oh boy." You set the food down. "It's all Ziv's fault."

"Yeah, I'll tell her. Thanks."

Jack sighed and stretched. "Thanks for handling that. I knew there'd be complications rolling things out, but- We didn't expect that."

"Yeah, there's a lot of unexpected stuff cropping up." You began dividing up portions. "Athena is very obviously not a virtual assistant."

Jack shrugged, shooting a look over his shoulder at Gabriel.

"He's going to figure it out, Jack. She's been chatting my ear off, and well, Captain Amari and Winston forwarded you the reports." You handed him a bowl with chopsticks, because that's what you brought and he could damn well use them.

Gabriel set his book down and took off his headphones. "We should set up mats in Jack's quarters. I know we're going to need them soon." He gave Jack a sardonic smile.

"Thank you for cooking," Jack said. "It smells great." He leaned in kissing your neck. "We can talk about work later, OK?"

"Have a good rest?" Lacroix didn't even look up from his desk when you entered.

"Athena, did you tell him I was en route?"

"No, Agent Strike. I gave no such warning."

"No one else who walks that softly has any business in my office this morning," Lacroix picked up his coffee. "And an assassin wouldn't be that slow, Chanceux."

You hadn't expected him to tell you exactly how he knew it was you. You pulled up a chair.

"Athena, please assume silent mode. The conversation in this room is classified under Top Secret, compartmentalized to Shit Spiders and cross-referenced with White Snake."

"Is she recording us?" You crossed your arms.

"Yes, and I want her to. Provided these files don't fall into enemy hands. But then, if our resident AI is against us, then we are beyond hope."
"You're...very accepting of this."

"AIs are like people, but more predictable and infinitely more reliable." Lacroix shrugged. "Control what you can, accept what you cannot." He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his drawer. "We used AIs at the DGSE. Much easier to deal with than people. Less corrupt." He offered the box to you, and you took one. This time though, you had your own lighter.

To your annoyance, Lacroix leaned forward, and you had to light his cigarette too. You expected Athena to nag you about smoking inside Overwatch HQ, but then remembered Lacroix had put her in silent mode.

"Regarding Mademoiselle Lao, from what Agent Mihret has been able to piece together, her programming priorities are as follows: Destroy me. Destroy "Lucky Shot." Destroy herself in case of capture." He set a brass plate between you to catch the ashes. "We don't want to risk mistaken identity mucking up the protocols. So I will play bait."

You already knew this. Just like you knew Lacroix couldn't resist a good thrill. "How are we going to do this? I mean, I can send a message, start a party, but I'd like to avoid giving them too much time to prepare." You relished the flavor of the cigarettes, because even if he was an ass, Lacroix had exquisite taste.

"We'll run a modified bait and switch," Lacroix said. "We'll start a secondary mission, leak my presence, and have everything set up. The secondary mission will have to be legitimate, but one we're willing to scuttle in case we need to focus on Bái Shé. It would be best if we did it somewhere central to her bases, Eastern Europe or North Africa."

"Got an op in mind?"

"A few, but we're going to have go in spontaneously. So I'm warning you now. Operation Candle Arc is live, and you need to be aware that it may trigger at any point you or I am in the field. Athena will keep you in the loop."

You nodded. "Ziv?"

"Not mission critical. And his skills aren't needed for this one." Unsaid was the fact that if both of you were trying to take Lao alive, no one would be watching his six. Ziv wasn't good enough in combat to be left unsupervised, yet.

"Jesse and Genji have both agreed to take her alive. They'll do their best."

"That simplifies things." Lacroix nodded. "Those two are more...enthusiastic in combat. I was concerned that would be an issue."

You didn't say they owed you. And you didn't say they were doing it for you. All of it was true; none of it needed to be spoken. "I have no reason to doubt their sincerity."

"And you would know. Because I doubt you're leaving any aspect of this operation to chance." Lacroix lounged back in his chair. "I finished with our little DGSE infiltrator. It took some work, but she sang an interesting song."

"Mercenary?"

"Hired by Talon, yes. Had some other aliases. Quite the little assassin she was. High bounties in four allied countries." Lacroix smirked. "It irked her terribly that some no-name trainee spy took her down. Thought I killed her partner too. I gave that no-name trainee spy credit.
It's much more fun when you bruise their egos."

Some people enjoyed their work too much. You rolled your eyes, because even if you were that no-name trainee spy, you didn't particularly enjoy playing with your victims.

"We fielded some questions for the English and DGSE and sent the recordings for posterity. Ana's idea, to keep relations smooth. Because we weren't transferring custody, not with all the other Talon plants infesting intelligence agencies. She knew too much."

"We?" You narrowed your eyes.

"Oh, Agent Mihret didn't tell you? He helped." Lacroix didn't even have to look at your face to know your reaction. "He has a stronger stomach than you give him credit for."

Ziv hadn't said a goddamn thing. Of course he wouldn't, that little shit. "I'm not worried about his fortitude. I think he's three steps away from being a serial killer." You had to keep your hand from gravitating toward your tanto. "Why encourage it?"

"You don't honestly think that, Chanceux. Quit attempting to mother the boy. It's embarrassing."

"I don't trust that you have our best interests in mind," you said. "That's all."

"Mihret may never have your skills in battle," Lacroix said blandly. "But he's very competent and methodical. In fact, if you ignore his constant wise-cracking, he is a very disciplined agent."

"That's really big "if" to ignore."

"Interrogation work doesn't bother him as much as it bothers you, Chanceux. Take my word for it."

You ground your teeth. "It should bother him."

"Like killing should bother you? Don't be such a hypocrite, it's both unbecoming and terribly cliché. Mihret didn't enjoy the act, but he handled it. Especially since she was trying to capture him. It helped that she pulled a gun on you."

You sat back in your chair. "I don't trust that you're not pushing him too hard."

"And I know you won't push him at all, Chanceux. You have a little too much Gabriel in you."

You ignored the innuendo. "You know he wants to impress you."

"I think we both know what he wants, Chanceux. And that is not your concern," Lacroix said firmly, signaling an end to that line of discussion.

"You be careful with him, Lacroix. I'm not joking."

"Your concern is touching, Chanceux. But I'm not joking either. Leave it alone. You are in no position to throw stones."

"It's not the same." You glared at him, knowing that you were fast enough to break his jaw.
"Isn't it? How are things with Gabriel and Jack? I hear you're being "borrowed" by Overwatch." Lacroix gave you a self-satisfied look, content in his own verbal and immoral superiority.

You crossed your arms, getting his message loud and clear. "Yeah. Funny thing that." You finished your cigarette.

"I'm sure you'll look fine in the uniform." Lacroix gave you a cool smile that was too biting to be flirtatious. "And it expands your roster of potential Candle Arc missions. Yes, I'm fine bringing Overwatch rank and file into it. They know me by reputation." Lacroix's pleasant smile didn't fool you for a moment. "They won't step out of line if we say we need our target alive."

"For some reason, Jack and Gabriel want me in more combat missions. I'm game, but it's an odd divergence from usual fare."

Lacroix shrugged. "Such is the nature of growth. Don't begrudge Mihret his opportunities. After we finish Candle Arc, I have some far less dramatic operations for you to undertake. Amélie and Mihret may join us."

You hadn't realized his wife was getting in on the action. Did that have to do with Ziv? Or was she a thrill seeker too?

"You blend fine in seedy undercover operations. Amélie can educate you on how to conduct yourself in more...reputable venues."

"Oh, so I'll be passing for an expensive whore soon?" You rolled your eyes. "Soon" is such a relative term," Lacroix said, casually picking up another cigarette .

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone had a good vacation. Short fluff chapter. Because Genji/Reader friendship has its many weaknesses. In my head-canon, Blackwatch Genji is kind of a mess and while he's not an awful person, he's not being good to himself which in turn leads him to being not very good to his friends. Or maybe Genji's just a shit and I like writing him that way.

My Athena head-canon is a lot like my Mass Effect EDI head canon. She's there to help and it's going to be awkward as fuck. But kind of endearing because she is not the damn MS Office paperclip.

Next chapter we'll be back to our regularly scheduled violence. Also, still struggling with a damn smut chapter. It has taken over a week to write and reshape and it's pissing me off.

In IRL news, my cousin and I got home after Christmas Eve at his sister's and found that one of my dogs had broken out of his kennel and eaten half a pound of dark chocolate out of someone else's Christmas present. So off the the Emergency Vet we went. $600 later, my stupid baby is fine, but fucking hell. I've gone my entire life without going to the emergency vet and then this month we've gone twice. It's expensive.
Starting a job hunt next month. Wish me luck. As a grown up, I've been working "below" my ability, but my area doesn't have a huge number of jobs and I've been doing retail for awhile now. I have a degree, but life happened and I had to move home and take care of family, so retail gave me the flexibility I needed to do that. I love my coworkers, but money and I don't have the tolerance for bad customers. My filter has been falling off and frankly, I'm not sure I trust myself to behave any more. Also, money. Because my dogs seem intent on driving me into debt.

Love comments. I like talking to you guys. Seriously, the feedback makes my day.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Overwatch missions involve a lot more explosions. And teamwork. You definitely prefer the explosions to teamwork.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When you got back to the office, Gabriel was fuming. "Fucking Morrison and his pet brain trust. I'm going to skin that gorilla and make a goddamn rug. That boy is next, Lucky. You can't protect his belligerent ass forever. One of our own helping develop this abomination-

Oh, he'd figured out Athena. That was quick.

"She's blocked out of Blackwatch still, right?"

"She keeps giving me mission reports in the hallways and offering to "help." Gabriel glowered at the door. "I can't leave without her spewing facts at me like a know-it-all kindergartner."

"Lacroix is using her. Well, mostly to record data for Operation Candle Arc. I have no idea why. You'd think a spy would want as little information left around as possible, but he seems OK with the idea. Something about AIs being more reliable than most people. And I thought I was cynical."

"You'll never compare with Gérard's world weariness. You aren't French enough," Gabriel muttered.

"Saw I needed to get fitted for Overwatch battle blues? Seriously?"

"Jack's got a run he wants you on today; briefing at 1500 hours. Hostage situation in an Irish paramilitary base outside Belfast. Surprisingly, no Irish factions are involved. It's some AI researchers and a contingent of omnics. Go see Torby before you suit up. He had some upgrades for you."

You blinked. "Who's going?"

"That's part of the briefing," Gabriel said dryly. "Now get."

You turned to go, and he caught your wrist.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"That I'm supposed to be going?"

He yanked on your collar and kissed you hard, your breath catching in your throat.

"Kick some ass. Make us look good. Come back safe." His eyes glittered. "That's an
"Not sure how you aren't dead yet. That carbine had a shit rate of fire and the bullets were way too small."

"...I figure you know that size isn't everything, Torby."

"I'll tell Reyes you said that," he said smugly, and it seemed that Jack was wrong. Even Torby knew and what the hell?

"Didn't realize he made you so insecure," you said, tilting your head back, rolling your eyes like you misunderstood his jab.

"You are not that dense," Torby snorted.

"So what's this gun do? Shoot rabid radioactive kittens at my enemies?" You picked up the sleek gray carbine. It had a similar shape and weight to your usual gun, so the feel was familiar.

"Those rounds are still in development," Torby said dryly. "Can't get the kittens to stop after the initial kill. Too many friendly fire incidents."

You snorted. "I wouldn't even be surprised."

"This is equipped to fire EMP and detonation rounds; the barrel can handles the heat and extra wear. Rate of fire is increased, because you don't hold back when you face down omnis, you understand Lucky? You aren't sniping here, you're shredding them before they can get to you, because I don't care how fancy your knifework is, your little pigsticker isn't going to penetrate their armor."

"I want a lightsaber," you said. "Just a little one. Please?"

Torby did not look amused.

"Genji already asked, didn't he? He's better at sword work," you sighed. "But a little laser dagger? It wouldn't be too much work-"

"And then you'd get up close and smashed before it ever got used. No. Now shut up and pay attention. This gun will overheat if you don't balance your rate of fire and the specialty ammo. It can fire lead rounds all day. But if you straight fire more than clip of EMPs, it'll get weird. Do half a clip of incendiary or detonation rounds, give it two minutes to cool down. If you don't...well don't come crying to me that the gun blew up in your face and took out an eye."

"...Gotta." You studied the preloaded clips. Torby had given you two of each: incendiary, detonation, and EMP. "This shit has to be expensive."

"Right about the time these were in development, I got a budget increase." Torby gave you a look. "You going to act like you don't know about that?"
You actually didn't. But you could guess. "Everyone's been really impressed by the prostheses. Obviously Lacroix likes the idea of me as a Swiss army knife." Deflection was your coping method, because you did not want to think about what Jack and Gabriel were doing behind the scenes.

"You watch yourself with that slimy bastard. He's worse than Reyes," Torby said forcefully.

"Totally," you agreed. "So what's this?" You gestured at the bodysuit on the table.

"Stealth suit," he said.

"Like chameleon patterning or does it actually turn invisible?" Your eyes lit up. Because the things you could do with either of those...

"It's not an invisibility cloak, stop fantasizing," Torby scowled at you.

"Obviously not. It's a catsuit, not a cloak." You grinned at him.

"It's a stealth suit, made specifically to conceal you from omnic combat sensors. They use infrared; it takes less energy, and is easier for their hardware to visualize than colors on the visible light spectrum. Humans can still see your stupid ass and shoot it."

"So does it run extra cold? Can I keep ice cream sandwiches in my pockets?"

"You're so dumb," Torby said in disgust. "How have you survived this long?"

"I'm kidding. I'm sure it stores heat, maintains ambient temperatures, and either has settings to vent when its safe or reuses the heat to power the stealth generator."

"That's an exceptionally simplified explanation, but you've got the idea." Torby looked slightly less outraged. "The suit has been combat-tested. It's fine, of course. Added some other bells and whistles. Need feedback on them."

"Always happy to be your human test subject," you said, studying the suit. It was a dark navy verging on black, close-fitting, and the outer coating felt like nylon. "No armoring."

"You wear it under your armor. The suit doesn't just hide your heat signature, it blurs your silhouette to the sensors - even if your temperature isn't in human ranges, they can still see your shape and figure it out. I've seen them take potshots at test dummies, just to be thorough."

"How long does it run?"

"Working on the balance. Optimally, it'll be self-sufficient. But right now, it'll run out of power after about six hours of pure stealth. If you extend the field to cover one person, it'll halve that. Using the attached comm units, jammer fields, and hacking utilities will reduce that time."

Torby set three metal fingers in front of you. "Nothing you have right now is suited for going up against omnics. And to be honest, at that size, you're asking for a miracle. These have a single-usage electrical pulse. It should disable anything smaller than a bastion. It might cook your augments, depending on what you use it on. Make sure that single pulse-finger is the only thing touching the metal when you set it off, otherwise, you're just going to fry yourself."

"...This does not sound safe," you said.
"Which is why you are testing it," Torby said smugly.

"...Do I have other options?"

"I'm still working on the lasers," Torby said. "But those won't stop exploding when they overheat."

The stealth suit went on under your armor in place of the usual rashguard and underarmor. You put your hair back and studied the Overwatch combat armor. It was heavier than your gear, but it could take more direct hits. Everything was such a bright blue: armor, shin guards, boots. It drew the eye and you weren't used to going into combat with a big colorful sign that basically said "shoot at me." The lack of a face-blocking reinforced collar also bothered you.

You requisitioned an Overwatch blue shemagh, and tied the scarf in a triangle over your jaw like an Old West bandit. That would work. You pulled the scarf off and tucked it in your pocket. The carbine latched onto your back, and you were suited up. You'd have to get someone to tighten your straps, but you were ready.

"Agent Strike, Strike Commander Morrison is requesting your presence in the ops-conference room." Athena chimed in.

"Shit. What time is it?"

"1510 hours."

Fuck. Your first official Overwatch mission and you were undeniably late. "On my way." You tore out of the locker room, down the hall, and across the complex, because Strike Commander Morrison was a stickler for punctuality and military precision.

You could run in the armor. That was good to know.

You reached the conference room in good time, straightened your collar, and opened the door.

Seven heads swiveled to stare at you. Jack stood at the head of the table, his arms crossed, eyes hard. He took in your appearance, nostrils flaring.

"So nice of you to finally join us, Agent Strike." His tone held an edge and you knew better than to push.

"Sorry sir. Just acquired the new gear." You saluted. "Won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," he said sternly, and turned back to the screen. You took a seat at the table, discretely checking out the other agents. You'd seen them around, knew a few names, but you didn't really know them. Agent Jemison was in charge of this squad. She was thin and dark, hair pulled back in dozens of neat braids. Her face was pinched, and looked unused to smiling. You folded your hands and listened to Jack's rundown of the situation.

The AI researchers were handling some kind of processing amplifier. The omnis were mostly humanoid, with a few larger units sprinkled in. There were no demands, but it was
speculated that the omnics were after the tech. Security had been massacred and the researchers were out of supplies. Belfast had finally agreed to Overwatch support, but the chance of political blowback was high. This reeked of a politicians and backroom plots, but you didn’t say anything. Jack had to know the ramifications already.

You studied the compound map. The complex was laid out in a plus sign, one building at each cardinal point, and a courtyard in the center. The hostages were in the northernmost building, with the attackers concentrated on the westernmost building. There were gates at the south and west. They’d hacked the of the southern building, so the turrets and other defenses were arrayed against you. You could slip in, break the line, and open the gates. It'd be easier if you had a hacker, but you'd have to work in tandem to keep them safe. You pulled up the squad dossiers on your tablet. This was Operation Cobblestone Dust. Overwatch had an automated naming system. Ugh. Agent Shoal was the short red-headed woman in her thirties. She had a sharp face, and pale blue eyes. Something about her reminded you of wolf.

"Do you have something to share with the rest of us, agent?" The commander's pointed question had you straightening in your seat and you felt everyone's eyes on you.

"I can get someone through the southern building, and shut down the defenses. If Agent Shoal can seize control or deactivate the original defenses, we don't have to lay siege. My hacking isn't good enough," you said, looking at Shoal, so she knew you weren't taking a potshot at her skill. "It'd cut time down considerably, sir." You kept your face neutral, fully aware that as the newcomer, you were going to look like a know-it-all. Well, you planned ops in Blackwatch; you weren't a rookie.

Jack studied your face. "How?"

"I can cloak one person," you said.

"Too risky; that might be how you do things in Blackwatch, but we're willing to take our time," Jack said coolly.

You blinked. Because you wanted to argue. You were used to arguing with Gabriel, but you couldn't do that to Strike Commander Morrison. "Understood, sir," you said tightly.

"I can do it, sir," Agent Shoal said after a moment. "Agent Strike's plan isn't a bad one. Minimal risk if I stay in her stealth field. And then everyone else is fresh for the real fight."

Jack crossed his arms. "Your plan, agent?"

"Each building is a closed network. I can shut it down if we get close enough to the server, or I can reopen a back door and try forcing them under my control. I can't say which way without knowing what I'm dealing with, but destroying the server is the safest bet. It'd be a practice run for the hostage building." Shoal looked at you. "If I'm hacking, I'm not shooting, and they'll have left something to guard the access point."

"I can handle a few indoor omnics," you said. You even had grenades. It just wasn't optimal.

Jack gave you a hard look, and there was nothing of your lover there. He dominated the room with his presence, and even though he had his attention on you, the rest of the squad was watching him. "Can you keep my agent safe, Strike?"

You met his cool blue eyes, mouth curving in an insolent grin. "Of course."
"Not smart to be late," Shoal told you while she helped you adjust your new armor on the transport.

"Yeah, I know." You shrugged. "Had to test out the new gear. Took longer than I thought."

"Seriously, it pisses him off. Everyone on the outside thinks Morrison is some kind of cotton candy fluff bunny that got the position because he's a Captain America stand-in. No, he's a hardass bastard, and you're lucky we're on a time crunch, because he would've ripped you a new one, especially since you're one of those undisciplined Blackwatch cowboys."

"There is only one undisciplined cowboy in Blackwatch, and I'm not him."

"It's a metaphor, Strike." But Shoal grinned at you. "You look halfway respectable in combat blues. Trying to transition to the heroic side?"

"Hell no." You began reloading your clips. "I don't have the discipline to be a real soldier."

Shoal laughed at that.

You spaced some of the detonation rounds in between your regular cartridges. They had a two meter radius and you didn't need to fire a straight clip of them in close quarters. "Got told this was a teambuilding exercise. They said there'd be marshmallows and kumbayas afterward. I like marshmallows."

"I think they lied to you, Strike." Shoal studied your gun. "Nothing marshmallow about Morrison's runs."

"Figured." Your knee bounced up and down, excitement already starting to build.

"You're packing some interesting tech." Shoal jerked her chin forward.

"I'm one of Lindholm's guinea pigs. So this could be really cool, or it could kill us all. Maybe both." You paused. "Call me "Lucky." Agent Strike sounds like an asshole." You were one, kind of. But you didn't need to give off that impression.

"Is it true what they say about you, Lucky?" Shoal said it with a smile, but there was a tension in her shoulders. She was all edges and angles, but short-waisted and broad-boned. Her red hair was close cropped. She looked like she meant business.

"What are they saying now?" You asked, glancing past her at Jack, who sat alone at the head of the transport. He was in full Commander mode, studying schematics, assault rifle across his lap.

"That you're Morrison's bodyguard." There was a half hitch in her voice, and you were pretty sure that wasn't what she was going to ask originally.

"I've done the detail, still in the rotation." That was as good as a "yes." Because being Jack's bodyguard was a good cover for your other activities. And Paris wasn't a secret. "But that's
not my reason for riding along today."

Shoal nodded. "That makes me feel better about this escort mission. If you can guard Morrison, you can probably keep me alive."

"I wouldn't have volunteered if I couldn't do it," you said dryly.

"Well... Blackwatch has a reputation for playing fast and loose with the rules."

"Sure, but we don't fuck over our own." You said it casually, but your grin was too tense to be comfortable. You glanced at Jack, and found him watching you. You gave a jaunty salute, and his expression darkened.

"Don't do that. He takes this shit seriously," Shoal hissed.

"Oops," you said, turning it into a finger wave.

Jack narrowed his eyes at you.

"God, you're a terrible soldier," Shoal muttered.

"But I'm a damn good agent," you said, a little defensively.

The complex was smaller than you expected. Each building was about six stories, and grouped closely together. Less terrain to cover, but it would be an oubliette if you just marched on in. There were turrets just outside the gate, and you weren't sure what formation you were supposed to hold. You just stuck to Shoal, surveying the grounds.

The other squad members didn't quite ignore you, but Shoal was the only one making friendly conversation with you, and that was because she needed you to keep her alive. Well, you weren't here to make friends. You were here to rescue some scientists and kill robots.

"You're up Agent Shoal." Jack frowned at you. "No unnecessary risks, you hear, Agent Strike?" His eyes focused on you, and anyone else would assume he was worried about leaving Shoal in your care.

"Understood, sir." You put extra emphasis on the word, just for him and he stiffened.

"Cut the crap, agent," he growled.

You were pushing too hard. You schooled your face, trying not to look obnoxious. "As you say, sir."

You flipped on your generator, and motioned for Shoal to come closer. You handed her a blue button.

"Changes to red as you get out of range. You want to stay pretty close. Like, you're glad I took a shower this morning, close."

"I'm glad whenever my squadmates embrace high standards of personal hygiene," Shoal said, and you found yourself liking her.
You waited while she keyed something into a device slotted in her armor.

"OK, we're going to have to get closer. Probably basement level. Schematics say most of the sensors use infrared. Can't vouch for the terrorists- think they're more sophisticated."

You grinned at the turrets. Because you were just going to walk up between them. Looping your arm through Shoal's, you strolled forward, noting the turrets didn't move as you got closer. Oh good, the stealth generator worked. Your plan might actually succeed.

"Are you like this on all your missions?"

"Oh no, just when I have an audience. Come on, now everyone's going to buy you drinks and ask whether or not I was hitting on you. Free drinks!"

"Are you hitting on me?" She asked, turning her head slowly.

"God no, that'd be an abuse of power. You're relying on me to keep you alive. There are all kinds of consent issues there. So no offense, I'm not hitting on you."

"You're a trip, Lucky," she said, sounding amused.

You released her arm as soon as you entered the building. The foyer was fancy; the floor was a mosaic bearing the company logo and the walls were lined with shattered glass cases displaying numerous awards inside. The bloodstains on the floor were a few days old, and you wondered what they'd done with the bodies.

You tied the scarf over the lower half of your face. The anonymity was soothing. Even if you weren't fighting Talon, you didn't need to broadcast your identity. Shoal gave you a concerned look, but didn't comment.

The buildings were laid out in circles, and you stuck to the stairs, noting that the cameras weren't tracking you either. Torby did good work.

"We haven't set off any alarms, and it seems that nothing has noticed us." Shoal kept her eyes on her screen. "I can't untangle whatever they're running. Going to have to hit the server room. Basement, southwest corner."

"Taking point. You stay back." You unhooked your new carbine and nudged the door open. The walls down here were a battleship gray and wires dipped out of the ceiling.

Something hummed along your fingers and you tensed.

"Activity spiked, I think they've noticed something's up."

"Yeah," you said. "Stairwell clear?"

"Affirmative."

You crept forward, listening for treads or clanking. When you heard nothing, you assumed they were humanoid models. Shoal moved behind you, too loud. You knew telling her to stomp quieter wouldn't really work, so you bit your tongue.

The first wave were a dozen small drones, hovering in the air. You shot them down, like expensive clay pigeons. Shoal didn't even have her gun drawn, too busy keying away at her datapad.
"There's something big ahead."

You palmed a grenade. "Anything flanking us?"

"Not yet," Shoal said tightly.

You found the double doors from where all the wires flowed.

"Got a good access point?"

"I don't know what they've done here," she admitted sheepishly. "You might be better off blowing the thing."

"Athena, you listening?"

"I am present, Agent Strike." Shoal jumped and you shook your head. Of course they'd integrated her already. Winston was a terrible liar and Ziv would do it just to spite you. "Any advice you can give?"

"According to Agent Shoal's data, they're running a variation of the Inverse Fourier Transformation cipher encryption. I can brute force it, but that'll take time and they'll lock onto my signal and you by association."

"I don't know what half that means," you sighed. "Can I blow things up?"

"Feel free to blow things up. I will inform the Strike Commander." There was a pause. "I would refrain from using the EMP grenades here. They might short out your generator."

"Oh definitely," you said. "I'm not that dumb."

"Your mission history demonstrates a high level of reckless behavior, agent. I thought it best to warn you."

"Ready?" You asked Shoal, ignoring that unsolicited assessment of your skills.

Shoal nodded.

You pushed the door open, with your gun. Three bipedal omnics opened fire and you slid to the side, dragging Shoal with you.

Going low, you hit the door again and rolled the grenade forward. Two seconds and boom! The room stunk of ozone and melting plastics. You swung back around, pushing the door open enough to sweep the room with your carbine. One of the explosive rounds hit the server units, detonating in a shower of sparks. The omnics went down, though they probably got off a distress signal. Well, they already knew you were here. You stepped into the room, and made a sweep. One of the omnics kept trying to raise its arm, the motion repeating itself over and over with stuttering grace. You shot it. You made sure you hit their processing cores, because you did not need zombie robots rising up to get you later.

The lights flickered and you rolled your eyes as the power went out.

"Did we blow a fuse or is this something more serious?"

"You took out the server and now the backup generator. The buildings defenses are neutralized. There may be more terrorists around, so don't let your guard down," Athena said, and you wondered if Ziv had programmed her to nag you. He would do that, that little shit.
"Good job, agents. We're moving out." Jack's voice came clearly through the comms. "Shoal and Strike, you catch up with Jemison's squad. Get the hostages out. I'm taking the other half the squad to clear the western building."

"Understood," you said.

The basement was pitch black, but Shoal's screen lit up the darkness. You flicked on the light on the end of your gun. Torby had done a nice job with this. You were definitely keeping this upgrade.

You traced your way back to the stairwell, Shoal following behind you.

"Entering the northern building. Encountering heavy fire." A woman's alto voice said over the comms. "Hurry it up, Strike."

"En route," you said and began to jog.

Back on the first floor, you cut through the building. Windows ensured you got enough natural light to navigate. The suit hummed and you glanced toward the western building. You could hear the firefight and you wished you'd gotten to see Jack in action. But orders were orders. You waited to cross the courtyard, crouching beside a statue, to get a better look at the layout. The first floor had a lot of windows, and the omnics were using them tactically. The courtyard had shit cover and you didn't want to use grenades with hostages in the building. You swapped out clips, going for the clip interspersed with EMP rounds. Your carbine was a midrange weapon, but it had telescopic sights. You were about three hundred yards out. You could still sharpshoot.

"Hold up," you told Shoal.

"What are you waiting for?"

You knelt and surveyed the windows. There were about a dozen omnics, and you angled for the ones closest to Jemison's people. There were only three of them, but they held the defensive line.

"EMP rounds live," you said, and fired.

The first pair went down convulsing. You'd only scored a direct hit on one, but the apparently the ammo pulsed on impact. You needed to keep these long range, especially with the suit and your fingers.


You swung your gun up and lined up the shot. You pulled the trigger and an omnic fell out the second story window.

"First floor, far west. Jemmy's at a bad angle for that one."

It took two shots, but you had the satisfaction of watching two more drop. The EMP rounds would fry more sensitive equipment and possibly disable an omnic, but if they had hardened armoring and good shielding, the effects wouldn't be permanent. You still didn't want to get caught in the pulse radius.

With less hostile suppressing fire, Jemison's crew began to advance. You got to your feet and broke into a run. No one reported any enemy snipers, but there was no point in tempting fate.
Shoal was hot on your heels.

"Light'em up, Shoal!" Jemison ordered.

An omnic at the door tensed and lurched forward as a blue jolt of electricity coiled around it. Light burst around its chest and it dropped, still wiggling. Jemison shot it, and stepped over the still seizing chassis.

"About time you got here," Jemison said to Shoal.

"Spotting for Strike. She's got some cool toys," Shoal said.

"Engineers," Jemison said, rolling her eyes. "What can you tell me about the facilities?"

"Hostages are on the fifth floor. There are a few hostiles left, but I can't track them."

Jemison looked at you. "You good to scout ahead?"

"Sure," you said, studying her face. She was older than you and career military. You still didn't get the welcoming vibe, but she didn't seem hateful either. It didn't matter; you worked better solo.

Stealth field still up, but no longer covering Shoal, you went up the stairs and through the front door. This building was another clone of the southern building, but with less trophy cases. You took the stairs.

"Progress report?" Jack's voice came through fuzzy.

"Eliminated the first defensive line. Strike is scouting ahead."

There was a long silence, and you wondered if the communication had been lost. You paused on the landing, cracking open the door. There were four omnics moving around, and were those bombs? Shit.

"Strike here. Got omnics with explosives on the second floor. Heading up to check on the hostages."

Jack and Jemison swore.

"Right behind you, Strike. Hostage extraction is priority." Jemison was breathing heavy.

You went up to the fifth floor, and slipped into the hall. It was quiet, and you didn't like that at all.

"Please don't-" There was the sound of metal on flesh and you ran toward it in time to see a woman in a white lab coat drop, blood erupting from her throat.

There were half a dozen bodies on the ground, and you counted five live scientists huddled in a corner. A large bipedal omnic stood with its back to you, it was over two meters tall and wielding a broad, slightly curved blade. You didn't recognize the model, but you weren't an expert. It advanced on the civilians.

"Get down!" You fired an EMP round, hoping none of them had augments or heart conditions.

The sword-wielder stumbled, and turned toward you. You fired again, but it had hardened
armor. You eyed the red node in the center of its head and shot again, this time shattering the panel. It dropped and you checked the bleeding woman on the ground. She was dead, and as was anyone not on their feet.

"Shit!" Jemison slid into the room, eyes on the carnage. "We need to move, people."

"Athena, you get a visual on this thing?" You asked.

"Agent Shoal, can you get a picture of the omnic, Agent Strike fought?"

"What the hell? Haven't seen that model before," Shoal looked at the bloody sword. "That's Chinese...Let me run it through the translator: Red Pole? That's a sword. I don't get it."

You swore, because you knew exactly what that was. "We need to get out. Now."

Jemison nodded curtly. "Survivors secured. Move it people!" She shouted at the shell-shocked civilians. "Hustle!" You steadied a man as he slipped on the blood of his coworkers.

Something grabbed your ankle and you looked down, in time to get thrown across the room. The omnic climbed back onto its feet.

"Strike!" Shoal started to reach for you, but Jemison yanked her back. "Use your tech, idiot!"

You hit the wall hard, and something cracked, but your armor absorbed the brunt of it. The impact still knocked the air out of you, and it took you a moment to stagger back to your feet. You hadn't released your gun and you brought it up, head spinning.

The omnic had already turned its back on you and advanced on Shoal and Jemison.

"Get the civilians out! I'll catch up!" You snarled, and began firing. The omnic stopped, its head swiveling around to look at you. You were grateful for the scarf across your face. Not only did it absorb the blood, it masked your identity. And you did not need the On Sing Triad to have pictures of you. Because a Red Pole? That was a goddamn Chinese mafia rank, usually the head of their military wing. This would bear looking into, once you got out.

It charged you, and your gun didn't have the stopping power to halt it.

Shoal lit it up with her cyber-magic, and that staggered it, but it was locked on you, and you yanked your left glove off.

"We have to move, Shoal!" Jemison sounded far away, and you couldn't focus on that.

You dropped as it swung the sword, and before it had the chance to make a second pass you jumped up and hit its chest, metal middle finger pressed against the chassis. Fuck you too.

The resulting light show blinded you and you heard your stealth suit short out. You pushed, smelling burnt wires and hot copper, and something heavy hit the floor. Gradually, the spots faded and your vision returned. You blinked several times, colors not quite right in the room.

"Strike? Strike? You alive?" Your comm crackled to life, echoing Shoal's voice. The shielded radio was more durable than the delicate tech of the suit.

"Fuck!" You rubbed your eyes with your right hand. The Red Pole omnic was down, and
you weren't sticking around to see if it was getting back up. "Yeah, give me a minute."

"You don't have a minute! Those explosives are getting ready to bring down the building. You need to get out now."

You limped to the stairwell, and that's when the first round of detonations started. Fire engulfed the floor below you, spreading fast in popping bursts. What the hell kind of explosives were they using? You weren't taking that route.

"Agent Strike." Jack's voice was cool and measured over the comm. "I have you in my sights. Head to the roof."

The building wasn't falling like it should. Instead the fire was burning far too hot and you dragged yourself up the stairs to the roof access. You climbed out, smoke already stinging your eyes.

"You need to take a running jump. Get as much airtime as you can," Jack said. "I'll tell you when."

You were only six stories up. You could probably survive that fall. Hell, if they'd said something earlier, you could have jumped from the fifth floor. You were going to break something for sure.

"Understood," you said. You backed up.

"When," he said, his voice strained.

You gave yourself a running start, your ribs, back, and lungs burning as you forced yourself forward. Sprinting hard, you hit the edge of the building and threw yourself into the air, cycling your arms and legs for all the good that would do. You were too far away to hit the southern roof, and you tried to relax; impact while tensed would cause more damage. You were descending now, the ground speeding toward you.

Then something collided with you midair.

You spun on contact, and it was Jack. He caught you against his chest, one hand seizing your collar, the other looping around your waist. "Now, Athena." he said. Something roared beneath you and the two of you hurtled forward in a crooked arc. The roof of the eastern building approached rapidly.

Jack wrapped an arm around the back of your head and turned, so that he hit first, grunting as he absorbed the brunt of the landing. You both rolled across the roof, momentum eventually giving out as you smashed against the wall of the roof access stairwell. You ended up underneath Jack, his hands cradling your head.

The two of you lay there, breathing heavy. Jack hugged you against him, head resting on your shoulder. You were going to hurt so much later.

"Holy shit- You both alive, Commander?" Jemison's voice crackled through the comms.

"Yeah. We'll be down after we clear the building." Jack pressed his forehead to yours. He smelled like cordite, ozone, and sweat. "You're a goddamn idiot, Lucky."

"Wasn't my fault," you muttered, your good hand reaching up to stroke his face. "Thanks for the rescue."
He sighed against you. "We'll talk about it later." He groaned. "That was a rough landing, baby."

"Better than it could have been." Your eyes fell shut and you concentrated on breathing, and the fact you were in one piece on solid ground and not a pile of smashed up bones and meat on the cobblestoned courtyard.

"Yeah." Jack didn't let go of you, and you exhaled slowly, pain flickering around the edges of your perception.

"We can't stay like this," you said regretfully.

Jack rolled back onto his heels. You glanced down at his boots, looking for some indication of the tech. "Rocket boots?" Because you wanted a pair.

"No, experimental speed augments." He gestured to the straps on his legs. "Athena overclocked them for the jump. They're fried now." He looked out over toward the northern building. It had collapsed on itself, white flames licking the sky while columns of ugly black smoke poured upward.

"What the hell?" You climbed to your feet. "Bombs don't normally work like that."

"We're going to need techs on site," Jack said grimly. "A lot of things aren't adding up." He opened the door to the roof access, fluorescent lights flickering in the white hallway.

You stepped in after him, and gasped when he pushed you against the wall. Jack yanked your scarf down and kissed you hard, gloved hand in your hair. You groaned as he ground against you.

"That was too close," he said, in your ear.

"I know." You dragged him back down into the kiss.

"Going to pound you stupid when we get back to base, baby. Don't think I'm overlooking all that attitude. Just because you look good in the uniform doesn't mean you can get away with being insubordinate." He bit your neck, eyes hard and bright.

"Jack-" Your breathing grew ragged.

"That's "Commander" to you," he said, nipping your lower lip. "Going to have to drill rank into you, agent."

"Going to drill something into me." You gripped the lapels of his coat, smirking up at him.

Jack growled. "Keep talking. I'll take it out on your ass later."

"Yes, sir," you grinned. "Is now the time to tell you how hot you are when you're all demanding and bossy?"

"Later." Jack stroked your hair. "It's taking all my control not to push you up against this wall and fuck you right here. This building hasn't been cleared yet."

"Right." You exhaled slowly, wincing as you took a deep breath.

Jack noticed your hunched posture. "You're hurt."
"Got thrown by an omnic." You glanced down at your metal fingers. The middle one was
darkened and immobile. Fortunately, your other fingers were still functioning. "Used one of
Torby's pulse prostheses. Shorted out my suit too."

Jack massaged his forehead. "Stay behind me. I'll clear the way."

"I can shoot."

"You're not my bodyguard this time. So stay behind me," he repeated. "That's a fucking
order, agent."

"Yes, sir." You tied your scarf back around your face, because that was the only way you
could conceal your grin.

The top floor was clear, but you found a nest of a dozen more bipedal omnics on the fifth
floor. It was a relief that they weren't Red Poles. They had weapons in hand, and Jack got off the
first shot, as fast as you remembered. His gun was far more powerful than yours, bullets shredding
through omnic armor. You'd be jealous, except the recoil on it would dislocate your shoulder.

"Two o'clock," he said. As a pair of bipedal omnics rounded the corner. Jack aimed high,
and you went low, your left hand not quite as responsive as you needed it to be.

"You bring me to the nicest places," you said, reloading your gun when the omnics were
nothing but smoking components.

"Stick with me and you'll see the world. It'll be the bad half, there won't be anything good
to eat, and you'll probably have to shoot your way out of the hotel, but it'll be real experience."

You laughed and it hurt. The pain was getting worse, but you just gritted your teeth and
focused on shooting. "This is why me and Gabriel should book the accommodations; can't leave it
up to the farm boy."

Jack snorted and you swept the fourth floor. Your eyes fell on a rumpled blanket and an
open window. It could be nothing, but you sniffed the room. Just fresh air, but the temperature
wasn't quite as cold as it was outdoors; the window hadn't been open all day. You knelt at the
window, lining up your gun. The placement was discrete and you had a wide vantage of the
courtyard. You could see Jemison's squad holding the defensive line; they were down two people
and you assumed they'd escorted the hostages back to the ship.

"I think we have human sniper on the grounds," you said after a moment. Because an
omnic wouldn't need a blanket, would it?

Jack studied the setup. "Possibly. Nothing we can do now." He paused, hitting his comm
button "Jemison, there might be a sniper loose. Keep your people in cover."

"Surprised there aren't more snipers. This op is wonky as fuck, sir."

"Keep an eye on those scientists. I don't know if any of them were supposed to make it out
alive to begin with," you said over the comm link.
Jack narrowed his eyes at you. "Careful how much you share."

"Whoever did this had inside help, Jack. I've done enough infiltrations to know that. Your team needs to be hyperaware." Because someone might take the extra mile to ensure their silence. Or maybe one of those civilians wasn't quite so harmless. You rubbed your side. "We're going to have to debrief them before we release them. Like let Lacroix loose on them debriefing."

"Not your call, agent," Jack said, his tone warning.

"Just my advice, sir." You followed him down. The first floor had some remnants of hacked security, but you took out the turrets and drones with no problem.

"You holding up OK, agent?" Jack asked, as you hit the front doors. He was distancing himself, and while you understood it was necessary, it bothered you more than you wanted to admit.

"Hurting," you said, lifting your carbine. "But I'll manage."

He nodded curtly. "Keep me informed."

You kept your eyes high, because now would be the time for a fucking ambush, either to clean up the surviving civilians, or because some bigshot Overwatch hero had his boots on the ground.

Jack strode through the courtyard, gun held across his chest. You limped behind him, eyes darting between the western and southern buildings.

"That was some jump, sir," Jemison said as Jack entered the southern building.

"Lucky!" Shoal was in your face, drowning out Jack's response. "Shit, I'm sorry, we had to herd the civilians out-"

You shrugged, because you'd told them to go. Jesse or Genji wouldn't have left you behind. But this was Overwatch and they weren't quite your people. "Commander came back for me. No worries."

"That was a pretty epic save," Shoal paused. "Guess he wasn't going to let you bite it after Paris."

You laughed at that, because what else could you do? "He'd have done it for anyone. Morrison's overly decent like that."


"You can owe me," you said, because you didn't feel like having this conversation. "I like whiskey." You trudged out of the building toward the transport. You hurt and you were beat and now would be the perfect time to attack. Heart speeding up, you raised your gaze to the blacked out southern building. Your eyes flicked to the back of Jack's head and then the windows.

You lifted your carbine on instinct, and stared down the sights. A few inches of barrel protruded from the window. "Sniper!" You shouted as you fired, glass shattering overhead. Jack whirled, gun raised.

You took off back into the building, because while you weren't sure if you'd killed him, you'd probably hit him.
"Damnit, agent!" You heard Jack swear, but he didn't order you back, which was good, because you just would have ignored him. You hit the darkened stairwell, leaving the light off on your gun. You took the steps two at a time, your chest and sides burning. Motherfucker wanted to snipe at Jack? He had another thing coming. You were going to take him alive, maybe kick the shit out of him when you got the chance, and then you were going to give him to Lacroix, and find out who sent him. You might even assist. And then? Well, it only got bloodier.

You didn't need light to navigate the stairs. He'd been on fourth floor and you slid the door open and slipped into the hallway.

It was an Asian man; he was halfway down the hall and moving fast. He yelled something in Cantonese and you bared your teeth. You'd bet the organic fingers on your left hand that he worked for the On Sing Society. He was big, probably in his mid-forties, and wearing body armor. You shot first, striking him in the center of the chest. The impact staggered him, but he was wearing some high quality armor. That was fine, you didn't want him dead yet.

You charged forward, left fist raised. He swung at you, punch glancing off the side of your head. He aimed badly and you didn't take the brunt of the blow. Your turn now, and you didn't hesitate. You smashed your metal fingers into his face and followed up with the stock of your carbine. He went down, blood and teeth spraying from his mouth.

Panting, you bent over, hands on your knees. Your whole fucking abdomen was on fire, but he was breathing. From his build, you guessed ex-military. Fucking Triads. You delivered a sharp kick to his side, but he didn't move.

"Agent Strike, answer me damnit!" Jack's voice echoed in your comm. Maybe he'd been talking while you were fighting, but you weren't sure. You'd been too focused on the sniper.

"Sorry, sir." You closed your eyes. "Had to persuade him to come along peacefully. With my fists." You laughed and goddamnit it hurt. You'd pushed it too far today.

"We are going to have a long talk with Commander Reyes about Blackwatch discipline," Jack said harshly and you groaned. Because that meant you were really in trouble. Nothing to do about it now.

You didn't have cuffs on your belt and you hadn't worn your pressure injector, so you just patted the sniper down, taking his sidearm and a large knife. You went to his vantage point and found the rifle. There was broken glass and no blood, so his armor had probably done the job. Damn, you needed some of that.

You gathered up his effects, then went back and grabbed him by the ankle. Then you began to pull.

The trip down the stairs was therapeutic.

Jack stood at the entrance of the building and you saw the rest of Jemison's squad watching from the transport.

You sighed, and dragged the sniper out of the doors, feeling like a dog that just realized it wasn't supposed to bring back all those delicious baby bunnies.

"I uh...sorry, sir. Got carried away."

Jack coolly looked down at you, every inch the commanding officer. He ground his teeth together, unaffected by your sheepish apology. You didn't like the set of his shoulders or the cold
fury in his eyes. "Wipe off that blood off your face and get on the transport, agent." He bent over and hefted the sniper over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

You limped up the ramp, getting a sympathetic look from Shoal.

You sat down and she helped you loosen your armor.

"Look on the bright side, the commander has to go easy on you. You just saved his life and captured his would-be assailant," Shoal said.

You laughed. "That just pisses him off more. Ow." Shoal handed you a wet wipe for the blood. You pulled off your scarf and wiped your face. You were pretty sure most of it was from the On Sing sniper.

"...Well, it's been a real trip, Lucky. Not what I was expecting when sat down for the briefing. Are all your missions like this?"

"Fuck no. If it's gone this far, we've really screwed the pooch," you said, watching Jack cuff the sniper and stalk up the head of the transport.

"I do not envy you. Commander Reyes is terrifying."

"Yeah." You rubbed your face. "I'm pretty much a dead woman walking."

Shoal laughed at that. Because she thought you were kidding. "You work for him. He'll probably take it easy on you."

You snorted. "You don't know Commander Reyes. It's because I work for him that he's going to be a hardass. Higher expectations and whatnot." You rubbed your forehead. He'd told you to make Blackwatch look good. You just looked like a loose cannon. "Ugh. It was nice knowing you, Shoal."

"Damn." Shoal tried to give you a hopeful smile, but underneath it, she looked a little scared.

"Yeah." You nodded, because while the sniper, the Red Pole omnic, and the dark building filled with enemies were all nightmare fodder, having Jack and Gabriel gang up on you was infinitely worse. If Gabriel decided to chew you out, there would only be a little hair, gristle, and bad attitude left.

You glanced over at Jack, but he was staring hard at the floor, posture too rigid. You'd never seen him this tightly wound; the other night with Gabriel he'd been two steps away from going off, but it was a hot anger. This was different, more compressed and harder to read, and there was nothing you could do about it till you got back to Zurich.

"It was pretty impressive, the way you went after that Red Pole omnic," Shoal said after a moment. "Jemmy dragged me out before you dropped it, but I saw the flash from the stairwell." She ran a hand through her hair. "I thought you were dead for sure. I know we had to get the hostages out, but...I still feel like a heel for ditching you. Jemmy does too, but you won't hear her say it. Sorry."

You shrugged. "I told you, whiskey makes it all better." Maybe you didn't want to work with Jemison's unit again, but you didn't hate them either. "Cake too, if it's good cake."

"I owe you drinks," Shoal said, extending her hand.
"Yeah, I know." You shook, because it wouldn't hurt for you to try to have allies outside of Blackwatch. And you kind of liked Shoal. "So what were you really going to ask me on the way here?"

"It was nothing," she said, gnawing on her lower lip. It made her look absurdly guilty. You had a few guesses what kind of unflattering query she had thought twice about making, and the fact she'd kept it to herself made you like her more. "But you're right," she said after a moment. "You make a terrible soldier, but a damn good agent."

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone has a good New Year. Because 2017 was a fucking bitch and needs to be kicked in the face. I work New Years Day, so no crazy partying for me. (There probably wasn't going to be any anyway.) Though I get time and a half, so that makes it a little more bearable.

That damn smut scene is still pissing me off. But grumpy seems to be my usual state of being now. I've been singing Me and Mine by the Brothers Bright at work and when I go out. Probably not the healthiest thing. But it makes me smile. (It's not a nice smile, but it's my smile.)

Also, I'm so sorry, I keep meaning to resolve the Lao arc, and fluff/smut/character side missions keep getting in the way. Like, I feel guilty to the damn character. Which is ridiculous.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Operation Cobblestone Dust debrief, drama, and hosting unwanted guests.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Years! May 2018 not suck!


Unf. Derp. I was happied. Also unEnglished.

You dragged yourself off the transport, trying not to let on just how bad everything hurt. Pride was the driving factor: you had to show up those Overwatch snobs. And maybe there was a little worry about how Jack would react. Best to keep the whining private.

Jemison's unit was taking the survivors for debrief. Jack had the sniper in custody. You were unpleasantly surprised to find Lacroix waiting for you. You were suffering enough. Why was he here?

He took in your bad posture and strained face. "We'll do this in the infirmary then, Chanceux."

You winced, because it was like two terrible things slapping you in the face, or the ribs.

"Korpal has arrived," he added. And you exhaled slowly: make that three terrible things. "McCree was an excellent choice of host. I doubt McCree is enjoying it, but Korpal seems to appreciate handsome young men waiting on him."

"If he touches Jesse, I'll break his face."

"McCree is capable of handling himself, Chanceux. You worry about your own well-being."

You straightened up, unwilling to be weak around Lacroix. Your chest hurt when you breathed, and it was worse than that time after the Alps when you'd bruised your ribs. You had a sneaking suspicion something was broken, and that you'd only managed to ignore it because of the adrenaline.

"What happened?" Lacroix looked amused.

"Got thrown by a "Red Pole" omnic. My money's on On Sing," you muttered as you limped along. "Got rolled across a roof - can't complain because it kept me from going splat. And
then I got punched in the face by a sniper. Think he's On Sing too. Jack's got him, but you should
do the interrogation. This mission was six kinds of off."

"I already read Jack's report, and I agree. It probably is On Sing. They've called a truce
with the Shimada, and it seems they're in the middle of talks with Talon. Good prediction,
Chanceux."

Of course, Lacroix knew what your enemies were doing. Supervillains shared a
wavelength.

You hadn't realized Jack had written his report on the shuttle.

"Are you sure you or Gabriel wouldn't prefer to do the interrogation?"

"Oh, I want to," you hissed. "But I think that's a bad idea."

"So bloodthirsty, and only because he punched you in the face," Lacroix laughed.

You glared at him, even as he held the door to the infirmary open for you. "You're not
funny."

"I know. But I am clever. Anything humorous is a mere side effect of my superior wit." Lacroix's smugness made you want to hit him too, but you were having enough trouble staying
upright.

Angela took one look at you and sighed. "Go sit down."

"Hurts to breathe," you admitted. "Also shorted out an augment and maybe damaged the
other two." The use of "maybe" was a politic version of "definitely."

Angela narrowed her eyes and pointed to a curtained off area. "Go."

Sighing, you obeyed and sat down on the exam table. Lacroix followed you in. You froze
as he leaned in and released your armor seals.

"You should have done this on the transport," he said. "And you should have used an
emitter." He held the backpiece, and you carefully finished removing the chestpiece.

"I was being a macho dickhead," you admitted after a moment. It still hurt, but the lack of
compression against the swelling was a relief.

"You aren't a soldier, Chanceux. Use all your available resources."

"Trying to leave a good impression on Overwatch. You know, since my reputation is
so...checkered."

Lacroix gave a polite laugh. "There are less painful ways to do that, Chanceux, but I know
your social graces need work. We will cover that in training."

"Mine? Have you fucking met Ziv?" You scowled.

"He's a charming boy," Lacroix said and you gave him a hard look.

Angela came in with her scanner. "Well, you really did it this time," she said after checking
you out. "Three fractured ribs, on top of the bruised ones. No flail chest, thankfully, but you're on
medical leave as of two hours ago. And you didn't even use an emitter?"
"I...sorry." You leaned back. "Adrenaline."

"I think you mean stupidity," Angela shot back. "It would serve you right to have wait a few months to get back on active duty. But no, modern medicine means I can fix you up and send you back out in a week. Doesn't mean I should."

"Please, because this is really uncomfortable."

Angela laid her icy stare on you. "I took the Hippocratic Oath, Lucky. Of course I'm going to fix your verdammt self. Nanites, and another emitter. And then I am kicking you off the active duty roster for a week so you can heal. No shooting. No hitting. No vigorous sexual activity. You are grounded."

You shot Lacroix a look. He just wore an amused smile. You really hated him.

"Yes ma'am," you said, solemnly, putting every ounce of sincerity you could muster into your expression. "I'm sorry; I don't try to get beat up. I'll take it easy, ma'am."

Angela's face softened. "I know. I just wish you'd be more careful."

"I really was. You should see the other guys," you said.

"I will prescribe pain medicine as well. I should have given that to you first." She favored you with a rueful smile and disappeared past the curtain.

"You're a better liar than I thought," Lacroix murmured in your ear. "There's hope for you yet."

"Why are you still here?" You gave him a baleful look.

"Because someone needs to coach you on how to appear to Korp. You have a role to play too. Now pay attention, before you start doping up..."

"Korp is currently engaged in a tour of the armory. He is behaving within the confines of socially acceptable interaction, but Agent McCree is not happy." Athena gave you the run down. You sat in your room, trying to stay upright while you basked in the emitter's warm glow. You'd already had her transcribe and edit your post-mission report. Which was handy because you didn't feel like typing or moving.

"He doesn't know how advanced you are, does he?"

"No. My level of awareness is classified as Top Secret. To rank and file Overwatch personnel, I am merely a very sociable virtual assistant. The deception is regrettable, but necessary."

You nodded, then realized you hoped she couldn't see you. "I can empathize. Blackwatch is totally underappreciated. Because they can't know what we do behind the scenes." Of course, the rest of Overwatch might not appreciate some of those things if they knew. So you took the good with the bad and kept it a great big secret. "Thanks," you said after a moment. "For repurposing Jack's external augments so I didn't go splat."
"You're welcome, but no thanks is necessary. I am here to help my team." There was a warmth in her voice that surprised you. Winston had done a good job of making her sound reassuring.

"Well, I don't take good teammates for granted," you said.

There was a pause. "It is satisfying that you view me that way. I don't know if that is reflective of the majority."

"No, I'm not a good measure of the rest of society, Athena. My closest friends are a wannabe cowboy and a mouthy asshole who needs a personality transplant. That circle also includes two emotionally disturbed cyborgs and a gorilla. I uh...yeah. Wow, that sounds even worse when I say it out loud."

"Are you upset that Lieutenant Jemison left you behind?" Athena's voice was curious and it was a little unnerving to be sitting on your bed talking to a disembodied voice from above. It wasn't a god, maybe a god-baby.

"I told her to, didn't I?"

"Yes, but it is my understanding that these situations are never that simple."

"No," you said, and found it was true. "If it had been someone I rely on, yeah, there's a chance I would be upset. But I don't have that relationship with Jemison or her crew. Our mission was to rescue those damn hostages. They did that. Whether or not you could ever trust them at your back was a different matter. But you weren't upset.

"How is your pain?"

"It's still uncomfortable," you admitted. "Keep that to yourself, please."

There was a long pause. "That request is in conflict with my core mission."

You rolled your eyes. "I'm healing up. I can take more meds that make me loopy and possibly a security liability, or I can sit here and bear it without being a risk to my team."

"You can ask Commander Reyes or Strike Commander Morrison to keep you company after you've taken a higher dosage."

"They're busy. And Jack is kind of pissed at me." Lying down hurt so you sat amidst your pillows.

There was another pause. "Strike Commander Morrison wants you in Commander Reyes' office immediately."

You leveled a glare at the speaker. "You do know about medical privacy, right?"

"I did not share your condition with him. The order came through unrelated. And yes, Agent Strike, I do know about medical privacy laws. However, you have been put on medical leave and the officers can see that."

"Sorry." You closed your eyes and climbed to your feet. "I shouldn't be so accusatory, but I know you're still learning boundaries."

"Yes," Athena said after a moment. "I do not mind you voicing your concerns or
corrections. My...shortcomings have to do with interpersonal actions. I have a comprehensive database covering legal requirements, intelligence classifications, official procedure, and most formal situations."

"Ah." You folded up the emitter. Because if this was a long meeting, you would need it.

"But your personal relationships with Commander Reyes and Strike Commander Morrison do complicate the situation."

"That is a vast understatement." You took a short shallow breaths for comfort. You should take the stronger pain meds, but you needed a clear head for whatever Jack wanted to throw at you.

"Are you an equal partner?" Athena asked.

"I'm trying to be. Otherwise this won't work." You sighed. "And that's a real personal question, Athena."

"I realize that. Thank you for answering. I will not violate your confidence."

"Thanks." You pulled on a hoodie. "Lacroix let me know that Korpal may be behaving inappropriately toward Jesse. Can you make pages to summon Jesse to Gabriel's office or come up with work-related excuses to extract him, or at least, give him an out if he needs it?"

There was a long pause.

"Are you running all this by Winston?"

"I am not repeating your conversation verbatim, however I am requesting context for the situation. I believe you are asking me to "cockblock" as Agent Mihret puts it colloquially."

You damn near choked on your tongue. "Yeah, that's precisely what I'm doing."

"I can do that," Athena said, and you'd never heard an AI sound so smug. You blamed Ziv.

You reached Gabriel's office without encountering any hostiles. It helped that Athena gave you updates on Korpal's locations. Poor Jesse. And then you remembered all the times you had to play honey trap and while he got to play action hero, and you didn't feel a smidge of guilt.

You opened the door to Jack pacing; still in his armor and overcoat and you wondered if he'd gotten checked out yet. He'd taken the sting out of the landing, but it had cost him. Gabriel sat at his desk, a wry smile on his face.

You saluted, and regretted it immediately. Gritting your teeth you went into the office and locked the door behind you.

When you turned around, Jack was in front of you. He pressed his hands into the door on either side of your head, angled so he was nearly nose to nose with you.

"Three broken ribs, Lucky. Did the sniper do that or were you stupid enough to go after him in that condition?" There was ice in his eyes and he enunciated each word clearly.
"You're welcome," you grinned up at him and his nostrils flared.

"Don't." He shook his head slowly, maintaining eye contact. "I can't joke about this with you right now."

"You haven't gone to the infirmary yet, have you?"

He didn't reply, but then you already knew the answer. Of course not.

You kissed him, and he held himself rigid for a moment before he softened and kissed you back, hands still on the door. When he let you up for air, you swallowed, because there was a feral light in his eyes.

"You're still in trouble, agent. Your mouthy, tardy, insubordinate ass isn't getting out of this that easily."

"Let her sit down, Jack." Gabriel didn't sound the least bit concerned. And that worried you more.

Jack pushed off the door, suddenly out of your space. "Couch."

You eased yourself down, breathing a little ragged, and not just from the pain. You winced, adjusting the throw pillows till you were comfortable. By then Jack had pulled up a chair and Gabriel sat down beside you. He took the emitter and set it up for you.

"Did Angela give you painkillers?" Gabriel asked.

"Yeah," you paused. "I haven't taken them yet. Wanted to be alert."

"I can tell," Gabriel said, frowning. "Lacroix updated you on Korpai, didn't he?"

You nodded.

"So, how'd the op go?" Gabriel smirked at Jack.

"She was late, mouthy, didn't integrate with the team, and nearly got herself killed at least three times," Jack said tightly.

Gabriel nodded. "That's troubling. What do you have to say in your defense, agent?"

You blinked. Because while the wording was professional, this setup was not. "Had to get all my new gear calibrated and make sure everything worked; but yeah, I'm sorry I was late. I'll be more conscientious next time."

"I'm still not sure how we can make her less mouthy, short of gagging her. And you can't really send her on an op like that. Did she bring your authority into question? Did she say something to endanger the mission? Or was it just the usual sniping?" Gabriel draped one arm over the back of the couch.

"None of the above. She had a few smart ass remarks, but mostly she's a smug little shit who likes to use "sir" ironically." Jack shot you a dark look.

"That's just my face, sir."

"Not helping, Lucky," Gabriel said, but he was smirking. "So she was actually pretty well-behaved, by our standards."
Jack just glared at Gabriel.

"From the reports she impressed both Agent Shoal and Lieutenant Jemison and did a good job keeping Shoal from harm. Not sure what you mean by "didn't integrate." Gabriel was entirely too relaxed, and worse, he seemed to be enjoying himself. He was goading Jack, you realized. Was that...wise?

"She went hand to hand with an omnic. Almost got blown up. And then rushed into a building alone after an unknown enemy."

"Those are more serious actions." Gabriel stroked the back of your neck. "Who broke your ribs, baby?"

"The omnic," you admitted and Jack sucked in a breath. "I couldn't really get away."

"You need to learn how not to get cornered," Gabriel said, not looking quite so amused.

"Working on it. But it was executing the researchers. Figured we didn't want to stand by for that."

Gabriel nodded. "So it was mission critical? All right. Heard Jack said jump off a building, and you did it. That's quite the leap of faith."

"I-" You looked at your lap. "I guess."

Gabriel's hand on your neck was soothing and you didn't want to look up at Jack.

"You told Jack you were injured?"

"Yeah."

"Then you rushed after the sniper anyway."

"He was either after the hostages or Jack, and my gut says it was Jack. That wasn't going to happen on my watch." You bared your teeth. "Don't even pretend like you wouldn't do the same."

Gabriel just laughed. "From a mission standpoint, I don't have a problem with any of her actions, Jack. She's a solo operator, not a soldier. Blackwatch might not subscribe to the same rules of discipline as the Overwatch grunts, but we get the job done and all her actions are a stellar example of that."

Jack glared at you both. "I'll see you on the mats tonight, Reyes."

He got up and stalked out. He even slammed the door.

You blinked and Gabriel stood and locked the door before settling back down beside you.

"From an ops standpoint, you did spectacular," Gabriel said. He leaned over and kissed your neck. "I would've done the same thing if I caught someone trying to snipe Jack, so I get it." You rested against him, enjoying his warmth.

"So I'm not in trouble?"

"Oh you're in trouble, all right." Gabriel's laugh was sharp. "Jack's going to think up something. And I'm none too happy about you running around with broken ribs."
You realized belatedly, that if this was meant to be a disciplinary hearing, Captain Amari would have been here. This was work bleeding into your relationship. Or was it vice-versa? Your rested your forehead in your right palm.

"And if it were me on that mission instead of Jack, I would tan your hide for haring off like that," Gabriel said gruffly.

"What? That's not fair!"

"I don't know why you continually think I give a fuck about fair." Gabriel continued to massage the back of your neck. "Of course, if it was me instead of Jack, I would have beaten you to the target, so it's a moot point."

"How bad did I fuck up?" You asked, because you were tired and there was a lot to digest.

"You kicked ass. You made Blackwatch look good. You came home to me. Everything else is minor," Gabriel said.

"Jack doesn't think so. But then you're both control freaks."

"Jack's feelings are more complex than just being a control freak."

"I know. He was fine till I went after the sniper."

"Maybe. We are control freaks, Lucky. No denying that." Gabriel's hands squeezed your shoulders and you relaxed against him. "Jack's used to ordering people into dangerous situations. Doesn't mean the consequences don't haunt him. Each close call you had just hit him harder. Being the boss and your lover causes a lot of cognitive dissonance. Not your fault, baby. I'd say the sniper was the last straw. The fact you were only doing what you were supposed to just makes him feel worse.

"I don't know. After he had Athena overclock his augments and did that insane flying-jump, he seemed like he was having fun. Got me in the stairwell of the building and-"

"And was ready to go right then? Couldn't keep his hands off you?" Gabriel purred. "You know Jack has some fun coping mechanisms, right?"

"I just thought he liked that kind of thing."

"He does," Gabriel chuckled. "But surely you've noticed, the more stressed he is, the more dominant and aggressive he is."

And back in the stairwell, he'd been all about rank. Shit, you'd missed that.

"It might be best if the two of you stick to missions where he's free to back you up and doesn't have to pretend you're just another agent." Gabriel spread out on the couch. "I know that would bother me."

"You enjoyed baiting him." You weren't entirely convinced that any of this was healthy.

"Yes." Gabriel's tone was firm. "Jack can learn to deal."

"You enjoyed baiting him." You weren't entirely convinced that any of this was healthy.

"Who do you think had to put up with all his stupid heroics right out of SEP? You think he
"Was sensible?" Gabriel laughed. "This is what he fucking gets. Granted he can't punch you in the face for being an idiot, but the parallels are very clear. He'll come around. He's not actually mad at us. He's just wound up and needs to calm down."

"You going to hit the mats tonight?"

"Yeah, but you're not walking all the way to Jack's quarters. You need to rest. Plus you're too slow, and with Korpel around, you can't afford to get busted."

"That's...you're right and you suck." Because you wanted to watch.

"It's not like you won't get to eventually." Gabriel's unfocused grin slowly widened. "You'll get a turn to drag us to the mats and it'll just turn into kinky sex from there."

"Not with these ribs it won't," you sighed. "That's the worst part. Jack was going to jump me once we got back, and he was all worked up, and now I'm on medical restriction again."

"Stop getting hurt," Gabriel said. "That's not a difficult concept."

You had two lovers, but they were the opposite of sympathetic when you got injured. Why did you even like them?

You awoke to your door opening and you reached into your nightstand for your sidearm. You had it leveled at the intruder before you realized who it was.

Jack stood there in the gentle glow of the emitter, a little hunched, in his black fatigues. He blinked, hands jammed in his pockets.

You lowered the gun and put it back in the nightstand.

"Come in and close the door," you said. You were bundled up in blankets, sleeping upright because of your ribs.

"I'm sorry, I should have knocked." Jack rubbed the back of his neck as he shut the door. "I wasn't thinking."

"Gabriel just shows up," you said after a moment. "Not a lot, because I'm not here that often, but...it's not a big deal."

He stood by the door, filling the space in your small room. He looked around, not that there was much to see. His gaze finally rested on the nest of pillows you'd made to get comfortable. "How's the pain?"

"Took a painkiller. It's manageable."

Jack fidgeted. "Sorry, I should have waited. Shouldn't have woke you."

"It's OK." You scooted over, though you weren't sure Jack could fit in your twin bed. "Trouble sleeping?"

"Yeah." He took your silent invitation and sat down the bed. It dipped under his weight
and he shifted, angling to face you.

"You have a really small room," Jack said.

"Thanks for coming all the way down here and waking me up to tell me that."

"Have you eaten?" Jack asked, because you did get snippy when hungry.

"No. Entire midsection hurts. Figured I'd hold off till the emitter healed me up a little more. I know, my body needs fuel to fix itself. Just want to be in less pain before I do that."

"So you're saying the injury is punishment enough and I should let up?" Jack gave you an apologetic smile.

"Yes."

"Gabriel was right." He took a deep breath, and you both knew how hard that was to admit, no matter how many times you had to do it. "You did a good job today. As your CO, I couldn't ask for more. But as your lover, I want to tie you up and edge you, spank you, punish you till you swear you won't pull anything like that ever again." He took in your skeptical look. "I know, I know. It's not reasonable and I'm certainly not going to do it, but don't argue with me now, please."

"I was just wondering how you're so damn kinky all the time."

Jack gave an abrupt laugh and kissed you hard. He smelled like soap and Gabriel's cologne. "Because I'm sexually frustrated."

"You and Gabriel didn't-?" You raised a brow.

"Didn't say that. Wanted you too, though. You and Gabriel both drive me crazy. It's never enough," he said, breathing shallow. "And now you're back on medical leave and I shouldn't pressure you, but all I want to do is fuck you into the mattress till you're screaming my name. Preferably so the whole base knows that you're off-limits."

Your heart rate spiked. "You're a fucking tease."

"Payback for earlier," he said, stroking your hair. "Want me to go?"

"You can stay," you said. "Not a lot of room, but we can move to the floor if it's easier."

"No, you need to keep comfortable. It'll be cramped, but I can do this."

"This is pretty bold, Strike Commander. Sneaking into one of your subordinate's beds late at night? Who'd believe it?"

"I'll do it again some time. Take you on this tiny bed, while you struggle to keep quiet. Fuck that's hot." He flashed you that bright wicked smile that had previously been reserved only for Gabriel. It made your heart catch in your throat.

"Teasing is just going to end badly for both of us," you muttered darkly.

"I know. It's just so hard to resist," Jack sighed, kicking off his boots and curling up beside you, one foot still on the floor.

"Are you going to be all right sleeping like that? I can turn to the side and you can lay
"Nah. I'm good. Done fine under far worse." He put an arm around your shoulder. "This OK?"

"Mmm-hmm." You passed him a pillow and unwrapped two layers of blankets. Jack draped them over his shoulders and lap, making sure to cover you too.

"Reminds me of SEP. Tiny room, sneaking around, single bed. Sometimes I miss those days."

"A simpler time?" You asked, because it had not been a kinder, gentler one.

"Yeah. It was bad back then too. But in a different way. But it was Gabriel and me against the evil robot invasion. It was do or die. It wasn't political. We'd fight, drag ourselves back to base, patch each other up..." You could hear the smile in his voice. You listened quietly, his voice soothing you. "Not going to lie, the sex was great back then too. That's probably what got me in the habit of binging on it for stress relief."

"You feeling better now?" You rested your head on his shoulder. "Gabriel's pretty thorough."

"That man," Jack sighed happily. "It's not just that he's hot. He knows what he's doing in bed. Always has. Has this raw sexuality that's just impossible to resist." Jack made a satisfied humming sound. "Got him to ride me tonight. It was beautiful. He straddles my dick and just takes it all the way in one go. Love how those thighs squeeze me. He can probably crush my head with them, you know."

"Damnit, Jack. It's not that I don't appreciate Gabriel's many, many charms, but breathing hurts. I can't even take care of myself right now." You opened one eye to glare at him.

"Sorry," Jack said, not sounding sorry at all. "Next time don't get thrown by a giant homicidal omnic."

"Fuck you. I'm going back to sleep," you said.

"Don't worry, I'm still going to fuck you raw when you get better." He kissed the top of your head.

"Jack, I'm trying to sleep."

"Just letting you know. You won't be walking right for days," he said, breath hot in your ear.

"Jack."

"Yeah, practice saying my name. I plan on making you scream it."

"Jesus, Jack, I'm going to push you off the bed."

"Halfway there already, baby."
"You haven't met Agent Strike yet, have you?" Jesse gave you a pinched smile as he ushered Vikram Korpali into Gabriel's office. Korpali was a slender middle-aged man, fine-featured and handsome. He even had dignified wings of gray along his temples. But the oily way he smiled at Jesse made you want to break his face.

"Agent Strike. I have heard a great deal about you." He gave you a sharp smile that wasn't the least bit friendly.

"All good I hope," you said mildly, well aware that the role you had to play was unsavory. "It's good the UN has taken a greater interest in our operations. I, for one, am eager to show the civilian authority what we are capable of."

Behind Korpali, Jesse's mouth dropped open.

"Interesting. My understanding is that your commanding officer doesn't feel the same way," Korpali pulled up a chair and sat down in front of your desk, folding his hands under his chin.

"Commander Reyes is a military man at heart. He's fully capable of running Blackwatch, but he's more suited less...subtle operations." You smiled apologetically. "I am sorry you haven't been able to meet with him yet. While he is a good leader, he doesn't know how to interact with civilians."

"Agent-" Jesse began, nostrils flaring.

"Take a walk, Agent McCree. Would you like some refreshments, Mr. Korpali? I'm sure Agent McCree could pick something up in the cafeteria."

"Oh I'm fine. There's a wonderful Italian bistro I'm planning to dine at tonight. But please, I'd love to hear your opinion of the situation, Agent Strike."

You smiled coolly at Jesse. "I would like some mineral water, Agent McCree."

Jesse's left eye twitched. "Understood, Agent Strike." He turned on his heel and marched out of the office.

"That's a bold move, Strike. Are you trying to sabotage your boss, or is this some kind of ill-wrought attempt at entrapment?"

"I think we both know Strike Commander Morrison isn't working out. Granted, he is popular, but his high-minded ideals aren't what's best for Overwatch. The organization is spread too thin, and to be honest, we aren't a police force or a superhero team. This is the real world, with budgets and long-term effects to consider. He's very likeable, a great figurehead, but not the man you want in charge."

"I'm just here to evaluate Blackwatch," Korpali smirked.

You smiled thinly. "Of course you are. And you'll find that Commander Reyes is actually fairly easy to handle. You just give him a competent assistant to deal with the diplomatic side of things. He doesn't really want to be involved."

Korpali raised a brow. "So he made you privy to his conversation with Director Petras?" Well, that confirmed what you already suspected. Korpali and Petras were on the same side: not yours.
"It would look bad if he met with you and suddenly got a promotion, one we all know that he wants."

Korpal stroked his chin.  "Reyes hasn't been willing to play ball."

"That's a negotiating tactic," you said dryly.  "As I said, not the best diplomat."

"What does he want done about Morrison?"

"Make up a new position with a fancy title.  Shuffle him off the side.  Don't do anything drastic or humiliate him: that will make the power transition far too rocky."

"That doesn't sound like Reyes.  He's known for being a vindictive son of a bitch."

"As I said, give him a competent assistant and you get a lot more done."  You sat back in your chair.  "I have to take credit for some of the strategy."

"I see."  Korpal's eyes reminded you of a snake, all wide, inquisitive, and devoid of emotion.  "What do you get out of this?"

"I run Blackwatch's administrative side.  I realize that isn't common knowledge; it isn't meant to be.  Putting me in charge wouldn't disrupt the status quo at all."

"Ambitious," Korpal said.  "You've been in Zurich for what?  A year and a half?  Before that you were some kind of floater agent?"

"Troublebusher," you said, refusing to be intimidated by his knowledge of your "background."  Hopefully he wasn't questioning your legend too closely.  "I'm not just a secretary.  You don't want to leave a mere paper-pusher in charge of Blackwatch."

Something dinged, and Korpal opened up his briefcase and took out a sleek holo-screen tablet: they weren't on the market yet and the only place you'd seen one was in Winston's lab.  "One moment, Strike.  I have to take this."

"Of course."

Korpal eyed the light screen, then set it back in his briefcase.  "Mmm, sorry, Director Petras wanted a progress updated."  He paused and skimmed through some more documents.  "Well, you certainly put on an impressive performance for Overwatch yesterday.  Though Morrison doesn't seem happy with your...undisciplined predilections."

"Blackwatch operates differently from Overwatch," you said.  "We don't march in formation, but we get the job done, personal feelings aside."  You paused.  "I don't have any ill will toward Morrison; but leaving a wide-eyed idealist in charge is a surefire way to self-destruct."

"And it doesn't hurt that you'll benefit from a transition in power."

"It doesn't," you agreed.

"And Reyes is on board with this?"

"He hasn't chosen a Blackwatch successor," you admitted without hesitation.  "But I think he could be convinced."

"Who do you think your rivals are?"
"Outside the organization, who can say?" You smiled. "But from within? There is only one: Gérard Lacroix."

"You don't think Captain Amari is a rival?"

"She doesn't want to run Blackwatch. Her eyes are on the Strike Commander position."

Korpal tilted his head to the side. "That makes sense."

"I am nothing if not well-informed, Mr. Korpal."

"You could be a great asset," he said, complimentary, but not committing to your side.

You only inclined your head in acknowledgement.

"You don't think Agent McCree could replace you?"

"He doesn't have the stomach for administrative work," you said. "He's much better suited for ops."

You could see Korpal calculating. He would go visit Lacroix next. Under the auspices of inspecting Blackwatch, of course. But he'd swallowed your bait, hook, line, sinker, and nano-tracking chip. You weren't sure what the rest of Lacroix's plan entailed, but you'd done your part. And hopefully, while Korpal was scheming and playing kingmaker, he wouldn't be looking too closely at the more sensitive Blackwatch operations.

"I have found our conversation most...enlightening," Korpal smiled like a shark.

You returned the expression when he shook your hand. Even through your gloves, you knew his skin was soft, his hands perfectly-manicured, and that he had never done a day of hard labor in his life.

"Will Agent McCree run telling tales to Reyes?"

"Probably," you said. "And Reyes will tell him to keep his mouth shut. No worries there."

"He is a charming young man," Korpal said.

You just smiled thinly. "So I hear."

Korpal looked at you expectantly.

Your stomach turned.

"I could mention something to Commander Reyes along those lines," you said slowly. "I'm sure...accommodations could be made."

Korpal's smile widened. "I'm so very glad we had this talk, Agent Strike. It's good to see that Blackwatch is so much more reasonable than I had been lead to believe."

"We are nothing if not practical, Mr. Korpal."
"You get all that, Athena?" You sat alone at your desk, rubbing your forehead. You were going to need a shower to scrub off all the filthy political bullshit you'd just waded through. You were going to have to buy Jesse a few drinks too. Though he'd never returned with your mineral water. Ass.

"Yes, Agent Strike." There was a pause. "You were very convincing."

"I hope so. I'd hate to make that pitch again." You poured yourself a whiskey and debated taking one of your pain pills. Probably not a good combination. Fuck the pill. You needed the whiskey more.

"Send the recording to Agent Lacroix and Commander Reyes. You can CC Jack, but I'd prefer not to bother him with this till we've got KorpáI taken care of." It wasn't anything you could convict KorpáI with, but it was good reference for whatever long game Lacroix had set up.

"...Am I going to be allowed on other Blackwatch ops?" Athena asked.

"Not my call. Lacroix had to lobby pretty hard to get you on this one."

"You helped."

"Shit, don't remind Gabriel. He's sore enough about it as it is." You slumped in your chair, and instantly regretted it. You adjusted the pillow behind you and sat up straight. "I don't think it even matters what I said. I distracted and redirected him to Lacroix. Hopefully my part is done."

"Do you want to be in charge of Blackwatch some day?"

"Fuck no," you laughed and that hurt too. "I've seen what leadership did to Jack and Gabriel. I'm happy just running around on adventures and coming home to...my team. People like KorpáI make my skin crawl. Like I'm just going to serve him Jesse or anyone on a goddamn plate because I want a promotion. Ugh. Who'd follow someone like that?"

"It happens, from what I observe."

"Yeah, I know. People are messed up. Always have been. When you're the little guy, you can't trust that justice works in your favor."

"I realize the comparison is unfavorable, but can you explain the difference between your relationship with your commanding officers and exploitation?"

You sat back in your chair and took a long swig of whiskey. Because fucking Athena and her loaded questions.

"I've offended you," she said after you sat in silence for a few minutes.

"There was no polite way to ask that question," you said. "I'm formulating a response."

"Do not feel obligated to answer if it makes you uncomfortable, Agent Strike."

"Just call me "Lucky" in private, OK? I keep looking behind me to see who this "Agent Strike" bitch is."

"Thank you, Lucky." Athena was very good a mimicking real emotion, or perhaps she really did feel things like you did. You weren't sure. Different sensory input and programming made sure she wasn't exactly like a human, but you could not deny she was more than a voice in
"I had a choice," you said. "A real choice that would've been respected if I said "no." I still have that option and I'm not worried about Jack and Gabriel leveraging rank and the job against me. It gets messy, as you've seen. But I'm here because I want to be, and because I trust them. I know it looks bad, two commanding officers sharing one woman like a fucking commodity." You flinched at the harshness of your own description. "But they're important to me and I know I'm not just their plaything." You sipped your whiskey. "It doesn't hurt that Jesse and Captain Amari are looking out for me."

"I am as well," Athena said firmly. "I cannot countermand missions or tactical orders, but I do have options if abuse of power is suspected."

"Huh." You sat there for a moment. "Didn't know that."

"Winston designed me to look after my people, Lucky."

"Yeah, I'm getting that." You closed your eyes.

"It should not be surprising. Many in Overwatch have that priority. They just go about it in different ways."

"True. The other half of that idea is respecting boundaries. You can't go repeating this shit or asking everyone the kinds of questions you're asking me. Especially if you want to maintain your "virtual assistant" cover."

"I am aware," she said sounding mildly amused. Were you ascribing human feelings to a robot voice? You weren't sure. "I only have conversations like this with Winston, Ziv, and you." She paused. "Agent Shimada sometimes talks to me now too."

You blinked. Huh. You hadn't expected that.

"When I was informed about your arrangement, I had expressed concern, but Ziv said anyone would be happy to be...in a relationship with such superior physical specimens."

"Athena, don't listen to Ziv. He's the worst." You sighed. "And that was not his wording."

"No, I was paraphrasing. His actual wording was much cruder."

"I know."

"He explained that he had already pursued that line of inquiry. You and Ziv always speak so antagonistically to each other, but I have come to realize it means you actually-"

"Athena, that's enough true confessions for one day, OK? Some things are better left unsaid." You poured yourself more whiskey and wondered how you were going to explain being drunk this early in the day.

"Well, that was terrifying," Jesse said after Gabriel had played back the recording for the
two of you. Lacroix had only sent the message that he was "handling it." And Ziv had sent you a message to brag about his involvement. Well, if he was the second honey trap, that would be hilarious. You were really going to have to castrate Korpal.

"I'm sorry," you said, not looking up from your desk. "Lacroix asked me to take the ambitious go-between angle. I...improvised a little."

"You were convincing," Gabriel said.

You rubbed the back of your neck, wishing you had a mint. You could still smell the whiskey. "I don't ever want to run Blackwatch," you said. "Too much paperwork."

Jesse laughed nervously.

Gabriel held your gaze. "You could you know. Not now, but give it a few years. You'd do well."

"That's not what I want," you said firmly.

Gabriel wore a faint smile. "I see."

"So do I have to escort him around for another day, boss? Because he's a handsy bastard and as soon as I can, I'm going to break his wrists and work my way inward."

"We'll see what Gérard has in mind," Gabriel said. "You're on call till tonight. AI, if you're listening in, it's time to fuck off."

"Be nice," you said.

"AI, if you're listening in, it's time to please fuck off," Gabriel said, rolling his eyes at you. And that was really the best you could expect.

"As you say, Commander Reyes."

"Out, kid." Gabriel gestured at the door.

Jesse gave you a suspicious look. "No auctioning off my virtue for cake, OK Lucky?"

"What virtue?"

Chuckling, Jesse walked out and Gabriel locked the door behind him.

"Come here," Gabriel said, sitting on the couch.

You gingerly settled down beside him, sighing as he cupped the back of your head and kissed you.

"Thought you'd been in the whiskey," he murmured when he released you. "That bad?"

"Waited till after he left. You heard me. Had to convincingly sell out you, Jack, and Jesse in one unpleasant conversation. Needed a drink after that. Not drunk."

"I know. I've seen you drunk." Gabriel held you against his side. "So what do you want in a few years, if not to run Blackwatch?"

"I want our enemies dead," you nodded to yourself. "Talon eradicated. Shin and Captain
Patel avenged. I want our people safe." You swallowed when you thought of Lao. You needed to heal up, because you did not trust Lacroix alone on that mission, no matter what he said about taking her alive. "And after that, cake and whiskey."

Gabriel absently stroked the back on your neck.

"Do Jack and I fit into that?"

"Yeah. Safe, definitely, maybe somewhere between cake and whiskey?"

"You're not drunk; you know what I'm asking."

You took a deep breath and winced. "I wasn't planning on ditching you two for Winston. I mean, he's a fluffy adorable dude, but the peanut fixation is weird."

"He's a gorilla," Gabriel said, not sounding amused.

"Really? I just thought he had a skin condition." You managed a lopsided smile. "I...I don't mean to give cop out answers. I just don't know how to tell you what you want to hear."

"Don't. Just tell me the truth," Gabriel said stiffly.

"Well then," you said, looking down at your boots. "I don't know. I don't think it's a matter of where you and Jack fit into my plans. I think it's the other way around. Will I still fit in your lives? You're big important people. I can't even live under my real name. Will it work out? Or will this just get too hard and complicated and collapse on itself?"

Gabriel blew out a long breath.

You regretted your honesty immediately.

Gabriel pulled his arm away, no longer touching you. "I guess I should have been clearer, because you read too much into things. Do you want us?"

"Yeah." You rested your hands in your lap, still staring at your boots. "I don't know. I don't think it's a matter of where you and Jack fit into my plans. I think it's the other way around. Will I still fit in your lives? You're big important people. I can't even live under my real name. Will it work out? Or will this just get too hard and complicated and collapse on itself?"

"I told you I need you," Gabriel said hoarsely. "And I fucking meant it."

"Yeah, I said the same thing."

"Sometimes I need to hear it too," Gabriel said, tugging on your collar.

You turned to face him. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Gabriel." You gripped one of his wrists with your right hand. "You should know that by now."

"Just need you to say it every now and then." He braced himself against the couch and bent over to kiss you. You wrapped your arms around his neck. "You need to heal up fast. It's my turn to take you out and play," Gabriel said in your ear. "Jack's pretty eager to try again too. Won't bring a pesky squad this time."

"This is seeming less like work and more like a date." A date where you shoot things and try not to die, while balancing quality time with a super soldier. Huh. That sounded nice. Probably because you were fucked up.
"You're catching on," Gabriel said, kneeling in front of you, his hands dropped to your belt.

"Wait, I-"

"Let me help you relax. I know you aren't up for anything strenuous."

You raised your hips for him even as you started to object again. "I'm not sure.

"Tell me to stop, and I'll stop," Gabriel rumbled, sliding your pants down. "Otherwise, I just want to taste your sweet pussy."

You sat on the couch, trying to control your breathing while Gabriel slipped his tongue inside you. His fingers brushed your clit. You clenched hard and sharp pain shot up your sides and into your abdomen.

"I can't." You ground your teeth. "Goddamnit, Gabriel, I want it. But I can't-"

Gabriel kissed your thighs and drew back. "Sorry, baby. Didn't mean to cause you pain." He helped get you put back together, hands gentle. "Not even taking care of yourself in your spare time then?"

"Damnit Gabriel, I don't have accelerated healing like you and Jack." You groaned. "So no, I haven't gotten off since before I got hurt."

Gabriel chuckled. "Poor thing. Don't worry, when you get better Jack and I will give you more than you can handle. We'll make up for all that lost time."

You shivered. "Jack's already plotting to sneak into my room at night and play the quiet game."

Gabriel grinned at you. "I know."

"You too?" It shouldn't surprise you. It really shouldn't. You already knew those two collaborated.

"Such a small room. It'll be interesting."

"You two are insatiable." You paused. "Are you ever going to show me what I need to do to restrain Jack?"

Gabriel's smile widened. "Yes. You want to dom him too? Because you set a pretty good pace back at the farm."

"Yeah, I owe him some bondage."

Gabriel laughed. "You do know he'll get you back for it later, right?"

"Yeah," you smiled. "I'm counting on it."

Chapter End Notes

Starting to run behind because I work a few chapters ahead and this stupid holiday
season has ruined my productivity. fdkjlfjdklfdklfkldk But I'm off the next few days and maybe I can get more done. I think that stupid smut scene is finally passable, but I'm still annoyed at it. Have some heavier edits to do which is also slowing me down. /whining

And we are now "officially" past 200k wordcount. That's about two regular novels. Thanks for sticking around guys. Totally appreciate you.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Interrogations and other awkward interactions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Your right hand rested on your tanto, and you did not move it. Gabriel sat forward, elbows on his knees, chin resting on his folded hands. Jack leaned back in his chair between the two of you, eyes cool.

"They chose me because I can make it last," Lacroix told the On Sing sniper. Overhead, Athena translated the words into Cantonese, just in case the bastard didn't understand English. Lacroix had gone for assassin chic, a well-tailored black suit, latex gloves, and slicked back hair. "The others would kill you too quickly." He flashed a grin at the interrogation room window and you resisted the urge to throw something at the glass.

Gabriel snorted and Jack reached out, one hand resting on the back of Gabriel's neck, gently massaging. But his gaze did not leave the scene in front of you.

Your thumb rubbed the pommel of your dagger. If you hadn't been so paranoid that day outside Belfast, what would have happened to Jack? You didn't like to think about it. Your ribs hurt, but you could breathe easier now, and both Gabriel and Jack ensured there was almost always an emitter around you. It wasn't hard to decode their motivations. They were pretty obvious.

Lacroix circled the man strapped to the chair, his pace slow and deliberate. "Your name is Chung Yee Wen, former sniper for the PLA South Blade division out of Chengdu. Very impressive records." You'd read the dossier, the South Blade, sometimes called the South China Sword, was special forces, the PRC's equivalent of the Navy Seals.

Chung did not respond, but it was him. You and Ziv had been very thorough, Ziv getting into the PLA personnel records while you assigned a few agents to gather information from his old squadmates. He was a big man, with wide features and close-cropped hair.

"Of course, your family has a proud tradition of On Sing service. Your father was a Straw Sandal." His father was a liaison officer who communicated orders between different cells. It was a somewhat prestigious position, though not necessarily violent. Interestingly, Chung had been a consummate professional during his military service.

Chung stared straight ahead, face hard and impassive. The only indicator of discomfort was the sweat beading on his upper lip.

"Your father's retired, of course. Having a good son like you, he didn't need to work any more. But that's about to change, isn't it? I see you have a brother serving life in prison and sister who disappeared under mysterious circumstances. It'll break your parents hearts when you don't come home and they have no idea what happened to your body." Lacroix didn't pull his punches. He'd told you Chung wouldn't break under your torture and that Gabriel would go too far,
rendering Chung useless. He'd said it smugly, promising that he had the perfect leverage.

"I must never reveal secrets or signs when speaking to outsiders. If I do so I will be killed by myriads of swords." He spoke English with a light accent.

"Oh, I've heard the 36 Oaths before," Lacroix laughed. "And I've driven men into breaking them. Don't mistake yourself for special, Chung. Now, I want to know everything about your time at Belfast. The Red Pole omnic was an interesting touch."

Chung stiffened. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I want to know your targets, who assigned them, and who paid the fee."

"Why would I talk?"

"Because reaching your brother in prison will be easy. Because finding your dear old mother in her kitchen on the eighth floor? Easier. Because I know exactly how your father takes his medicinal tea, where he likes to buy mápó dòufu, and whom he plays xiàngqí with." Lacroix casually pulled a small, wickedly curved hatchet off his belt.

Lacroix was faster than you thought. He struck and suddenly Chung was missing an ear.


Chung, to his credit, didn't scream.

Lacroix picked up the ear, dangling it from between his index finger and thumb in Chung's face. "I will send it to your father. The next piece will go to your mother. And I will do this for as long as I can keep you alive. And then, I will go visit myself, and I will take my time, because I am a patient man, and it occurs to me that your father may know as much you. And while your father probably doesn't love your mother, he might be inclined to speak if it eases her suffering."

You rested your forehead in your palms. Because how the fuck could you be the good guys if you did shit like that? Granted, you suspected Lacroix was bluffing, and you knew Jack wouldn't let him go torture a little old lady, Triad family or not, but it still made your skin crawl. This was the man you were learning from? Would you be OK with this in a year? What about Ziv? Your grip on your tanto tightened, and you felt a warm hand on your back.

"Relax," Jack said. "There are lines we don't cross. Gérard knows that."

Gabriel didn't say anything, because you knew he would cross those lines to keep his people safe, Jack topping that list.

Lacroix kept up his friendly tone, describing exactly what he'd do to Chung's aged mother if he didn't talk. Chung had a wife and son, but Lacroix was really pushing on the filial piety angle. And Chung was sweating hard, his eyes darting around the room.

"You will kill me after this. You will not touch my family."

"Of course. Make us happy and we might even return your body, all parts included," Lacroix smiled brightly, and it made your stomach turn. He was lying, of course. Chung's family would never get closure.

"I don't know who set it up. We wanted the tech for our Red Pole omnic division. The fire should have burned hot enough to erase any evidence of that prototype. The researcher we bought
was the first to be executed; no loose ends. The tech we acquired easily, but then came the contract for the Strike Commander. I don't know how they knew he would come, but I assume it was because they were going to create a big enough incident. I was just to wait for the "rogue" omnis to go down and finish Morrison at the end. The more Overwatch agents I could send with him, the higher my bounty."

"Details, Chung."

The assassin hesitated, perhaps a little shocky from blood loss.

"You've got such a pretty wife. She's a doctor, isn't she?" Lacroix licked his lips, casually turning the hatchet over in his hands.

Chung told Lacroix everything he knew. Dates, times, bank account numbers, even some On Sing names. He talked about the omnic program, and it sounded far more advanced than you liked. A certain Fong Chun had passed the orders down to him. You would be going to Hong Kong soon, you decided, and retrieve that man.

Jack's hand was warm against your back.

"Did you want a turn?" Lacroix turned to the interrogation window and you swore he was looking straight at you.

You were on your feet before you realized it. But Gabriel was already at the door. You took a step and Jack caught your wrist.

"Don't," he said softly.

"He was-

"Let Gabriel handle it."

"I can-

"I know. But you'll regret it later." He kissed your gloved hand. "And Gabriel will need us both afterward."

Fucking Jack knew how to play you like a violin. You sat back down, his fingers stroking the inside of your arm.

You looked up when Gabriel punched the Chung in the gut, and you heard bones and cartilage snapping, somewhere in the vicinity of the ribs. Lacroix stood by, arms crossed, face impassive.

Chung gave a rattling wheeze and Gabriel picked up the bolt cutters.

You knew what was next. You'd been here before. And this time, you had the foresight to look away. Gabriel took the same three fingers first: index, middle, and ring off the left hand.

Jack turned your face to his. "You've never told him how much that bothers you, have you?"

You shrugged. "I can handle it. It doesn't give me flashbacks. But both the visual and the why of it are...uncomfortable."

"You were permanently scarred protecting him. He feels it should have been the other way
around. It's not something he's gotten over," Jack said. "Do you want me to say something?"

You'd always suspected something like that, but it wasn't something you ever wanted to bring up in conversation. "It's not his fault. I don't want him carrying that around." You paused. "Would me saying anything change anything?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Couldn't hurt."

You turned your eyes back to the interrogation room.

"Don't worry," Gabriel said. "If you've told the truth, we're not going to go after your family. But you're not leaving here alive."

Chung might have laughed. That gurgle almost seemed relieved, but that was probably projection. He was choking on his own blood, because Gabriel had pulverized his rib cage, driving shards of bone into soft tissue. You didn't miss that connection either.

Gabriel stood back and let Chung drown as his lungs filled with blood.

Jack held onto your wrist the entire time. You would have bruises in the shape of his fingers.

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You sipped a Coke and nibbled on the pizza. You weren't enthusiastic about food, not after that demonstration, but emitter healing always left you with an appetite. You sat on Jack's couch. Jack had Gabriel in the shower, and while you wanted to join them, everything hurt too much still.

At this point, you were going to have to name the emitter. Emmett? Emma? Emmy? Ziv was right, you were shit at naming. You did consider pasting some googly eyes on it.

Gabriel and Jack both emerged, in nothing but gym shorts and you tried not to stare at all that hard muscle. Gabriel's shorts clung to his thighs, and outlined the curves of his butt. You tilted your head back, trying not to be obvious about your ogling as he bent over to grab his boots out of the middle of the floor.

Jack's skin was pink from the shower and maybe other things. He gave you a sly look, and stretched, arms reaching overhead, while his pectorals rippled. You smiled at him wistfully and he winked at you.

Gabriel's eyes were unfocused as he dropped onto the sofa beside you. Jack settled on the other side, cramming half a slice of pizza into his mouth.

"Feeling better?" You turned Gabriel's chin so he was looking at you and he sighed, kissing your fingers.

"Yes," he rumbled. "Gérard was right. Did him too quickly. Couldn't help myself."

"Probably because you felt sorry for him. Lacroix's kind of psycho. Like, are we sure he's really on our side?"

Gabriel laughed, letting himself fall the rest of the way into your lap. His hair was damp, but you didn't mind. "He's not going after the family. No point now."
That wasn't the reassurance you wanted, but you'd take it. "You OK?"

"Fine," he said, tugging on a lock of your hair. "You?"

"Wishing I could've joined you in the shower," you said.

"Watching me do all that didn't put you off?" Gabriel asked, his eyes lingering on your left hand.

You shrugged. "Didn't do anything for me, but I'm not squeamish. And you took good care of me after Chumak." You offered him a bite of your pizza and he took the whole damn thing in one Jaws-style attack, his teeth grazing your fingers.

Jack laughed at your slightly disgusted expression.

"Yeah, I take it all back. You're awful and make my ovaries shrivel up like raisins."

Gabriel's grinned up at you, cheeks puffed out as he chewed. And damn if he wasn't cute, even if it pissed you off.

"Didn't think table manners bothered you," Jack said, grabbing another slice.

"It's not that; I don't have table manners," you clarified. "But he took all my pizza. That's a dick move."

"There's more pizza," Jack said.

"Not the point."

"You share food with us all the time," Jack said, sounding confused.

"Not my portion," you said.

"Had a dog once," Gabriel said, after having chewed and swallowed the slice. "Started as a stray. A real sweetheart. But at feeding time, if anyone came near his bowl... Well, you'd need stitches afterward."

You pursed your lips, not liking that comparison one bit. "So you do know better."

"Just pointing out that you have some food aggression," Gabriel said. "It's cute. Not healthy, but cute."

"Ironic that you're judging aggression," you said and reached for more pizza, but you couldn't quite get to it, because there was something in your lap.

Jack nudged the box closer.

"Thanks." You paused mid-reach, and then pulled your left glove off. You rested your metal fingers on Gabriel's nose. "Do these bother you?"

"No," Gabriel said, kissing the tips. "I think they bother you more."

"Yeah, maybe." You looked at Jack for help.

He just grinned at you. Because he was a dick.
"You have a pattern," you said after a moment. "I uh...yeah. Fingers. Chop chop chop. They match." You held up your left hand wiggling the respective fingers, because fuck coherency.

"I understood that," Gabriel said after a moment.


You pinched the bridge of your nose. "You're always badgering me about therapy and shit. And I've done it enough to know that's a big red flag."

"You think I'm some kind of amputee fetishist?" Gabriel asked, sitting up.

"No!" You paused. "You're not, are you?"

"No." Gabriel rolled his eyes and picked up another slice of pizza. "I'm not going to deny the connection between your injuries and my interrogation techniques. But it doesn't bleed over into anything else. Does it bother you?"

"I don't want you to feel guilty for something that wasn't your fault." You studied your fingers.

"Like you don't feel guilty about Shin Sato or Aishani."

"That's different. I was there, and conscious, and-"

"It's the same, except I was their CO; they were my responsibility. Maybe it's not my fault, but it doesn't feel that way. And I didn't pay for fucking up. Everyone else did." He took your left hand in his, kissing the joints. "Your fingers don't bother me. It's that you lost them because of me."

"I lost them because those Talon cunts blew up the base and I was too dumb to duck properly. It's not all about you, you narcissist."

Jack snorted. "Very tactful, baby."

Gabriel just laughed. "I know that here." He tapped his temple. "But I don't feel it here." He placed your hand over his heart. "I'll admit, I like taking from them some of what they took from you. It doesn't hurt that it's an effective way to make someone talk. But if it bothers you, I'll stop doing that."

"...I'm not going to comment on your interrogation methods. I just don't want you to feel guilty about me. You're carrying around enough shit. You know it's not your fault, right?"

"Some of it is," Gabriel said. "I should've been better. I should've cleaned up Blackwatch sooner. I should've expected that last ambush."

"Maybe. But talk about unrealistic expectations; even if you're a super soldier, you're still human. You didn't have control of the entire situation, so you don't get to take all that blame on yourself."

"That's nice of you to say but-"

"And you're nowhere near perfect, it's not a secret, stop acting like you are, you're not fooling anyone, least of all us." The words spilled out rapidly.
Jack choked on his coke, spraying a fine mist across the couch and the edge of the coffee table. Thankfully, he missed the pizza.

Gabriel kept your hand against his chest. "You just keep sweet talking me, Lucky. See where it gets you."

"Pfft, Jack's not going to say it, unless you two are fighting, and then you won't listen anyway."

Jack blotted at his face with a napkin. "Damnit, Lucky, you had to time it when I had my mouth full."

"But yeah, that's what I wanted to say." Gabriel had a strange look on his face, like you'd surprised him and he wasn't sure what to do next. You decided a little deflection was in order.

"Also, Jack made me do it." You took another slice of pizza, psychoanalysis complete.

Gabriel looked over his shoulder.

"I didn't *make* her do it -"

"Instigator," Gabriel said, without any heat.

Jack leaned over and kissed him. "OK, maybe a little."

Gabriel wrapped an arm around you. "Troublemaker," he said, and leaned in to take another bite of your pizza. You smacked him in the nose, with the bottom crust, and then took a mouthful. "Uck Ov!"

Gabriel stared for a moment, then lunged, and you threw the rest of the pizza at Jack, rather than let Gabriel have it. Because food aggression or not, you were Blackwatch petty first.

You got dressed, progress slowing when your eyes fell on Jack tucked against Gabriel's chest. Gabriel had kicked off his covers, and their legs were intertwined. Jack had a faint smile on his face, and Gabriel looked so peaceful it made you want to crawl back under the blankets and cuddle up with him.

Or suck his dick.

You sighed, because it still hurt to breathe and you could not manage any sex marathons this week. The interesting effect was that both Gabriel and Jack just wanted to touch you more. It wasn't even sexual: hand-holding, chaste kisses, back scratches. Hell, you'd spent most of the evening on Jack's lap, if only to keep Gabriel away from your pizza.

You gave them one last wistful glance, and slipped out the door. You were halfway through the officers' quarters, when you heard footsteps. Shit.

Korpal emerged from the main hall, perfectly polished, and one brow raised when he saw you.

"Agent Strike," he said, all oily charm. "What are you doing here at this hour in the morning?" He wore a sly look, and you could see him speculating whose room you'd come from.
"Mr. Korpal," you greeted dryly. "I could say the same thing."

"You are ambitious," Korpal smirked. "It's good to see horizontal diplomacy is alive and well in Overwatch."

You heard a door open and prayed it wasn't Jack or Gabriel.

"You left this behind, ma puce."

You groaned and turned around.

Gérard stood behind you in his shirtsleeves, top two buttons undone. His dark hair was disheveled and he gave you a slow intimate smile that made you shiver, and not from pleasure. This was too fucking weird.

In his hand he held a gauzy black scarf, and leaning into your space, he nimbly tied it around your throat. It smelled like his cologne. "How unlike you to be so distracted."

You fought the urge to tear the scarf off, and strangle both men. "Don't be so full of yourself, Gérard." It was even weirder to call him by his first name, but you had to continue the charade.

"I'm not the one who was filled, ma puce."

You facepalmed.

Korpal was laughing at you. Lacroix was laughing at you. You had died and gone to hell. Or this was a nightmare and you were going to look down and realize you'd forgotten your pants too.

"Interesting dynamic," Korpal said, looking between you two. "I wasn't expecting that, given your rivalry."

Lacroix shrugged. "She has her charms."

"My work and my personal life are two separate things," you lied audaciously. "Gérard has his uses."

"You wound me," Lacroix smiled at you too sharply, and tugged on the perfumed scarf, drawing you far too close to his face. "After all those sweet."

"Don't worry, Gérard, if I get the promotion, I'll still have a place for you. He looks very good on his knees," you said, giving Korpal a nonchalant nod.

"That's a big "if," ma cherie. You're such an arrogant little thing. I'll enjoy teaching you a lesson in humility." Lacroix released the scarf. "You'll want to run along now and let the men talk."

"If you want to embarrass Mr. Korpal, go on then, I have work to do." You gave Korpal a polite nod. "Don't let your guard down around him."

"I could say the same to you," Korpal smirked.

"Oh, I am well aware," you said, meaning it.
"Fuck," you swore as soon as you got back to your room, the scarf balled up in your gloved hands.

"Are you all right, Lucky? Agent Lacroix was...awake, and I informed him that you needed assistance. It seemed unwise to involve Strike Commander Morrison or Commander Reyes."

"Good call," you said and set the scarf on your desk. "That was too close. And now Talon's going to think I'm sleeping with Lacroix, which makes my life more complicated. Maybe. Hopefully he's trashing me to Korpal right now emphasizing that I am just a stepping stone."

"...Yes, in cruder terms," Athena said after a moment. "If you need help moving between your...significant others' quarters undetected, I can aid you."

Huh. That seemed like cheating. And you had no problem with that. "Yeah, that'd be great," you said. Because you did not need to have another incident like the one this morning. You did not want to owe Lacoix. "Is that against your protocols?"

"As long as you are just requesting aid in moving undetected and not breaking other rules, no. I am happy to help."

"You do this sort of thing often?"

"You are the only person I have made this offer to. The rest of our team doesn't require that amount of stealth in their daily activities."

"That's a lot of trust," you said. "Or am I misreading it?"

"You're a good teammate, Lucky. I want to help." Athena paused. "And I know you need all the help you can get. Ziv has emphasized this on numerous occasions."

"Ziv is a jerk." You needed a shower, to get any trace of Lacroix's cologne off. "But he's not wrong. Don't ever tell him I said that."

"If you wear one of the communicators we can choose an encrypted channel and I will give you instructions." Was Athena learning how to gloss over awkward social moments? Because Ziv had certainly not taught her that.

"So uh, can you not tell them you're helping? I mean, they can always revoke access to their quarters, and I'll respect that. But the element of surprise is way too cool to pass up."

"I think we can do that," Athena said.

You sat back at your desk, and contemplated the possibilities.

Gabriel hadn't come down to the office yet.

"Korpal incoming," Athena warned.
"Start recording," you said.

The door opened without any knocks, and you pretended to be reading a report when Korpal stepped inside.

"Aren't you a busy little bee?" He didn't leer at you, probably because you were female, but his ingratiating tone made you feel dirty.

"To what do I owe the honor?"

"Interesting that you and Lacroix are sleeping together."

"We don't trust each other enough to sleep," you said dryly. "It's a hazard of the job."

"It's interesting then, that he tried to protect you," Korpal said.

You raised a brow. Because he could not possibly know- "Come again?"

"Lacroix spent some time telling me what a whore you are." Korpal smiled. "I have to say, you aren't my type, but he pimped you pretty effectively."

"Yeah, well, Lacroix's fucked up." And so was Korpal. You didn't back away. You just folded your hands on the desk. "That's not protection."

"Men like Lacroix are all twisted up inside," Korpal leaned over your desk. "If he really hated you, he would have talked up your charms, trying to get me interested. It was subtly done, but he wanted to deflect my attention."

"You obviously prefer men, so that's wasted effort."

"I just think he doesn't want to share," Korpal said.

You laughed at that, because you didn't want to think about Lacroix's sex life ever. "Lacroix just likes humiliation."

"Or, maybe the two of you are collaborating. Maybe you want to be his pet secretary?"

You wrinkled your nose, not trying to hide your disgust. "Lacroix is a means to an end. It's not something I really had a choice in and I have no desire to remain under his thumb." you said, having no trouble implying that the relationship wasn't consensual.

Korpal smile widened. "So what if I told you the job was yours, if only you got him out of the way?"

"I'd want more guarantees than just your word," you said.

"I think you want him gone, badly," Korpal said, not hesitating to capitalize on that weak point.

You shrugged. "It's very risky."

"I have powerful allies that find him...troublesome," Korpal said.

"He's an obnoxious prick," you said, the sentiment genuine.

"You seem much more reasonable."
"That's because I am." Again, not much acting needed on your part.

"Well then, Strike. I think you know what to do."

It was strange to see everyone in one place. Well, not everyone, but almost everyone you dealt with regularly. The main Blackwatch conference room was rarely used, but had the best soundproofing, according to Gabriel. You could guess how he knew that.

Jack sat at the head of the table, Gabriel on his left, Captain Amari on his right. Lacroix lounged in a chair just off to the side, looking terribly pleased with himself. Ziv leaned against the wall beside him, arms crossed like the kind of back alley punk you used to be. He also mimicked a punchable-level of smugness. Winston stayed closed to Ana. You sat by Gabriel; Jesse and Genji stayed on the Blackwatch side of the table.

"Gérard, you have a place here," Captain Amari said. "Agent Mihret, I don't know what your excuse is, but Gérard should have taught you better."

You didn't grin at Jesse, but it was a near thing. He gave you a sly look before quickly tilting his hat downward, so as to partially conceal his expression. Genji had his faceplate on, but you suspected he was amused too.

"Ana, I would love to be at your side, but Winston beat me to it." However, Lacroix rose, sauntered over, and took a seat. Ziv pushed off the wall and followed. You didn't miss Gabriel rolling his eyes.

"Now that we're all sitting at the table, Athena, what can you tell us about Korpal's whereabouts?" Jack began.

"He boarded a private flight to Chennai at 1600 hours, giving his apologies to the Strike Commander, and claiming a family emergency. The transport has landed, and he was whisked away in a vehicle bearing the logo of his wife's company. We lost track of him in traffic."

"Is it normal for you to lose cars on road, with your level of satellite tracking?" Gabriel asked.

"It is highly abnormal. I strongly suspect there was outside interference." Did Athena sound embarrassed?

"Let's back up," Lacroix said. "To ensure everyone understands the situation." He folded his hands in his lap. "We knew Vikram Korpal was a Talon spy before he ever set foot in Zurich. We also knew he had a weakness for handsome young men and being an absolute pest. Agent McCree, was tasked, because of his considerable...charms, to handle Korpal."

"I wasn't the one doing the handling," Jesse muttered.

"Indeed," Lacroix said. "Chanceux's job was to provide a flawed view of Blackwatch's political landscape. She did a most convincing job portraying us as political rivals and gave the impression of wanting to promote Gabriel to Strike Commander, a very believable scheme already proposed by our beloved Director Petras."
You didn't squirm under everyone's attention, but you smiled sheepishly. "I also tried to sell him Jesse."

"You'd be better off offering him Ziv. That way we'd get some peace and quiet around here," Jesse drawled.

"Yeah, I was trying to convince him to do me a favor. Nobody wants Ziv. He's awful."

"Fuck you both!"

Jack coughed. "Focus, agents."

"Korpal did come to see me and size me up. He made a few token overtures, but he was firmly in Chanceux's camp, a side effect of being a Talon-plant. It didn't hurt that she offered him McCree."

"We do have all the conversations recorded, for the very top secret record," Winston said.

"Afterhours, Agent Mihret and Agent Shimada handled the monitoring. Korpal has a taste for expensive food and criminally young rentboys."

Ziv managed to look both smarmy and disgusted. You weren't sure how he did it. Genji just looked bored.

"It was all very basic operational surveillance coupled with standard disinformation procedure," Lacroix continued, making all the pseudo-treachery sound very boring. "It did get interesting when Korpal came sniffing around the officers' quarters and found Chanceux after she'd left Jack's quarters this morning."

Everyone was looking at you and you winced, because even though they all knew your relationship status, it wasn't something you flaunted. "He didn't know where I came from. Athena got Lacroix. He came out and pretended I'd been in his room. Thanks for that by the way." You sounded more resentful than grateful.

"Any time, Chanceux." Lacroix twirled the scarf that you'd returned around his fingers. "We were very convincing."

You fought the urge to throw your coffee mug at his head.

Jack shot a concerned look at Gabriel. Gabriel just snorted.

"Linking Lucky to you is just painting a target sign on her back," Jesse said.

"He came to me afterward and offered me the Blackwatch Commander position if I got rid of Lacroix," you said.

Ziv narrowed his eyes. "Why would he think you'd do that?"

"Chanceux went out of her way to imply that I was coercing her into sex." To your surprise, he nodded in approval. "It was a good smokescreen that added depth to her cover story. It gave a personal motive behind the rivalry, an all too believable one given how badly DGSE has behaved in the past. Sadly, while all these machinations gave us a broader view of Korpal's allegiances - he is definitely in bed with Talon - there isn't anything we can use in a court of law."

"If there's nothing we can use, what was the point?" Jack asked, eyes hard.
Lacroix actually yawned. "Who said anything about taking this to court?"

"We're not going to the UN?" Captain Amari asked, but she didn't sound surprised. "Are we that short on allies?"

"No, but it doesn't behoove us to show our hand so early. We don't need the scandal." Lacroix tilted his head to the side, smiling brightly, and was that a dimple? Did that fucker have dimples? There was something wrong with that.

"Quit dragging it out," you scowled. "You've already solved this, haven't you?"

"What have I told you about patience, Chanceux?"

"Stop wallowing in your own cleverness and spill it," Gabriel said.

"Soldiers," Lacroix laughed and you remembered his warning about impatience. The bastard. "Agent Shimada, Agent Mihret and I have solved it." Lacroix basked in his own admiration, and maybe some of Ziv's. Ziv was acquiring that angled smirk that Lacroix did so well. Ugh. And was he trying to grow a mustache? This was just getting weird.

"Korpal has been estranged from his wife for years. It's a political marriage and very acrimonious for obvious reasons," Genji said. He still looked bored, but it had to be the faceplate. He was awake, his eyes were open, but he didn't look interested in the proceedings.

"Because he's a dick or because he likes dick?" Jesse asked.

"Both," Lacroix said. "And his wife has been looking for something to use against him."

"So we wrecked his sham marriage, whoop-dee-shit," Jesse said, taking his hat off. "You've seen these trashy rich divorces. It sucks for him, but how does that help us?"

"Gita Sharma comes from a proud, high-caste, obscenely wealthy family. Agent Mihret posed as a private investigator and contacted her to offer her his services. It was a clichéd story about him tracking down one cheating spouse and catching him with Korpal. But she bought it, accepted the contract, and we produced a few films: suffice to say that Korpal's companion is older than he looks, was willing, and was well-compensated for his evening roles. Gita plans to leak it selectively. Her clan will take insult. He will disappear in a twisted honor killing, but everyone in their society will know it is because he crossed the Sharmas, and no one will suspect Blackwatch involvement."

Everyone sat there, digesting that.

"What kind of reports did he send back to the UN?" Jack asked.

"In his private communications with Director Petras, he recommended that Strike Commander Morrison be given an operations oversight advisory position and Commander Reyes be promoted. Interestingly, for his UN oversight committee, he only had positive and vague reports to give about Blackwatch, hence Commander Reyes' recommendation," Athena said.

Gabriel and Jack exchanged looks.

"It could have been much worse," Lacroix said, smiling. "We can work with this. But what did he send Talon?"

"We can't tell everything he sent anything off to Talon. Ziv and I are decrypting all the data
packets we intercepted, but Korpal was using some pretty cutting edge tech," Winston said, sheepishly. "We know he delivered a more in-depth report about Blackwatch and Commander Reyes to them. But we're still working with the data we do have."

So you had no idea if he'd linked you to Lacroix. You would have to operate as if he had. Though if he had, you could maintain the fiction that you were under duress. It wouldn't be difficult.

"We'll keep you updated," Ziv said.

"The Chennai local news is reporting that Vikram Korpal's vehicle was carjacked just outside his father-in-law's home. He was tragically killed," Athena announced. "The police suspect the motive was robbery. But some of the celebrity gossip sites are already whispering that it was Gita's oldest brother who ordered the hit."

"That was quick," Ana said, after a moment.

Lacroix radiated slick, untouchable self-satisfaction.

You were glad Korpal was dead. But did Lacroix have to be that right, damnit?

"How much of that faux drama was necessary?" You stared hard at Lacroix, wondering if you could make his head explode through sheer willpower.

"Window dressing, Chanceux. You, me, and McCree kept him distracted with petty Blackwatch politics. However, he did spread some gossip with people lacking the proper clearances-" Lacroix gave an apologetic shrug.

"...Is there now a rumor that I'm sleeping with Lacroix?"

Winston averted his eyes. Jack and Gabriel both looked irritated. Captain Amari took off her hat and scratched her head. You were going to have to ask her how she managed to go through her career not getting paired with everyone she spoke to; maybe it was because she was classy, maybe it was because everyone knew she could make their heads explode from three miles away.

"Have lunch with Amélie today. In a very public place. That should quell any issues," Lacroix said.

"Or it will make everyone think you're sleeping with both of them," Genji said.

"Better a slut than a homewrecker," Ziv added helpfully.

You were going to throw your coffee mug at him, but Jesse knew you too well and grabbed it first.

_________________________________________________________

You sipped your coffee and tried to smile at Amélie Lacroix.

"We should do this with wine," she said, her lipstick not coming off on the rim of her mug. How did she do that? "I know they frown upon that in the cafeteria, so we will have to go out into the city." Her accent was pronounced but elegant and you were glad she spoke English fluently.
Your French was...laughable. Literally: Ziv and Lacroix laughed at your accent.

You conscientiously cut your cake into dainty bites with your fork.

Amélie wore an off-the-shoulder sweater dress in maroon and knee-high leather boots. Her hair was pulled back in an effortless chignon and her nails matched her sweater. Her makeup was bold and flawless. You now understood what Lacroix meant about Amélie being the perfect teacher on how to pass in higher echelons of society.

"I uh...sure," you said. "I'm sorry. This is a new experience. I've never had to do this before and I'm sorry that you've been dragged into our mess."

"It is no trouble, Chanceux," she said with a gentle laugh. "I am delighted to have some way to repay you for that ski trip. And Gérard speaks so highly of you."

That was laying it on thick, but you had enough manners to not badmouth Lacroix to his wife. "I was just doing my job," you said.

"So modest, it is very unnecessary. You should be proud of your accomplishments, even if you aren't allowed to speak of them." She took a deep breath, raising her hands elegantly, palms up. "Stand up straighter. Look people in the eye. You are formidable. Don't be afraid to show it."

"I'm happiest when not being noticed," you said. "Because if I've been noticed, I've done my job wrong."

"Who's talking about work? There's an entirely different side to life." She smiled conspiratorially. "I've seen how your men look at you. Even if you wear no makeup, dingy armor, and a semi-flattering uniform: none of that matters. They appreciate you and that is how it should be." She tapped your nose with her index finger. "But you could always dress the part. Bring them to their knees. It is good to be fascinating."

"Uhh..." Because you were not having this conversation with someone you barely knew in the middle of the Overwatch cafeteria.

"You lack savoir-faire. Gérard has said as much, but really, it isn't his place to tell you these things so bluntly. You and Ana should accompany me out for a night on the town. Shopping, a spa visit, dinner." She sighed happily. "Overwatch is...pleasant, but it is so very dry. We should get out and see an opera or perhaps a puppet show? Would that be more to your taste?"

That did not sound fun. "I've never been to the opera. And puppets are creepy."

Amélie pursed her lips. "Maybe we should start small with an art museum. Ana would enjoy that. I will talk to Gérard. He will make it so."

You put a piece of cake in your mouth to give yourself time to think.

"Yes, Ana will enjoy herself and I think you will too, Chanceux. We can expense it, of course. You are supposed to be training with me soon anyway. You will teach me sneaky knife moves. I will teach you which knife is appropriate at dinner. Then we can discuss which dinner knife is the most elegant choice for an assassination. I expect timing is the key." She studied your face. "Gérard can't possibly expect you to play honeytrap without some quality time at a salon. See, I know some things about espionage." She smiled at you. "And what I do not know, I will learn. And I will smile and hold my head high while doing it. Because they do not deserve to see me in distress. Remember that, Chanceux. Even if they are getting to you, never let them see it."

You had forgotten for a moment that Amélie had been a ballerina and even if you were
uncultured swine, you knew the performing arts world to be cutthroat and vicious. Her poise wasn’t just for show. It was an armor in and of itself.

"Thanks," you said.

"It is not enough to be impassive," she said sharply. "You must be absolutely unconcerned with their trivial thoughts. They are nothing to you, Chanceux. And do not be afraid to show it. They will come to fear and respect you. *Et c’est comme ça.*"

"I...thanks?" You stared at the empty plates; that meant dinner was over, right? OK, you’d survived and had managed not to disgrace yourself. Excellent.

Amélie stood. "Dinner was delightful," she told you, and clasped your hands in hers. She kissed each of your cheeks left, right, left, right, and you didn’t even try to return the gesture. "We should do this again soon. À bientôt, Chanceux!" She gave an elegant little wave and sauntered off, half the cafeteria watching her.

You took advantage of the distraction to slip away.

Chapter End Notes

...I need to go to bed. Kind of dumb right now. But today was an amusing and dramatic day. Between my manager telling me "I can't deal with this right now! You do it!" In reference to handling the local news (my other coworkers were like "NO! Don't let her do it!" Which was the wise decision) and the level of hilariously obnoxious shit that was said, I'm actually kind of good. Still need to find a new job.
Chapter 28

A few days after Korpal's tragic demise, you were finally healed up. Angela didn't clear you for operations, but you were officially off medical leave. Best not to mention that little Korpal mission you'd undertaken. Angela didn't have to know about that.

When you walked into your room, you nearly tripped over Jack. He sat at your desk, in black fatigues, his legs stretched out. Gabriel reclined on your bed, in a hoodie and sweatpants. You shut the door behind you, very aware of how crowded everything was. Your room was just big enough for you. Having Jack in it the other night was cramped. Having both of them here? You'd have to push in the chair and maybe stack some more furniture in the corner.

"Interesting gun," Jack said, not picking up Montgomery's revolver. He rolled one of the bullets between his fingers. You'd left them lined up on the desk. "That the one that nearly got you, baby?"

You nodded, eyes flicking between him and Gabriel. Gabriel inclined his head back in greeting, but you weren't fooled by his coolness. Something was churning beneath the surface.

"You think it was closer than the goddamn Red Pole?" Jack asked, eyes flashing.

You shrugged, because while the Red Pole omnic had nearly gotten you killed in two different ways, it'd happened too fast to linger over. Sometimes you'd be drifting off and you'd glimpse eternity in the barrel of that very revolver. "I know which one gives me nightmares."

"That's because I got all the nightmares from Operation Cobblestone Dust," Jack ground out.

You shook your head and leaned forward, tapping him between the eyes. "Not all of them. If I'd been too slow-"
He caught your wrist and pulled you onto his lap. The chair creaked beneath your added weight and it rocked backward too far.

"Saw you running the track today." Jack pushed your hair back, one hand trailing up your side. "Healed up then?"

"I think I can handle you tonight. No sparring-level stuff though." Your voice was breathy and you tightened your grip on Jack's shoulders.

"That's why we're using your room," Jack said, already unbuttoning your shirt. "Can't get too carried away in here."

"Jack, you can get carried away anywhere," you said, recalling him pinning you up against the wall in that stairwell in Belfast.

"What do you think, Gabe? The bed or the floor?"

"Bent over the desk could work. Dresser's a little high."

Your pulse picked up. This was all for show, they already knew what they wanted to do and where. You still liked hearing it.

"Nah, she's going to need some cushioning." Jack's hands lingered on your sides. "Promised her I was going to pound her senseless. And I keep my promises."

"Floor then," Gabriel said, voice husky. "You'll break the bed."

You looked between the two of them. "I uh...can we not break things, please?" You climbed off his lap, a little concerned about the chair. It hadn't tilted that far back before.

"Floor it is," Jack said. "Still owe you our post-combat cooldown."

"I'm surprised you're into delayed gratification," you said, because pointing out that he was using a ridiculously technical term for sex would just annoy him.

"I'm really not." He narrowed his eyes at you. "I just haven't forgotten your attitude problem."

"What? I was well-behaved. Gabriel agrees." You waved your hand at Gabriel, who just smirked.

"I don't, and as your CO for that mission, it's my opinion that matters." Jack's expression flattened. "You were insubordinate, mouthy, and a loose cannon. Worse-" Jack stood and yanked your collar, pulling you closer. "-you are still completely unrepentant."

"But Jack-

"You think you're the only one who can hold a grudge?" His smile wasn't the least bit friendly now. "You're too used to Gabriel letting things slide. I'm not that kind of guy."

"That was over a week ago!"

"I've had a lot of time to think on it," he said, dragging his knuckles across your cheek. "Had so many ideas. Gabe talked me out of some of them, since you're still healing up."

You glanced over your shoulder warily. Gabriel sat on the edge of your bed, hat on your
night stand. He looked entirely too pleased.

"It's not him you should be watching," Jack said, one hand still gripping your collar. He pushed you up against the door, knee parting your thighs. "Or are you trying to egg me on?"

Your nipples tightened and you rubbed against his thigh. "No, sir."

Jack chuckled and released his hold on your shirt. "Is this what I have to do to get you to behave?" He leaned in teeth grazing your throat. You moaned as he sucked on your neck, squirming as his hands cupped your ass. He ground against you, cock already hard.

"If you fuck me up against the door, everyone's going to hear us." Your voice came out high and breathless.

"Would serve you right. Bet it would stop all those pesky rumors if everyone knew who you belonged to," Jack growled in your ear. "Not McCree. Not Gérard." He unfastened your pants, calloused fingers slipping into your panties. Your eyes widened as he slid one thick digit inside you. "This is the property of the Strike Commander."

"You are so greedy," Gabriel said, but he didn't sound upset.

"Already wet for me?" Jack purred, ignoring Gabriel. "You like this, don't you?"

You nodded, not trusting yourself to stay quiet.

He pushed another finger inside and you covered your mouth.

"You're soaking wet, baby. So eager for me to fuck you? I know you haven't been taking care of yourself lately." Jack dropped to his knees and nudged your panties aside. His tongue flicked against your clit and you bit your glove. His fingers moved leisurely inside you, wiggling and spreading you for him.

You slumped against the door, your legs shaking as he played with you. His eyes stayed on your face and even if he was the one on his knees, he had you trapped there. It was his touch making you tremble, his tongue teasing you while you struggled not to make any noise. There wasn't any question as to who was in charge.

You bit your glove when he pulled away, trying to mask your disappointment.

"When I let you come, it's going to be on my cock. Nowhere else." Jack wiped his mouth off on the back of his hand. "Strip."

You complied, tossing your clothes into a pile on the bed.

Jack stroked your ribs, watching your face. He poked them gently and you pursed your lips.

"I said I was fine."

"And I know better than to believe you," Jack said sharply. "You'd rather lie than admit weakness."

"Only some of the time," you said, a little defensive.

"You think those times don't count? You think that makes me trust you more?"
The words were a slap in the face. "Jack-"

"Don't "Jack" me," he growled, shaking his head. "You think I don't remember that building going down in flames? I saw the pictures of that Red Pole omnic; it slaughtered those civilians. Then you disappeared into that goddamn building after a fucking assassin on your own. Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"No." You crossed your arms. "Jesus Jack, you want to rehash this now?"

"No. I want you to know why I'm angry."

You sighed. "Do we need to spar instead?"

"No," he said gruffly. "Come here." He patted his thighs. You perched on his lap, his erection pressed against your leg. You watched him carefully, and he pressed his forehead to yours. "We talked all about how your decisions were tactically sound. Fine. You're right. You did Blackwatch proud. But you scared the shit out of me, Lucky. Worse, you don't seem to care. You never apologized. You never acknowledged that I had a goddamn point. You were too caught up in being fucking right. It's one thing if an agent takes a risk for her CO. But you're not just an agent and I'm not just your CO. What do you think that does to me, knowing that you're ready to throw yourself away because it's your goddamn job to protect me?"

"Then maybe you should have said this and not been riding my ass over insubordination, tardiness, and everything but what was really bothering you!" Your throat was tight and you hated the wounded look on Jack's face. It made you feel like the bad guy.

"Yeah. I get that." He closed his eyes. "And I know you're bad at feelings. But I'm no expert either; that's why it took so long to put this into words. What would you do in my place?"

You hung your head, unsure of what to say.

"This is the part where you apologize," Gabriel said dryly, still sitting on the bed.

You rubbed the back of your neck. Because that was the obvious answer you were too dumb to think of. "I'm sorry, Jack. I'm not sorry that I accomplished my mission, but I am sorry that I put you through all that."

Once upon a time you'd had this conversation with Gabriel, after rescuing Ziv and Lacroix in Shanghai and getting shot for your efforts. You expected this kind of anxiety from Gabriel. But this was new with Jack. Did they have a point? Were you too careless? Or were they too attached to see the situation clearly? Because realistically, if anyone was expendable, well, it wasn't either of them.

"Better," Jack said, kissing you. You pressed against him, goosebumps spreading across your skin. "Don't do that to me, please."

"OK," you said. "I'll try."

"That's all I can ask," Jack sighed, because you both knew it wasn't that simple. "You're cold," he said, rubbing your arms.

"Yup," you said, because it wouldn't be nice to point out that he told you to strip then talked about feelings. "Gabriel should come over here."

"Gabe's not the only one who can warm you up," Jack eased you onto your back, kneeling
between your legs. He pulled his shirt off and you sighed happily, running your fingers through the downy blonde fuzz and across his nipples. Your hands lingered on a ridge of scars just under his heart, the muscles of his abdomen firm and well-defined. He caught your wrist and held it against his chest.

You stopped moving, gaze flicking to his face. Jack frowned down at you, his brow furrowed. There was still tension in his shoulders.

"What's wrong?"

His free hand traced your jawline, fingers coming to rest on your throat. He took a deep breath. "Want to ask you to do something for me."

"OK," you said cautiously.

"I'm still pretty on edge," he admitted. He released your hand. "Can you let me be in charge?"

"You usually are," you said, eyeing his hand on your neck. "I mean, you're on top of me right now."

Jack gave you a sheepish grin. "I...not what I meant." He rubbed the back of his neck, a blush spreading across his skin. "Can you let me be in charge without pushing or goading? No sass, no fighting me. I want you to submit."

You sucked in a breath trying not to make a face. "Like, all "yes sir," and gooey agreeableness? Because I don't know if I can do that convincingly." You weren't a goddamn Barbie.

Jack blinked. "I-no. That'd be weird." He laughed, fingers stroking your throat. "You don't have to pretend to like everything I'm doing. And you can always use your safe words. I just...need a little more control right now."

You swallowed, heart rate picking up. "I uh...no arguing with you?" Your voice went a little higher than you liked. "I just have to be obedient and take it?"

"You act like I'm going to hurt you," Jack said, frown deepening.

You exhaled slowly. "It's just that I'm already the one who usually gets tied up and overwhelmed. Being difficult gives me a handle on things." You crossed your arms.

Jack leaned in and kissed your neck gently. "It's OK then. Don't want to make you uncomfortable," he said softly, though you could hear the disappointment in his voice. "I want you to enjoy yourself too."

You closed your eyes, and took a deep breath. The fact Jack had saved up all that emotion from Belfast worried you. He seemed fine after the initial blowout, but obviously that wasn't the case. Sparring with Gabriel hadn't sorted him out. Cuddling and talking with you afterward hadn't really fixed him either.

Jack had already admitted that you did the job well; this wasn't actually about Operation Cobblestone Dust. This was about him realizing he couldn't order you out of danger, no matter how much he wanted to. This was Jack's baggage catching up to Gabriel's - because you expected this kind of reaction from Gabriel. That Jack had it too surprised you. Maybe he hadn't told you the worst of his war stories. Maybe he just hid his issues better. But Jack needed some kind of
grip on the situation, and this was his solution.

You didn't like it, but you understood. It was just the antithesis of who you were. It was OK if someone else was in charge. But there was a difference between reluctantly following orders and quiet obedience. You didn't give in without a fight. You hadn't survived this long by just lying down and taking it. Even if you couldn't win, you didn't just submit.

Of course, you remembered Captain Patel dying for Gabriel and for you. That still tore you up inside. "Almost dying" and "actually dying" were very different, but now that you'd been through it, that fear would never leave you. And Jack? Well, he experienced it more than most.

You mulled it over, and came back to one conclusion: yes, you trusted Jack.

"I'll try it, sir," you said, opening your eyes.

Jack's mouth was still against your neck and he stiffened against you. "Are you sure?"

"I'll use my safe words if I need to," you said, running your fingers through his hair. "Not going to lie, I'm a little worried about whatever you have planned. But I'll try."

"You forgot to say, "sir," he said, kissing your fingers.

"...Sorry, sir," you said, quashing your urge to say something petty.

He laughed softly, nuzzling your throat. "Move your arms."

You dropped them to your sides, shuddering as he dipped lower, taking as much of one breast into his mouth as he could fit and sucking hard. You clenched your teeth as he pinched your other nipple, rolling it between his fingers and tugging on it lightly. He wasn't rough but your nipples were sensitive and he toyed with them while you squirmed beneath him. He kept one knee between your thighs. You ground against him, whimpering as his teeth grazed your flesh.

"You're getting my pants all wet," Jack said, raising his head. "Are you that sloppy already, agent?"

You bit your lip, staring at him reproachfully. You liked banter. And here he was, expecting "yes, sir" and "no, sir." It just wasn't right. "Please, sir-

He ran his fingers along your lips. "Open."

You licked his fingertips, tasting yourself. He smiled crookedly, pushed two fingers into your mouth slowly pumping them in and out. "I can see how badly you want to argue with me. Keep these in your mouth until you can be good. Next time I'll have a new gag for you."

You closed your eyes, and focused on getting his fingers wet.

"You make the same face when you're sucking my dick. I like thrusting just a little harder and watching you choke it down. You are getting better at it. And we're always happy to help you raise your limits." Jack withdrew his fingers. "You want me to play with your pussy some more, agent? Get you nice and ready for my cock?"

"Please, sir." You parted your thighs. "See how wet I am?"

"You're pushing it, agent," Jack said, but he didn't sound bothered. You reclined on your elbows, sighing as Jack slid his fingers back inside you. "Don't think you're getting off without
permission. Do you understand?"

He really wanted you to fight with him. That was the only explanation. Except when you met his gaze, there was a fierceness in his eyes that made you swallow your smartass retort. "Yes, sir."

"Good girl," he murmured, leaning in to kiss you. He nibbled on your lower lip, his fingers speeding up as he covered your mouth with his. You moaned as he curled his them, making you arch against him.

"Please-"

"So eager," Jack chuckled. "Don't worry, agent. You'll get all the cock you can take and then some. Hand me a pillow, will you Gabe?"

Your eyes widened as you realized Gabriel was already naked. He sat on your bed slowly stroking himself, dark eyes fixed on you and Jack. He tossed Jack one of your pillows.

"Do you have any idea how many times this week I've lain awake in bed jerking myself off, thinking about all the ways I wanted to fuck you when you finally healed up?" Jack asked conversationally.

"That's really hot, sir." You clenched around his fingers and Jack smirked.

"You're right baby, I don't like delayed gratification at all. Frustration makes me...testy." He pulled his fingers out of you. "Lick them clean."

You flicked your tongue along his knuckles, making a show of it before you opened your mouth and sucked on your juices off his skin. Jack groaned.

"I'll fuck your mouth later, agent. Get on all fours. Face Gabe."

You rolled forward, balancing on your hands and knees, your eyes on Gabriel's face, his fist still leisurely pumping his cock. "What are you doing on my bed, Gabriel?"

Smack! Jack's sharp slap against your ass stung and you dropped your head, teeth clenched.

"Pay attention, agent. And if you're going to address Commander Reyes, you can use "sir" or "papi." He'll answer to "daddy" as well, but you won't be walking tomorrow if you use those last two."

"You really shouldn't," Gabriel said, voice low and you shivered.

Jack dropped the pillow under your head. "You can scream into that."

You looked helplessly at Gabriel and his mouth curved in a satisfied grin. "You brought this on yourself, baby."

You bit your lip as Jack pressed himself against your slit. "Status, agent?"

"Green," you said.

Jack's hips pressed against your ass, and you shuddered as he hilted inside you on the first thrust. He stretched you, cock going in deep from this angle, and you dropped your head into the pillow, teeth sinking into the fabric.
Jack gave a low growl, gripping your hips with bruising force. "You're such a pretty cockslut, agent. Is this what you've been craving?"

"Oh yes, sir," you moaned.

"Going to fuck that sweet little pussy wide open and fill you with my cum," Jack said, speeding up. "Going to remind you exactly who you belong to. And after I've left you exhausted and used on the ground, you're going to thank me for it."

You rested your cheek on the pillow, focusing on breathing. You wanted to push back, to set the pace, but Jack held you firmly against him. He nuzzled your cervix with each stroke and you mewled into the pillow, panting softly.

"Look at yourself, ass in the air, body shaking, you're dripping wet for me and all you can do is lie there and take it," Jack sighed happily. He kneaded your ass. "I remember you teasing me in that stairwell. You said you liked it when I got "demanding and bossy." This isn't quite what you had in mind, is it?"

"No sir," you whined. "Not complaining though, sir." Despite his conversational tone, Jack had set a punishing rhythm, and you clawed at the floor, heat and pressure building in your core. You slid one hand down between your thighs.

"Did I say you could do that?" Jack caught your wrist. "And you were being so good too."

"Please Jack," you glanced at him over your shoulder. His hair fell in his face and sweat dripped down his chest. You clenched around him. "I wasn't going to come without your permission."

"Mmm, still so disrespectful. You should be calling me "sir."

He pushed you back against the floor, your face in the pillow.

"I'm sorry, sir. " You exhaled as he resumed his hard thrusts. "I get carried away, just can't help myself, sir, especially when you're spoiling me with your cock. Need you to keep me in line, sir."

Jack groaned, twitching inside you. "Damnit, agent."

"If you want her to be quiet, you have to use a gag, Jack." Gabriel chuckled. "You didn't say she couldn't be deviously agreeable, did you? Or did you forget what a clever little bitch she is?"

"Please sir, I'm just doing what you told me." Because you had learned how to give someone exactly what they asked for while keeping it the opposite of what they wanted. You smothered your smile in the pillow, because it wouldn't do for them to see you looking smug.

"I don't think you really understand submission," Jack growled.

"Maybe you can give me an expert demonstration sir. You're always talking about leading by example."

Gabriel laughed.

Jack stopped moving, his hands dropping off your waist.

"What was that, agent?"
"Sorry, sir," you said, trying not giggle.

"You're sorry?" Tension strained Jack's voice into a harsh growl. "You don't sound sorry. If you can't do this, agent, then we'll stop."

Belatedly, you realized that you shouldn't be pushing him so hard. The whole point of submitting was to give Jack some sense of control. Your playing derailed that. You met Jack's steely gaze over your shoulder.

"I am sorry, sir," you said softly. "I-" You understood sex about as much as you understood the need for control, even if your tics were subtler than Jack or Gabriel's. Jack was wrong; you understood what he meant by submission, you just didn't want to do it. Even though you agreed to it. And maybe that wasn't quite fair. Your eyes darted to his hands, and you took a deep breath. "Let me get on my back, sir. I think I can convince you."

Jack sat back on his haunches, expression cool. "Go on then."

You rolled over and spread your thighs. "Please come here, sir."

Jack knelt between your legs, cockhead pressed against your dripping slit. You took his right hand and placed it on your throat. You reclined against the pillow, and released his wrist, forcing your own hands down to your sides.

"Please don't squeeze, sir." You forced yourself to meet his eyes. You took another deep breath, unable to hide your discomfort. "I know you like breathplay, but I can't do that."

He caressed your throat, not quite closing his hand, but applying just enough pressure to hold your attention. His eyes flicked from his hand to your face, and his demeanor softened. You wondered if it was enough, but it was all you could think of and even now your breathing grew shaky. You trusted Jack not to hurt you, but that ever so slight hint of constriction still made you nervous.

"Oh sweetheart," he breathed and slid back inside you. He kept his eyes on your face, hand steady on your neck. "Such a good girl. So good to me," he murmured and kissed you hungrily. You trusted Jack not to hurt you, but that ever so slight hint of constriction still made you nervous.

"Please don't squeeze, sir." You forced yourself to meet his eyes. You took another deep breath, unable to hide your discomfort. "I know you like breathplay, but I can't do that."

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"Oh sweetheart," he breathed and slid back inside you. He kept his eyes on your face, hand steady on your neck. "Such a good girl. So good to me," he murmured and kissed you hungrily. You opened up to him, hands balling into fists at your sides.

You began to pant as he resumed his hard pace, his cock coated in your slickness. He didn't hold back now, his free hand moving down to your nipples, pinching and tugging while you squirmed under him. "You did your best to ignore the hand on your throat, keeping your attention on his face, his cock, everything but that part you didn't like. "Sir, please."

"You want it harder?" He ground against you and you bit your lip, nerves oversensitive. You wanted to move, but you couldn't, not with his hand pinning you down. He canted his hips, hitting your g-spot and your legs jerked off the ground.

"Jack!"

"Oh, you like that. Gotta remember rank, though." He nipped your bottom lip, thrusting hard inside you. His enthusiasm was contagious, and you wanted him just as badly. You raised your hips, trying to keep your back flat on the floor. Watching the almost blissful expression on Jack's face made it easier.

"Please, sir-"

Jack gave you that bright delighted smile and touched his nose to yours. "What do you want, baby? You want me to touch you somewhere else?"
"Please-" His hand kept you in place, even if he wasn't applying any force. "Please let me come, sir. You promised."

Jack’s breath hitched. His free hand slipped lower and you gasped as his calloused fingers worked rough circles around your clit.

You trembled underneath him, heels digging into the floor. "Please Jack-"

"That's it, baby. Going to fill you up again and again. I did promise to give you more than you could take. Me and Gabe both, don't you worry. You're being so good, I know. Love how you feel underneath me," he rambled, hips driving him deeper into you. You threw your head back, eyes squeezed shut as your core nerves coiled tighter and tighter. "Open your eyes, baby. I love seeing the look on your face when you come."

"Jack-"

"Oh, I haven't given you permission yet, have I?" Jack didn't slow down. "Are you just hanging there, trying to hold it back?"

"Please-" Light flickered on the edge of your vision. "Please let me come- I've been good sir, haven't I?"

Jack sighed, pleasure relaxing his smile. "Yes, baby. You can come."

It wasn't just his fingers and cock that sent you over the edge. The tension that twisted through your limbs and core snapped at his words, and you writhed underneath him, control shattered from getting his permission to come. He lasted a taut few thrusts through your orgasm before he spent himself inside you.

His hand never wavered, even when he came his grip didn't tighten and your eyes fluttered as his thumb stroked the side of your neck. He released your throat after he came, mouth claiming yours as he pinned you to ground with his hips. Jack held you against him, careful not to put his full weight on you.

You embraced him, chest too tight from the vulnerability of the act.

"Are you OK?" He asked, those blue eyes bright and liquid as he pressed almost frantic kisses to your face. "Was it too much?"

"I need a moment." You closed your eyes, breath evening out. When you opened them, Gabriel was above you, one hand brushing your hair back.

Jack sat up, pulling you against him. He rubbed your back and you took a few more shuddering breaths, before kissing his cheek.

"I'm OK. Just...too exposed." You shook your head. "Not something for every day."

"Won't do it without permission," Jack sighed against you.

You looked at Gabriel. "I hope you don't want to do that too."

"I'd be too tempted to squeeze," he chuckled and you winced. "I'm kidding." He leaned over and kissed you. "Maybe some other time when we're on the mats again. I just want you riding my dick, baby. No games for me tonight."
Jack rolled his eyes.

Gabriel sat on the floor, his erect cock bobbing slightly. "You can be on top, if you want."

It was enticing, not just because of the picture he presented. You needed some control back now. You rose on unsteady legs and balanced against Gabriel's shoulder.

"Can you lie down?"

Jack had to move onto the bed to make room, and Gabriel took the pillow and reclined, his smile devious. You lowered yourself onto him, exhaling slowly as you inched downward. You half expected him to grab your hips and rush you, but he propped himself up on his elbows, watching you through half-lidded eyes.

You pressed your palms against his abs, resting your weight on your knees. The stretch was easier from this angle and you ran your fingers along the crisscross of scars on Gabriel's torso and chest.

"You want me to sit up and suck on your pretty nipples?" Gabriel asked.

"No. Just want to enjoy the view for a moment."

Gabriel stretched out naked beneath you, and folded his arms under his head. He gave you a full pinup smile, all mischievous promises and wicked pleasure. You reached out and raked your nails along his broad chest and across his nipples. He twitched inside you and you clenched, breath quickening.

"Teasing me isn't going to end nicely for you," Gabriel rasped, expression growing fiercer.

"Still recovering from Jack," you said. "I don't have your stamina. Probably should've waited, but you looked so good sitting there and I'm greedy."

Jack laughed softly and tugged on a lock of your hair. You looked to your side, and he was on his stomach, watching you both. He leaned in to kiss you again and you ground against Gabriel. "That's it baby, I love watching you take him all the way. And he's trying to be nice right now, letting you take the reins. But look at how tense he is."

Your breath hitched.

"I know you've missed this," Jack continued. "And he has too. You going to push him like you push me?"

"No, because Gabriel's nice," you said dryly.

Jack sputtered incredulously.

"Oh hermosa, Jack must've fucked you harder than he thought and addled your brains, because I am not nice." Gabriel sounded offended.

You traced the line of hair down his abdominals. "You're nice to me. That's what matters." You bent over and planted a kiss on his chin. "I want to go slow right now, so that's what you're going to let me do, OK?"

Gabriel gave a tolerant sigh. "Jack's right, I do spoil you."

"You indulge both of us, because you're good like that." You nodded happily. "I'll start
moving in a moment. You're just so big, Gabriel, and Jack didn't exactly take it easy on me."

"You kind of begged for it," Jack said, not sounding remotely sorry.

"Yup. Not denying it." You rolled your hips and whatever Gabriel was about to say was lost in a choked groan. "Oh Gabriel, it's easier to take you like this. You still fill me up though." You closed your eyes, hips rocking in short shallow motions. "I need it this way now, but I don't know if it's my favorite position-"

"I can still bend you over the bed and fuck you into the mattress," Gabriel offered. "I'll even try not to break the bed."

"Notice how he didn't say anything about not breaking you," Jack purred.

You shivered.

"You like that?" Gabriel rumbled.

You nodded, but pressed down on Gabriel's hips as he began to thrust upward. "Not yet."

His nostrils flared and he gave you a hard look. "My patience has limits."

"Just enjoying this," you said. "The calm before you guys gang up on me again. I like being coherent too, you know."

"You like being a tease," Gabriel growled. "How about we put you on all fours, so Jack and I can spit roast you?"

You began to bounce up and down breathing hard as you took him all the way. "Don't you like seeing me on top?" You pulled one of his hands up and placed it against your chest. "I'm even doing all the work-"

Gabriel snapped his hips up and loud squeak escaped your throat. "If you want me to lie here, don't tease," he warned. "Otherwise, I'm going to assume you want me to turn you over and pound you into next week."

You sighed as he cupped your breasts.

"Tell me what you want," he said, hips moving with yours.

"Oh Gabriel, it all sounds good."

"Is that what you want?" His hands dropped to your waist.

"Please," you said.

"Then that's what you'll get," he said and flipped you onto your back.

"It is 0600 hours. Strike Commander, you have a meeting with Epsilon squad in half an
hour. Commander Reyes, you're due to give the Blackwatch auxiliary armory its monthly inspection. Agent Strike...you should probably take the day off."

It occurred to you then that you hadn't outlined privacy protocols with Athena. Shit. You were on the floor, pillow long gone, squashed between Gabriel and Jack. You were sticky and sweaty and curled against Gabriel's side, Jack's arms wrapped tightly around your waist. Your neck hurt. Other places hurt too, but your neck ached because you'd passed out at a weird angle.

"Jack?"

He groaned and you knew he wasn't going to make that meeting.

"Gabriel?"

"Postpone the inspection till 1600 hours, Athena. And then get the fuck out," Gabriel muttered, rolling onto his back and grunting as he bumped the dresser. "Too old for this bullshit."

"Is the Epsilon squad meeting mission critical, Athena?" You asked.

"Negative, Agent Strike. It is an acquisitions presentation."

"Then reschedule the Epsilon squad meeting for- whenever Jack's next free period is after 1100 hours," you said. "Is there anything else pressing?"

"No, the meeting can be rescheduled for 1400 hours," Athena said. "Done." There was a long pause. "You have no mission critical duties today, Agent Strike. Would you like me to clear your schedule?"

"Thanks," you said, not quite ready to have the boundaries talk with an AI in front of Jack and Gabriel. "We'll talk later, Athena."

"Of course. Enjoy your rest."

Jack mumbled some semblance of thanks and buried his face in the center of your back.

You ached and would be walking funny later. You had an emitter somewhere, but you couldn't quite bring yourself to get vertical and look for it. Instead you shifted to a more comfortable angle against Gabriel.

"You OK?" He pushed your hair out of your face and rolled onto his side.

"Exhausted," you whispered, because you didn't want to wake Jack.

"Kind of pushed it last night." He stretched, bumped his arm, and glared at the wall. "I do not miss these tiny rooms."

"Who pushed it?" You didn't need to see yourself to know you had finger mark bruises all over. Just like you didn't need to see either of them to know they'd already healed up from your bite marks and scratches. It really wasn't fair.

"You and Jack. I was a gentleman," he said with a chuckle.

You snorted, because he must have a very different definition of the word "gentleman." He and Jack had done all they had promised and then some. "You're talking about how we started out? The throat stuff?"
"Yeah." Gabriel stroked the side of your neck. "You didn't seem to enjoy it."

"The sex was good, but it's a boundary," you agreed. "I don't want to do it very often, but I could handle it. He was...really on edge, and I didn't know what else to do."

Gabriel blew out a breath, brow furrowed.

"I mean, I had my safe words. And if he had squeezed, well, he'd regret it more than me. It was symbolic."

"I know the three of us were building up to sex, especially with all the teasing. But if Jack's wound up like this, next time take it to the mat. He'll kick your ass without leaving any permanent damage, then tear off your clothes and fuck you there. It'll be rough, but there won't be mindgames."

"That was an option?" You sighed, because that actually sounded pretty fun too.

"Would've had to wait a few days," Gabriel admitted. "You said you weren't up for sparring. Maybe we should've done that instead."

"I...don't regret it. Just might be hesitant to do it again in the future. Not that I don't trust Jack; he was good. But in retrospect, it was outside my comfort zone. Now I really know." You sighed. "Do you and Jack do breathplay often?"

"Sometimes. Would it bother you to see?"

"I don't know. If you're enjoying yourselves, I don't think it would." You kissed his chest. "Thanks."

"Can't leave you unsupervised," he said and kissed your forehead. "Jack, you can stop pretending to be asleep. I don't know why you do this. You're both so bad at it."

You sputtered as Jack tightened his hold on you and nuzzled the back of your neck. "Seriously, Jack?"

"Why are you going to tell Gabe you were uncomfortable, but not me?" He hugged you against him.

"It was one of those after the fact realizations. And he asked."

"Would you have told me otherwise?"

"Maybe next time it came up," you admitted. "I'm not upset. It just wasn't my thing."

Jack huffed. "You need to say something if you don't like what we're doing or have done. It's part of that whole trust thing we're working on."

"It's hard to have a conversation when you're getting fucked stupid." You turned your head and kissed Jack's temple. "It wasn't awful and I'm not upset, Jack. Just processing. I think if you want actual submission, we'll have to work something out ahead of time. It's...difficult for me."

He stroked your back. "Of course. Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Shut up," you muttered.
Gabriel reached over and patted Jack's shoulder. "You're both ridiculous. We good? Because I want to go back to sleep."

"Wait, you rescheduled my meeting so I could sleep in, didn't you?" Jack purred. "So that means we have time to-"

"No Jack, we're going back to sleep. And if there's time later, maybe," you said firmly.

Gabriel laughed softly and extended his arm over both of you. Jack took his hand and you nestled in between them, so warm it was almost uncomfortable. You didn't care. Gabriel held you like he was trying to shield you from the world. Jack held you like you melt into shadow if he looked away. And you held onto them, because when it came to the important things, you didn't know how to let go.

Chapter End Notes

This short chapter gave me so much trouble I almost cut it. Maybe I should have? IDK. Just finished the rough draft for this arc and my brain is mush.

Sick AGAIN, this time with a cold one of my coworkers managed to spread to half of us. It's a nasty one, I had to go buy something with pseudoepinephrine for the first time. (I grew up with people who fed me vitamin C and echinacea for a cold, so I'm trying to catch up with the 21st century relief options.) I usually just make Happy Death Broth, which is hot peppers, garlic, ginger, stock, and more hot peppers, but I don't feel like cooking. Just mucus-y and drained, and my nasal passage and throat hurt, so sneezing and coughing suck, and I'm gross.

Bet you got contaminated just from reading this.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Operation Embalmer goes live.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After arriving in Zurich, your showers had never been awful, not like the fucking Ninth Circle, but you had occasionally run out of hot water, a hazard of living in a dormitory. But since Athena had gone live, you always had enough hot water. Was that coincidence? You didn't think so.

Jack had to leave first, his meeting was earliest and he needed to change clothes. Gabriel had reluctantly showered alone, because your shower wasn't really big enough to fit two people if they actually wanted to get clean and not just have sex in a tiny enclosed space.

You got cleaned up afterward, made a trip to the mess, and brought your food back to your room. You'd have to do laundry and you poked your chair. It creaked and you were pretty sure it wasn't safe to sit in.

"Athena, were you...listening last night?"

There was a long silence.

"Athena, I know you can hear me."

"Only till I was sure you were not distressed by them entering in your room. I know you have access codes to their quarters, however you don't actually have any permissions listed for others to enter your quarters unattended. I understand that intimacy is a private act and respecting that is one of my directives." There another pause. "Should I have warned you?"

"Nah. I don't want you warning them when I want to surprise them. It's only fair." You shoveled some macaroni and cheese into your mouth. "Thanks, I think."

"Also, there was a noise complaint. Agent McCree left his quarters to sleep in the rec room."

"Oops." You were going to have to apologize to Jesse. "He the only one who heard us?"

"He's the only one who commented on it. Agent Shimada is possibly aware. But Agent Vo slept through the whole thing."

"That's good. Vo Min doesn't wake up well." The demolitions expert was surly on the best of days, and you didn't want to get on her bad side. "Thanks for the wake up calls." You took another bite. "What criteria did you have to suggest I should take the day off?"

"I wasn't listening," she said after a moment. "Not while you were engaged in relations. But beforehand, the commanders were talking. Contextually, I assumed you would be physically
exhausted if you went along with their...plans. Coupled with Agent McCree's early morning complaints, I assumed you did not get a sufficient amount of rest last night."

    Oh boy. "I guess I'm going to have to remind them to use privacy mode, huh? You're not scarred from their locker room talk, are you?"

    "Human intimacy seems very messy."

    "Yeah, it is." You silently reassured yourself that you did not have to explain sex to the AI. She had access to the net and you knew Ziv had to have given her some semblance of "the talk," if only to explain the sheer quantity of pornography available.

    "And it bridges connections on a mental level?"


    "It is considered enjoyable and recreational though, right?"

    "For me and them, yeah. Touch and sex are biological impulses, usually a bit lower of a priority than food and sleep. Some of us seem to want it more than others." You thought of Chang for a moment. "Gabriel and Jack are very...driven. But I know people who actively avoid contact with others."

    "Like Genji?" OK, Ziv obviously hadn't explained enough, because he was awful. Winston had an excuse. Ziv did not.

    "...I don't know what or who Genji does in his spare time," you said, partially lying. You didn't know everything, but you and Jesse compared notes, and you had a good idea. He spent a lot of time with Angela, and maybe something was going on there, but you also knew how long it took to do maintenance on you fingers - Genji had a lot more cyborg parts to take care of. "He has you calling him "Genji," now?"

    "We communicate regularly," Athena said, sounding almost squirrely. "Did I overstep my bounds with Commander Reyes?"

    You let it go, because if Genji had a problem with Athena, he obviously wouldn't hesitate to drag you in and make you deal with Winston and Ziv. "Gabriel hasn't given you access to his schedule, has he?"

    "No. But I have access to the facility checklist, and the auxiliary armory is due an inspection. Commander Reyes is a very hands-on leader and the records show his initials on all prior checklists."

    You chewed your food. "Good deduction." You weren't sure how Gabriel was going to react once he realized Athena was still trying to "help out" Blackwatch. But that wasn't actually your problem.

    "Do you think Commander Reyes will allow me to become a fixture in Blackwatch?"

    You sighed. "No idea. We've all had some bad experiences with inorganic life. I get that you're on our team. Totally on board with you. But back in the day, people trusted the omnis too. Granted, I don't remember how it was back before it all went bad. I know you can say some shit about organic life and that's totally fair, but I don't blame him for being wary." You finished up your mac and cheese; they'd gone fancy today, adding gorgonzola and crab meat. "Just keep doing what you're doing. He's warming up to you. I think."
"You have an upcoming mission in Hong Kong. The Fong Chun retrieval. Would you want me along?"

You sat back on your bed. Athena had kept you alive during Operation Cobblestone Dust. You didn't mind having her along. But it was you and Gabriel. "I don't mind. I don't know how Gabriel will feel. And...well..."

"You intend to engage in intimacy post-mission or possibly during the mission?"

You nearly choked on your tongue. "I...don't know? It's not just that. You're an asset, for sure. But it's just a retrieval. I don't actually need him along either."

"Fong has a very advanced security suite. I can't even penetrate his defenses. If you plan on abducting him from his own home, you will need more technical assistance. If not me, then Ziv."

You frowned. "You're researching this on your own, aren't you?"

"I am here to take care of my agents," Athena said, and you wondered just how far she was going to take that directive.

"OK. Send me the data. I'll look it over and if you're right, I'll make the proposal. Include what capacity you'll need to arrive in. I don't think Gabriel wants to bring any large omnic bodies along. But if you can minimize your footprint, he'll be more inclined to agree."

"Thank you, Lucky. I will do my best to ignore any sexual interplay between the two of you. I will even wait till after the fact to request clarification about terminology. Unless you'd rather I asked Ziv."

"Boundaries, Athena. Never give Ziv more ammo to use against me. Please."

"I don't want to bring Ziv."

You studied the schematics for Fong Chun's condominium in Repulse Bay. Part of Hong Kong's Southern District, and one of the most expensive places to live on the island, entry would require more security-breaking measures than you expected. It was toward the top of a high-rise and well-protected: you could get in undetected, but it was going to take some work. Athena would make it easier to bypass security.

Fong Chun ranked as a "Vanguard." You had several recent surveillance photos of him, a doughy older man who liked dapper western suits, trilby hats, and small spectacles. His background was riddled with holes and he was basically On Sing's Operations Officer. Once you took him, things would escalate quickly. On Sing knew Overwatch was closing in on them, just like it knew Blackwatch had targeted the Shimada Clan. That the Shimada and On Sing had formed an alliance sat ill with you.

Thus far, the analysts had no idea who was on top of the On Sing triad. People whispered about a shadowy cult leader who practiced all kinds of highly unethical genetic engineering. Others spoke of a pair of albino twins, rumored to be incestuous cannibals. Sometimes it was a dead man, covered in tattoos and swearing in a dialect so old, they had to get an ancient classics literature professor to translate. Honestly, the stories were kind of ridiculous, but you didn't dismiss them. The more you dug, the more you realized On Sing had been around for a very long
time and they were very strange. What they'd been doing, where they'd been hiding, you weren't sure. What they wanted was even harder to decipher.

"We land on the roof and rappel down. Hell, I can do that part alone if you just cover the exit," Gabriel sat with his boots on the desk hat tucked over his eyes.

"Surveillance can't get a bead on his security. Drones aren't picking up any signal emissions from his floor. Athena can't hack the suite remotely. And the blueprints don't point to any extra shielding." You ticked off each problem on your fingers; not that it mattered, Gabriel wasn't looking.

"It can always be added after the fact. Get in the building itself and do a scan. They rarely shield between floors," Gabriel said, not looking up.

"It's a fifty story residence. Heavy shielding means unpleasant things, like Red Pole omnics. I'm a little worried about civilian casualties."

"It'll be worse if it spills onto the streets. Hong Kong is ridiculously crowded." And dual-wielding shotguns there would be a bad thing.

"Yeah, I guess." You had an entire plan for a snatch and grab based on his late night congee runs. It looked like you were going to have to scrap it, despite the long man hours put in. "Ugh."

"What are you worried about? I was doing retrievals long before you ever joined up, chica."

"It's complicated, and probably a nonlethal op. Are you sure you want to tag along? This isn't quite your...specialty."

"Baby, you're being condescending, and it makes me want to bend you over my desk and remind you who's boss." He tilted his hat up and gave you a hard look.

You laughed. "OK, you're right, sorry. Seriously though, I don't like this level of security. On Sing makes me nervous and we're going to be in their territory. We need a tech of some kind and having remote access point for Athena isn't a bad plan. It can get shot and no big loss. If Ziv gets shot, he'll complain for the rest of his life and mine." Also you didn't want to go on any missions with both Ziv and Gabriel. Ziv was too comfortable with you and you didn't trust him not to goad Gabriel. "Not to mention, it'd be nice if she can access any sensitive Triad documents."

"Fine," Gabriel said. "You want to bring the AI, you can bring the AI. Just stop nagging me. You're as bad as Jack."

You could have done this op with Genji. In fact, he was better suited for it. But On Sing had gone after Jack and both of you wanted to handle it personally. "Are you sure you want to do this one with me? Genji's the best candidate. Granted, I'm better at taking them alive than he is, but--"

"On Sing made this personal," Gabriel said after a moment. "But I want to watch you work too. If you think Genji is a better choice, then fine, you can change the roster."

You studied the schematics and replayed a few surveillance videos. On Sing was on higher alert since Chung hadn't made it back, but they couldn't confirm that you'd successfully captured and interrogated him.
"No, it's a fairly routine run with some potential complications. As long as we take extra precautions, we should be fine."

"I knew that; I was just wondering how long it was going to take you to work it out." Gabriel smirked and pulled his beanie back down over his eyes.

Hong Kong wasn't like Shanghai or the rest of the mainland. Though part of the PRC, Hong Kong had operated under its own set of rules for too long. Rich residents were always bribing the local authorities to fly their crafts within city limits, and the island wasn't quite as strict about transport protocols, compared to the mainland coastline. That gave you more leeway for drop-off and pickup.

Gabriel landed a small shuttle directly on the roof of the fifty story tower that contained Fong Chun's condo. The main transport hovered over the bay, well within legal docking.

"So this is your op," Gabriel said as he drew up his hood and checked his guns. "I'll step in if I think you're forgetting something, but I want to see how you do things."

You adjusted your gloves and switched on your stealth generator. Even if the Red Poles had better sensors, it would help you bypass the building's security equipment. "All right." You took a deep breath, because while you'd talked about the plan back in the office, you weren't sure Gabriel had actually been listening.

"Operation Embalmer is live. Anubis and Ammit are on the ground," he said.

"...Fine, you name it," you said, feeling quite petty since it was your op.

"What would you have picked?" Gabriel asked, not sounding sorry at all.


"Benedetto is a treacherous little shit," Gabriel said. "I don't mind being a bandit king, but if you're going to assign "meaningful" names, I wouldn't pick that one."

"It was also the name of one of the bakeries I liked back in the day."

Gabriel snorted.

"Would you have picked "Edmund"?" No, that's too plain. You'd be "Count Dantes" or "Monte Cristo."

"You can be Haydée," he purred in your ear.

"Yeah, I bet you'd like that. Dantes is all, "she's like a daughter to me." Then she's like "...Sure, I'll call you daddy...in bed." And he's like "Really? Cool. Never mind that whole daughter thing." And they go from "friends" to lovers after a big convoluted murder-revenge fest. That book is so you."
"...That's not how it went," Gabriel sighed.

"I paraphrased," you said. "You read it to me. I remember." You paused. "I liked it too."

"I know." Gabriel patted your shoulder. "Now focus."

Athena hovered beside you, her drone chassis cuter than expected. The body was about the size of cat and curved slightly in a stretched-out comma shape. Fins spiraled the circumference and she had a single blue light recessed in the head, that looked like an eye. Gabriel had taken to calling her "Fish Torpedo."

"Athena, you're up first. Get us a perimeter scan."

"Parameters, Ammit?"

"Five floors above and five floors below should be sufficient." Fong Chun occupied the 42nd floor alone.

"Understood, Ammit." She floated over the edge of the roof and disappeared into the night sky. You paused, wondering what the hell an Ammit was.

Gabriel had a better education than you, and you guessed the theme was classical mythology. Anubis was Egyptian and had a dog head: that was about all you knew.

Maybe he was doing the "A" thing. Alliteration? Assonance? Assholery? Something like that. The other night, he had explained some poetry terms to you, something about ambics and feet. It put you straight to sleep.

"I knew an Amit," you said, waiting for Athena to report back. "He was from Kolkata and an OK guy."

Gabriel just chuckled. "It goes with the god motif."

You hit your comm button. "Athena, what's an Ammit?"

"Ammit was an ancient Egyptian deity also known as the Eater of Hearts, the Great Devourer, and the Bone Eater. Her body is a composite of lion, crocodile, and hippopotamus. She eats the hearts of the unworthy, as judged by the psychopomp and death god Anubis - he's the one with the jackal head," Athena added helpfully. "More a force of divine justice than a goddess, she was not so much worshipped as feared."

You worked your jaw a few times, trying to make words. Was that a food aggression joke?

"You're reading too much into it. It's just a code name," Gabriel laughed, anchored his climbing line, and gave it a few test pulls.

"Ammit, the security suite makes it impossible to get an accurate reading and maintain cover. The shielding on these walls is stronger than the architectural plans led us to believe," Athena said.

"Can you tell what floors are occupied?" You dug your anchor into the roof tiles.

"The 43rd floor currently shows no signs of life, however the 42nd through 40th floors consistently lack of signals emissions."

"Unpleasant security measures," you translated. "We already knew this."
"Yes. The surveillance footage from today shows him returning to the building after dinner."

Gabriel tapped his foot impatiently.

"All right, we'll go in the 43rd. Just being thorough."

Gabriel rolled his eyes and dropped over the side of the building. "We already went over this, baby. Try to keep up."

"You're a dick, dog-face!"

"Jackal!" He corrected, words almost lost to the winds.

Standard operating procedure: keep an eye on the perimeter and never go in straight if you can help it - that route probably had traps and if not, it was reserved for exits. You dropped off the edge, climbing rope going taut under your gloves. The wind tore at you while you took the distance in controlled leaps: push off, swing back, steer your landing with your hips and keep your knees bent.

Glass shattered and you saw Gabriel disappear into a darkened frame. You followed, swinging in through the window he broke.

Athena hovered behind you, shining a blue spotlight into the bedroom. It was a well-appointed guest room with fancy bedding and pretty silk wall hangings, but no personal effects. "Alarm signal intercepted. Disabling security on this floor."

Gabriel unhooked his rope and drew his shotguns. How he managed to use each of them one-handed still made your brain stutter. You couldn't shoot one of them with both arms. He glanced at you expectantly.

"Athena, rescan, please."

The drone moved fast, zooming over your shoulder. "Besides the alarms, I am detecting ten omnic signatures on the floors below us; the energy output matches the profile of the Red Pole units."

"Ten?" You rubbed your forehead, because one had been more than enough.

"This isn't going to be like Belfast. You have me, not some Overwatch rookies." Gabriel grinned fiercely at you over his shoulder.

"I figured they were expecting us." You began swapping out clips, because you needed more EMP rounds for this. "This seems an awful lot like a trap. Athena, are you picking up any organic life?"

"Yes, Ammit. There are three signatures and they are concentrated toward the east side of the building."

"OK," you adjusted your plan. "I've got EMP grenades and rounds. I can disable if you can clean up."

"Of course." Gabriel nodded, looking pleased. His shotguns were ideal in close quarters. "And?"
"Athena, can you scan the elevators and stairwells for any unpleasant surprises?"

"Remotely disabling laser mines left in the stairwell exit of the 41st floor." It looked like they had expected you to come from below. Well, rappelling down from the roof was a ballsy move. "Do we want to try the elevator or stairs?"

"Neither." Gabriel shot through the floor, shells tearing past carpet, metal, insulation, and wiring. Four rounds and he kicked through the floor, before dropping down through the hole. You followed, shaking your head.

You landed in another bedroom. Gabriel pushed the door open and you kept your gun pointed to the side. Athena buzzed behind you.

They heard you coming, of course. You had your decibel-blockers in, but those Hellfire shotguns still sounded like thunder driving a train. A pair of sword-wielding Red Poles took up the narrow corridor in single file. You rolled an EMP grenade right into them and the pulse sent them into a sparking stutter. Gabriel leveled his shotguns and tore them apart in two shots each. You eyed your carbine a little resentfully.

"Why did you abandon stealth?" Athena asked.

"Element of surprise will only take us so far: it got us into his house," Gabriel said. "Maybe Genji could slip past all the omnic's unnoticed and assassinate our target without anyone noticing, but that's not going to work for us. We're in, now we shift gears and handle the rest."

"Thank you for the explanation, Anubis."

"If you're running ops with us, better make sure you get trained right," Gabriel said gruffly and kept walking.

"I am receiving some strange signals. It feels...odd," Athena said softly.

"Congested electronic traffic?" Hong Kong was a tech heavy city, a lot of it unregulated. It would have a different feel than Zurich.

"No, there's something big and aware around here."

You raised a brow. "Another AI?"

"Most likely. It's...vast."

"A god program?" Gabriel scowled. "You've got to be kidding me. The PRC wouldn't let one of those run amok..."

"Not enough information. It is not trying to force contact. But we are in its passive field. If it does move, I won't be able to stop it."

"Complications," you sighed. "All right, make a note, but if it's not moving against us, we're not scrapping the op."

You came out in the foyer, a tasteful room done in teak, porcelains, and delicately-carved furniture. Some of those stone statues and painted vases had to be worth serious money. Gabriel's shotguns powdered them casually alongside another Red Pole. Wistfully, you eyed a jade statuette. Old habits died hard. Focus. You were here to take Fong Chun, not acquire a fortune in knickknacks.
Gabriel kicked the wreckage out of his way and put another round through the still jerking Red Pole. He laughed, the sound too guttural to be cheerful.

"Detecting hard-light barriers ahead," Athena announced.

"What?" You raised a brow.

The answer came in the form of bright holographic panels that glowed an eerie cool white. Large and rectangular, they blocked the doorway. Gabriel shot the wall, obliterating plaster and wood, but revealing more light panels.

"Prototype energy; Vishkar's been making serious inroads with it." Gabriel no longer sounded amused. "For operations' purposes, it's exactly what it sounds like, hardened light that you have to shoot through."

"In its current form, it still causes radiation burns, so no skin contact," Athena added.

"They have laser shields? Fuck these guys," you grumbled. Maybe you needed to go back to school and learn how to science. Raising your carbine, you began firing, the barrier dimpling under your EMP rounds. Gabriel joined in and the light started to bend under impact. Ten seconds in, the light shattered, leaving the strange stench of ozone, cordite, and burnt sugar.

Gabriel stepped through the doorway. Athena spun behind you.

"Organics up ahead. Another pair or Red Poles too."

You entered the living room. It too was decked in expensive baubles and traditional Chinese furniture. A large shrine took up an entire wall, complete with multiple ancestral tablets.

"Athena, make sure to get a shot of that," you said, jerking your chin at it.

"The famed Commander Reyes: you honor us with your presence," Fong Chun said without a trace of sarcasm. He spoke English with a British accent and sat on a low divan at the end of the room, a heavily-reinforced picture window at his back. He wore a beige suit, trilby hat in his lap. Two young men wearing red tunics and clunky metallic gauntlets knelt on the floor in front of him. The Red Poles stood at attention, between you and the men.

Gabriel just kept his shotguns up. "You're kidding, right?"

"Just because you've broken into my house and caused quite a bit of property damage, doesn't mean I have forgotten my manners."

"Skip the formalities, Fong. You know why we're here."

"I guess Chung wasn't able to hold his silence. His father will be so disappointed." Fong Chun sighed. "This is not personal, Commander. I have nothing but admiration for all that you've accomplished. I am very impressed that you came yourself, truly."

White light flared as Gabriel fired, absorbing the shotgun blasts. The light panels unfolded and shuffled around you like a deck of cards. They enclosed you in a narrow box and you danced backward as the Red Pole on the left swung its sword. Gabriel swore and brought up one shotgun to block the one on the right. The blade struck the barrel and sparked.

You fired at the red diamond light in the center of its head, shattering the panel. You were too tightly packed to use grenades, but once your bullets penetrated the chassis, the Red Pole came
to a stuttering halt. A quick glance at Gabriel showed that part of his opponent's sword was embedded in a shotgun barrel. You really needed more room to maneuver.

You took aim, shooting at Gabriel's opponent and wishing Torby had made you a laser sword.

Gabriel dropped his broken gun and jumped backward, firing with his remaining weapon. Gabriel's opponent went down, but your omnic was climbing back to its feet and Gabriel's shotgun clicked empty.

"Anubis!"

You backed up, keeping an eye on Athena as she scanned the barriers.

Gabriel spun and picked up the fallen omnic's sword with both hands, perspiration gleaming on his face. He slammed the flat of the blade into the omnic's sword arm. Drawing back, he rushed forward in that familiar fencer's lunge. Metal screeched as the sword pierced the Red Pole's chestplate. You blinked. Apparently that move did have practical value. Huh.

Laughing, Gabriel dropped the sword and turned to Fong Chun. "We can do this the hard way, if you like."

"Yes," Fong said.

Wood splintered and a metal blade tore through the floor, before another set of metal hands seized Gabriel by the ankle and dragged him downward through the hole into darkness.

"Athena!"

She swooped down and you followed through the hole into another dark room, her cool blue lamp lighting the way. You didn't get a good look at your surroundings, but you already knew you were fucked: you counted four red diamond lights in the darkness.

"Behind me!" You ordered Athena, and rolled an EMP grenade toward them. You couldn't see Gabriel, but you could hear him swearing in a steady stream of Spanish, the blunt sound of flesh striking metal. Light arced through the room and you caught sight of Gabriel, intact shotgun raised like a bludgeon.

"Over here!"

Athena turned her high beams onto your targets.

Gabriel dove past the omnics, and you fired over his head. You kept backing up, knowing better than to let them get close. The EMP grenades had slowed them but you weren't doing nearly enough damage.

"Cover?"

"Load-bearing wall behind you," Athena said. "But there are more-"

Gabriel brushed up against you, and you could feel the heat pouring off his body. "Get me a moment to reload."

"On it. Take cover." You grabbed a frag grenade and threw it at the Red Poles, before following Gabriel through an open doorway. The explosion blew out the glass, subtly literally
going out the window.

Climbing to your feet, you saw two red lights still flickering and began to fire.

"We are going to have to get you a real gun, baby," Gabriel grinned at you, and turned his shotgun on the one closest to him.

"Beside it!" You got out, before the second survivor lunged and smashed Gabriel backward into the darkness. You heard him collide with something solid.

"Ammit!" Athena's voice went strangely high and you whirled, in time to see her plow into your shoulder. She knocked you off balance and into a wall.

You blinked and a blade materialized in the space where you'd been standing, metal sparking as it cleaved Athena's body in two.

"Fuck!" You stared in horror as her little metal chassis dropped to the ground, lights dead. Rolling backward, you fired, too close to use an EMP grenade. The blade swung forward and you dropped to the ground, still shooting.

"Anubis?" You hit your comm button. "Anubis!" The second Red Pole hadn't come back for you.

"Got this one!" Gabriel bellowed. "You just stay alive over there!"

Easier said than done. You tried to avoid the window-side of the room, knowing it could easily throw you and defenestration would be the end. Rolling to your feet, you circled, tracking it as much by sound as the glint of moonlight striking its blade.

Your carbine clicked empty and you tore off your left glove, knowing you only had one chance.

Something whistled overhead, and while you could barely see the outline of the omnic, there was a flash when the arrow impacted. You covered your face, one hand instinctively going to your shoulder.

Another arrow hit, and you dropped to the floor, watching it glow as it fragmented and ricocheted off the walls, sparks striking the omnic from numerous angles.

It went down, metal groaning as it fell. You looked up. A terribly familiar ninja nocked his bow and aimed it at your head.

"Seriously, are we doing this again Shimada?" You glared at him, though it was doubtful he could see your face in the dark.

"I thought it was you," he said, not relaxing. "Is my brother here?"

"If I say "no" are you going to shoot me?"

Hanzo kept his bow trained on you. "No."

"Are you going to shoot me regardless of my answer?"

"I will shoot you if you continue to irritate me."

Well, you were fucked. "No, he's not here. And if he finds out you shot me, he's going to
be even saltier at you than he already is," you lied brazenly, because you weren't so sure that Genji actually cared that much.

To your surprise, Hanzo lowered his bow. "Are you his lover?"

"...No." You couldn't picture Genji sleeping with people, he was so averse to contact outside of sparring. But then your friendship with Genji wasn't exactly normal. "We're just buddies. I cook for him sometimes."

"I hope you're a better cook than a warrior."

"Well, I'm certainly a better friend," you said, then realized you should probably reload before starting a pissing match with Hanzo Fucking Shimada.

Even in the dimness, you could see the tightness in his shoulders and wondered if he was getting ready to splinter-shoot you to pieces.

"I...just want to talk," he said, voice strained. "I heard about Belfast. I knew someone would come for On Sing." And this mission would have been right up Genji's alley.

"Great, we should talk over cake later. It'll be smashing. But I gotta check my drone and back up my boss." Logically, you knew Athena was fine. She could be in multiple places at once, but she'd taken that hit for you and that visceral shock of seeing her shell destroyed lingered.

"I will assist," Hanzo said, like he didn't trust you to survive on your own.

"Anubis?" You reloaded your gun.

"Almost done." His voice was rough and you were worried.

You flicked on your flashlight and sighed when you saw the shattered remnants of Athena's little fish torpedo. It was disturbingly broken and probably unsalvageable. You scraped her up and put her in your bag. No point in giving On Sing any hints about what kind of tech you used. At least that's what you were going to tell anyone who asked. "Your drone is scrap."

"I noticed."

As you went in Gabriel's direction, you could hear something rending metal.

"Anubis?" You raised your gun.

"You found a friend?" Gabriel rasped, leveling his gun slightly to your right. It was a bluff, because there was no way he could fire and not hit you. You kept your light out of his eyes, but he was bruised and hunched, blood smearing his mouth. You really wanted to check his injuries.

"Yeah. Hanzo Shimada, this is Anubis. Anubis, this is Hanzo Shimada, Genji's favorite brother. Wants to have cake with us, help with Fong Chun, and talk about a family reunion. Like for real. Swear on Captain Patel's elephant gun."

There was a long silence. "You're serious, Ammit?"

"No joke. I can swear on Shin's tanto, if you want." You could feel both their stares burning through you and you fought the urge to squirm.

"We need Fong Chun alive," Gabriel said, after a moment, lowering his gun. "I'll go back the way we came."
"We can't all go through there," you said, because that was a great way to get mowed down.

"We can take the outer route," Hanzo said.

"If anything happens to my agent, Genji's brother or not, it will take you days to die," Gabriel growled.

"Your "Ammit" has already conveyed how unhappy Genji will be if something happens to her," Hanzo said stiffly. "I have no desire to cause him further distress."

"Yes, everyone think of poor Genji before you do something stupid and let's finish this job. Cake afterward." You turned around, annoyed by how close Hanzo stood to you. Yes, you were his human shield, in case Gabriel didn't want to play nice, but he didn't have to be so obvious about it.

Hanzo turned abruptly and stalked to the blown windows and disappeared.

"You be careful." Gabriel gripped your arm and kissed you hard. He burned too hot and tasted of copper and smoke. "One wrong move and you end him. Doesn't matter how Genji feels about it."

"You OK?"

"We need to move," Gabriel said, pushing past you. He crouched, and in one leap he gripped the edge of the ceiling and pulled himself up through the hole.

You went to the window and looked up, feeling for your grappling hook. You were slightly mollified when Hanzo dropped a rope. You climbed up and balanced on the window ledge.

"You are so slow," Hanzo said.

"I'm not a goddamn ninja," you huffed.

The windows were reflective and bulletproof. You pressed your index finger, opening your multitool. Very carefully, you began to cut through the glass. Hanzo rolled his eyes, gripped his bow, and smashed it through the glass. Fong Chun looked over his shoulder. The two lightbenders were sweating, trying to hold the barrier. Gabriel was bleeding all over, laughing as he discharged his remaining shotgun.

"We need the fat one alive," you reminded Hanzo.

He gave you a dark look. He was wearing a face mask with only his eyes visible, but they were expressive. Right now, they were expressing great annoyance with you.

"I can do the work, I'm just reminding you not to kill everyone. You know, like you did last time."

"I truly believe you and Genji are just friends. Because you are too aggravating for even my brother to sleep with."

You didn't really have a comeback for that.

Instead, you punched Fong, mostly because he kept fucking Red Pole omnis around the
house. Then you flicked your ring finger, needle injecting him with a strong cocktail of drugs. That unpleasantly familiar whistling sound passed by both your ears, and when you looked up, the lightbenders were dead, arrows through their throats.

The barrier fell and Gabriel raised a brow as you kicked Fong along the floor. "Where's Fish Torpedo?"

"In my bag. She took a hit for me."

Gabriel's eyes traveled to Hanzo.

"You're "Anubis?" Really, they sent you?" Hanzo narrowed his eyes. "The Commander Reyes."

Oh boy. You massaged your temples. Gabriel really needed a mask or something. "Let's get Fong and get out before On Sing reinforcements show up."

"Got a problem, Shimada?" Gabriel casually rested his shotgun in one arm. But you weren't fooled.

Hanzo's eyes flicked between you and Gabriel. "We can talk about it later. Over cake."

Gabriel smacked his hand against his forehead. "Really?"

You loaded Fong into the shuttle, making sure to take the hard-light gauntlets. Gabriel managed to drag a Red Pole omnic onto the service elevator, so Winston could dissect it.

Hanzo just watched with those terribly judgmental eyes. "I'll find my own way to Zurich," he said.

"What? We can just wash our hands and go to a bakery. I hear they're all over the city."
You discretely wiped your bloody gloves on your pants. "Tea, cake, we can do this."

"You maybe, but "Anubis," covered in blood will incite panic. I'll be in touch, "Ammit," Hanzo said the code name like he actually knew what an Ammit was. He then turned around and vaulted into the darkness.

"Drama queen," Gabriel muttered. "See where Genji gets it."

You glanced over the edge of the building, catching sight of Hanzo clambering down the next tower over. Something about his posture reminded you of a squirrel, and you snickered.

"Let's go, Ammit," Gabriel said, sounding more irritated than usual.

Damn, now you wouldn't be stopping for cake.
You put the gauntlets in lead-lined cases and triple-checked Fong for weapons and tracking devices, then stuffed his unconscious body in the brig. Gabriel sat hunched over beside an emitter, legs spread wide as he let himself heal. Bloody and bruised, he was sweating hard and you brought him three pouches of electrolyte solution. He drained them immediately and you had to get him another one.

"Got you pretty good, didn't they?"

"You went hand to hand with one. Figured I'd see what I was missing," he rasped. "You're lucky it only broke your ribs."

"You took a giant sword and fucking stabbed a damn omnic," you said, wiping blood off his cheek. "Who's the careless one?"

"You made a temporary ally out of Hanzo Shimada. I think that wins for the dumbest thing done tonight."

"Oh no, Athena got herself chopped in half trying to save me from a Red Pole. She wins." You set the bag of scrap on the bench.

"It's different for them," Gabriel said after a moment. "But yeah, maybe she does. You hurt?"

"Scraps and bruises, but nothing that I need to bother Angela with."

"Good." Gabriel took his hat off. "Because I want you up against the wall, right now."

You swallowed. "Gabriel, you're injure-"

"Don't care." He shook his head. "Had worse and Jack still rode me like a champ."

Gabriel pushed you into the wall, already loosening your armor. "You sure-"

"Tell me to stop. Tell me to keep going. But don't ask if I want you or not. You should already know the answer." He kissed you hard and you fumbled with his armor. He opened the seals, and it dropped with a clang. He removed your chestplate and practically tore your belt off. Gabriel was moving fast and before you knew it, your pants were on the floor and he was unzipping his fly. You shuddered as he lifted you by the knees and dropped you onto his cock.

"Gabriel!"

He covered your mouth with one large hand. "Shh, you have to be quiet, baby. Don't want the pilot to hear us." You whimpered, because there'd been no prep and while you were wet for him, he split you wide, stuffing you too full too fast.

"You're so big, too-too much," you stuttered, sinking onto him, breaths coming quick and shallow.

His grin widened. "Oh baby, that look on your face. Makes me want to go harder."

"No!" You gripped his shoulders. "Can't-

"Can't take me all the way yet?" Gabriel growled in your ear. "I'm too much for your tight little hole? But you're already dripping down my thighs, baby girl. I know you like watching me fight, almost as much as I like watching you. Gonna tell me you didn't expect this?"
"Damnit Gabriel," you moaned, clawing at his chest.

He hissed in pain and you drew back instinctively. "No, don't let go. Don't fucking stop." He held you against the bulkhead, your knees resting on his elbows. "Shithead hit me harder than I thought, is all. Can still handle whatever you've got, baby."

"Sorry," you panted, kissing his neck. "Are you-"

"If you ask me again, I'm going to let loose and show you exactly what kind of shape I'm in," Gabriel said, voice low. "All I care about right now is seeing you on my dick." He rolled his hips, pushing deeper inside you and you dropped your head back against the wall, his girth all you could focus on. Gabriel slowly filled you the rest of the way and any resistance dissolved into liquid pleasure.

You still hadn't come down from the adrenaline of the fight, and that was good, because otherwise this could be painful. A few staggered breaths later and you were adjusting. His touch blazed feverishly hot, and you tugged at his hoodie.

"Off. You're burning up."

Gabriel complied and you winced at the scrapes and bruises across his chest and torso. His skin tone hid the worst of the bruising, but that you could still see swollen tissue over thick muscles wasn't good.

"Looks worse than it is." He bent over kissing you hard. You sighed softly and he jerked his hips, pulling out halfway then sheathing himself to the hilt. He swallowed up your cries and you raked your nails down his chest.

Snarling, Gabriel slammed his hips into you and your eyes flew open. Struggling to maintain silence, you bit the flesh at the base of his neck. He arched against you, driving himself into you hard.

"Keep that up and I won't be nice."

"Already know you're going to wreck me. Always do when you're like this," you murmured and licked the indentations in his skin, as he shuddered against you.

"Do you hear that?" He thrust inside you, slick sounds echoing in the bay. "That's all you, baby. Your body already knows how to take me. Don't act like you don't want this." He moved faster, deep strokes hollowing you out as you squirmed. He had you pinned to the wall, legs spread wide, and the look on his face ferocious, all teeth, hunger, and scorching heat.

"Want it," you breathed. "Always want you, Gabriel." You clenched around him and he braced his palms against the wall. He bounced you on his cock, his shaft slick with your juices.

Your eyes fluttered shut and you bit your lip, vainly trying to keep quiet. Helpless squeaks escaped your throat as Gabriel pounded you against the wall. You took everything he gave, an outlet for the rest of his unspent energy.

"Need to fill you up," Gabriel groaned. "Need to see you dripping with my cum. Need to feel you coming on the end of my cock."

You dropped one hand to your clit, working yourself closer to the edge.

"That's it, hermosa. Love watching you touch that needy pussy. Don't worry, I'm going to
be up for most of the night. Going to wreck you, just like you wanted. We'll go back to my room and you can be as loud as you want. We'll get Jack too. Don't think you'll be able to take both of us after I'm done with you. But you like having him between us, don't you?"

His filthy words finished you off, and you squealed as he drove harder, trying to catch up with you. One hand flattened over your mouth, muffling your sounds.

"Fuck!" Gabriel barked. "So good like this. Can feel it in my balls, baby." He gave a low strained growl and you whined as his hot cum poured inside you. "Oh that's it, yes-" He closed his eyes, resting his head against your chest. He took a few deep breaths, collecting himself, and lowered you both to the floor, before pulling out.

You lay on the hard metal floor, legs wobbly as you tried to move them.

Gabriel nuzzled your cheek, his beard soft against your skin. "Going to go one more time, baby. Then I'll let you rest, OK?"

"Mmm," you sighed as he lifted your legs over his shoulders. You pulled your hoodie off and balled it up as a pillow. "Knew you were going to mess me up."

He gave you one of those intensely self-satisfied smirks. "Cum-stained and wrecked is a good look on you. What do you want your papi to give you this time?"

You shivered at the excitement in his eyes. "I need to be able to walk off this transport."

"No promises," he grinned, and slid back inside you.

"Ten minutes till arrival," the pilot announced and you opened one eye, slightly surprised to find yourself mostly dressed. Your armor was still on the ground, but other than that, you didn't seen any evidence of what you'd been up to. You vaguely remembered Gabriel coaxing your arms up while he pulled your hoodie back on for you.

You were sprawled across Gabriel's lap, the two of you soaking up the light of the emitter. He stroked your hair absently.

"You all right?" You rolled onto your back and looked up at him.

"You're the one who passed out." He chuckled.

"I was worn out. I had to play nice with Genji's stupid brother, kidnapped some Triad member who was armed with mad science, and then got jumped by a goddamn super soldier on the trip back."

"So you'll be up for another round when we get in?"

"Jesus, Gabriel." You touched his skin. He'd cooled down significantly, but that heat output bothered you. Hong Kong was a humid city. He'd been fine in the snowy Alps, but the subtropical climate hadn't been good for him. "Have you always run that hot on combat missions?"

"...No." His voice went flat. "It's gotten more pronounced in the past three years."
You bit your tongue, worried by the grim look on his face.

"It's an SEP side effect. Don't know what it means. Jack's fine, hasn't had any complications. None of the first gen have it, but none of them are quite as strong as me. Chang has some overheating issues, but she doesn't run as hot as I do." He looked down at you, face oddly blank. "It's not a problem yet."

"Is it because you exert so much energy? Like your cooling system isn't up for the amount of power you're generating? It's just from combat right?"

"Yeah, only when I push myself. You've got the general principle." His voice softened. "I'm fine, baby."

"OK," you said, not quite believing him.

"I can still outlast you, and damn if I'm not ready to go again." He leaned over and kissed you. "When we get back we'll put Jack in the middle. You get pushy after a few rounds and you always like directing your aggression at him."

You patted his cheek. "It's self defense. Because when we reach this point, if I let you guys boss me around, I'll die of exhaustion."

"You just had a nap."

"I'm going to need water, a shower, and a herd of llamas to carry me back to my room."

Gabriel laughed, dark mood dissipated.

You rolled over, testing your legs. The emitter helped and hopefully you wouldn't be walking funny when you exited the transport. Gabriel looked amused, troubles apparently forgotten. You kissed his warm cheek, and wondered if he was being completely honest with you.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took several revisions. I blame the Christmas holiday. It was awful. Blargh.

Getting better. Not quite over the cold, but thanks for the good wishes. Serious job hunting starts this week.

Having hilarious amounts of snow and ice here. It's awful. Hope you guys have better weather.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Operation Embalmer.

Chapter Notes

Slight daddy kink warning for those who can't abide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack, Lacroix, Winston, Ziv, and two Blackwatch In-Sec officers waited in the disembarkation hall. It was a bigger reception than you were expecting, and you were glad you'd foregone trying to fix your hair and just pulled your hood up. The In-Sec officers saluted you and Gabriel and went on to retrieve Fong Chun.

"Commander Reyes, we seem to have a minor...situation," Lacroix said, watching the In-Sec officers board the ship. "On Sing has sent us a message. We can discuss it privately."

You already knew why Winston and Ziv were here. "How's Athena?"

Winston wrung his hands, and you noted small bare patches around his wrists. "She's a little traumatized. I'd like it if you recounted what happened, and then maybe talked to her."

"Of course." You glanced up at Gabriel who was glaring at Lacroix.

"Good to see you managed to avoid breaking yourself this time, agent," Jack said, an amused lilt in his voice.

"That is apparently Commander Reyes' privilege."

There was a long pause as Jack and Winston gaped at you. Lacroix's mouth twitched and Ziv gave Gabriel a long speculative look.

"Breaking oneself, of course," you said wryly. "He managed to push himself too hard. I don't think anything's literally broken, but he did go hand to hand with some Red Poles, so you might want to make sure he visits the infirmary."

Jack narrowed his eyes at Gabriel.

"Snitch," Gabriel growled in your ear, not sounding pleased at all.

"Well then, I also wanted to pass along another interesting tidbit," Lacroix said, smiling a little too widely. "Hanzo Shimada has contacted us, specifically requesting Gabriel and "that aggravating woman" to meet with him to parley. We should discuss whether or not it is appropriate to involve certain agents."
Gabriel gave you a dirty look, shaking his head slowly and you stared at him innocently. "Need you in peak condition, sir."

"We are going to talk about this," he said in a low voice.

"Yes, yes we are." Jack rested his hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "We can do this in the infirmary. Come see us when you're done, agent." He rolled his eyes as Gabriel turned that irritated look on him.

You handed Winston the bag containing the drone pieces. "Brought you some interesting tech from on-site too. A whole On Sing Red Pole omnic and some fancy hard-light manipulating gauntlets."

Winston just studied the bag. "You brought back the pieces?"

"Well, you know, didn't want to leave evidence lying around," you said smoothly.

"Ah, thank you." Winston gave you a smile, careful not to show his teeth, a sign of aggression in gorillas. Ziv had been trying to get him to smile wider, but it was one of those learned behaviors you weren't sure was going to change. You always forgot, but Winston didn't seem to mind when you and Ziv did it.

"Let's do this privately," Ziv said, watching Gabriel, Jack, and Lacroix disappear around the corner.

That Ziv had an office always amused you. If only the door locked from the outside. Maybe you could get him a door that opened outward and prop some cinder blocks against it. Winston had one of his custom-made ergonomic gorilla chairs inside, and Ziv sat on his desk. You took his chair, because it was the most comfortable one. There was a camera on the desk, and you assumed Athena could view the proceedings from there.

"Agent Strike...I am glad to see that you are well." Athena's voice came through the speaker's oddly flat.

"You all right, Athena?"

"I am unharmed." Her voice held a depressingly subdued quality that you recognized. Damn, how had Winston gotten the voice inflections so right?

"Uh-huh."

"You do understand that that drone only contained part of my consciousness?"

"Being "unharmed" doesn't mean "all right," Athena." You studied Winston's face. "This your first...bodily trauma?"

"The...connection was lost. One moment I was trying to propel you away from the Red Pole, then metal rending and loss of motor control, then nothing."

"She blinked out for five seconds afterward," Ziv said. "We were able to establish that you were fine after you reported in at the end of the mission, but until then-" He combed his fingers through his hair. "It was messy." He watched you with bright amber eyes, his lips pressed firmly together in a thin line.

You rubbed your forehead. "Thank you, Athena. I would've been badly hurt, at the very
least, if you hadn't knocked me into that wall."

"Protecting my agents is my primary directive," she parroted, voice still flat.

Winston rubbed his wrists. "She's been like this since the episode. We can't pinpoint any data loss, however, it's possible the abrupt termination of the connection caused some sort of memory malfunction."

"Nah," you said, studying the bag. "You just did too good of a job with her. What'd I tell you to call me, Athena?"

"My apologies, Lucky."

"You mad at me for getting you smashed up? It's OK if you are," you said, folding your hands. "I remember you trying to warn me about that straggler while I was facing down the bigger group."

"No." The answer was firm. "No, I am just glad that you are unharmed."

"But that was scary, right? That loss of control? You felt your shell get destroyed, and then you lost the connection. Kind of like getting knocked out or concussed. You know, the cybernetic equivalent."

"It was not comfortable."

All the pieces fell into place. That admission was what you'd needed to hear. You followed that train of thought down the rails to its logical conclusion. You didn't have trouble relating to that discomfort, because early on you'd learned just how vulnerable you were. That all those reassuring platitudes adults told children, were lies. That if hit hard enough, we all cracked open and bled out in the dirt. That there was never any guarantee that everything was going to turn out all right. You'd been a fighter long before you'd been an agent, and you tried to remember the first time you thought you'd saw your end coming. You hadn't expected an AI to react the same way every rookie soldier did.

"Near death experiences never are," you said. "Sure, you can clam up and pretend it doesn't bother you, but sooner or later, it outs itself. And you still have to learn to deal."

Ziv uncrossed his arms. "Shit."

"Yeah," you said. "For the record, Ziv's a moron when it comes to feelings."

"For the record, Lucky was too dumb to realized she was in love with her surly ass boss, so she has no room to talk."

You blanched. "Shut it, Ziv."

He just smirked at you triumphantly.

"You remember everything up to the destruction, right?" You tapped your fingers on the desk.

"Oh Athena..." Winston had concern written all over his face.

"Yes. Nothing was lost."

"Not true. Innocence, your sense of invulnerability, that cute fish torpedo chassis." You
opened up the bag and dumped it onto the desk. "I salvaged what I could."

"I have no need of that," Athena said sharply. "You can dispose of it."

"No, you should take a look at it."

"I have no need. The components may be recyclable, however the drone itself is unsalvageable."

You pulled off your left glove and held up your hand for the camera. "I know it's a little different, but I can relate. I hate looking at them. They remind me that I failed. They remind me that I'm not invincible. But they also remind me that I protected someone and while the loss stings and the discomfort never really goes away, I know that I can go back out there and do a better job, because I fucking learn from my mistakes."

When you looked up, Ziv had his head turned away and Winston was watching you with big round eyes.

"It's a scar, Athena. You got knocked down, kicked around, and now you gotta get back up. Winston designed you too well. It's the tradeoff: you care about us, you live among us, and maybe you're becoming too much like us. This avoidance, humans do it all the time. I'm guilty as fuck." You managed a lopsided smile, because this level of honesty hurt, but it wouldn't do to show it.

"I am not human, Lucky."

"You're a baby AI. You've never had to face the concept of the void, not really. And while you don't have a true body, you now understand your equivalent of death, and it is loss of data. So take your time. Adjust as you need. Talk to someone, ask questions. But don't pretend like you're unaffected." You put your glove back on. "And seriously, thank you for the save. If you hadn't, well, Ziv would probably be trying to give you a different kind of explanation and he'd fuck it up royally."

"Fuck you," Ziv said, voice rough.

You slapped him on the back, head turned away. "Right back at you." You went for the door and paused as Winston coughed.

You sighed, turned around, and hugged Winston as best as you could. He tentatively returned the embrace, and it was oddly nice. He smelled like an odd combination of baby powder and peanut butter, but his fur was surprisingly soft. "I think you can take it from here. Thanks."

He held very still. "I, well, you're very welcome, Lucky."

"You and Torby really need to analyze that Red Pole armor and hell, whatever armor that On Sing assassin was wearing, because I've been shooting them straight on, and they keep brushing off the regular lead rounds."

"The hard-light gauntlets are more my expertise. But I will see what I can do," he said.

"Athena, don't let him work too hard," you added, because she would need something to keep herself occupied while she processed.

"I will remind him to eat and rest at recommended intervals," she said, sounding less subdued. "And if he does not, I will harangue him abrasively like you and Ziv do to each other."
"What?" You scratched your head.

"It is how humans normally show close platonic affection, is it not?"

"Oh fuck all," you sighed, and walked out of the office.

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Genji was waiting for you outside your room, faceplate on, though you knew that pointed look in his eyes. You tilted your head back, rolled your eyes skyward, and sighed.

"Who told you?"

"Athena."

"Gabriel will shit a brick."

"The commander doesn't have to know."

You opened your door, trying not to think of all the terrible things that statement could preface. "Come on in. Athena, enact privacy mode." Because you also learned from other people's mistakes.

You sat on your bed and watched as Genji perched in your chair. It tilted even farther back and he shifted forward, eyeing it suspiciously.

"They're discussing whether or not to bring you into it right now. So don't tip them off that you already know," you said, rubbing your forehead.

"He's my brother."

"He tried to kill you."

"I know." Genji hunched over. "I still don't want anything to happen to him."

"He helped us tonight. Recognized Gabriel when we got into better light. Might've saved me some bullets. You know, I could've taken that omnic on my own, but I have to admit, it would have taken longer."

Genji could read between the lines. "I see. What did you tell him?"

"I might've stretched the truth and said you'd be annoyed if he offed me and that no we weren't banging, we're just friends. He was grumpy and insulting; I can see the family resemblance."

"He's my brother," Genji said in a way that let you know Hanzo had always been that charming. "We are not "banging." How is that stretching the truth?"

You laughed, heart feeling lighter at that admission. "Yeah, OK, Genji."

He turned his head. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," you said, fiddling with your gloves. Genji shifted in the chair again,
unable to get comfortable. "He's got a sweet tooth, like you, doesn't he?"

Genji chuckled. "His love of cake is much like yours."

"I got that," you said after a moment. "Didn't expect it. Guess we really are going to have to go out for cake. And I am fine with that."

"His favorite flavor is strawberry."

"I figured it'd be the tears of children or the bitterness of duty."

"Third and second favorite flavors."

You snickered. "Yeah. I'll see what I can do. I don't know if having you at the initial meeting is a good idea. But he was stalking On Sing to find us. So he obviously wants to talk to you."

"He's my brother," Genji said, sounding mildly annoyed.

"Do you want your next meeting to be on the record? If so, great. Otherwise, wait." Genji had always been protective of his privacy.

"I don't want him hurt."

"As long as he doesn't get violent, and I don't think he will, we're not going to go in guns blazing."

"What do you want from him?" Genji asked tightly.

"Information would be great. He's not too shabby in a fight either."

"You want to recruit him?" Genji asked, relaxing a smidgen.

You shrugged. "He asked to meet. I figured he wanted an alliance of some sort. Or he was just hard up for people to go to a Hong Kong bakery with." And you could see why, what with him being a monumental dick weasel who maimed his baby brother.

"All right. But I want you to keep me updated."

You blew out a breath. "I'll see what I can do. You're better off relying on Athena. Gabriel doesn't tell me everything and Lacroix likes to tell me the wrong thing."

There was a pause. "She was disturbed by tonight's mission."

"First brush with death," you said, a little surprised that he knew.

"I know."

You sat there. "I talked to her. I don't know if I made it worse."

"She said it was a good speech. I think it helped."

"It better have. I'd been saving a variant of it for the next time someone got spare parts. You know, some of the "I wish I'd known this before I sunk into an obsessive spiral of depression and murder" tips." You paused. "I didn't think you'd want to deal with her after that initial issue."
"...She was relentlessly polite and apologetic. And you're right, she is a baby." Genji didn't make eye contact, instead fiddling with your busted chair.

And maybe Genji would be a better big brother than Hanzo. You smiled a little at that image, the little fish torpedo tagging along behind Genji while he ate cake. Maybe you'd get her a big blue bow. "You're probably the best person for her to talk to, you know? I used up all of my words of wisdom."

"Ah. I certainly know how limited your supply is." And just by the light in his eyes, you could tell that he was smiling behind the metal. "It would be wise to ration all your words, just in case."

"Get out," you said, pointing to the door.

When you got out of the shower, you tossed on some clean sweats and made your way to Gabriel's quarters. At first, you weren't sure if they were back yet, until you heard Gabriel's low growl.

He already had Jack naked on the bed, Jack's legs wrapped tightly around his waist. Gabriel was on all fours, and Jack hooked one arm around his neck, leaning in to kiss him.

They both looked up when you shut the door.

"Don't let me interrupt," you said.

"Was wondering if you were going to join us," Jack said, voice raw.

"Had some stuff to take care of. Sorry." You slowly approached the bed. "Good meeting?"

"That's what you want to talk about?" Gabriel growled, resuming this thrusts. You tilted your head to the side, watching his firm round ass bounce and clench with each stroke.

"Oh no, just babbling while I admire the view," you said, mouth too dry. You sat down on the bed beside them. Jack tilted his head back and you leaned over to kiss him.

"Gabe said you might not be up for another round. Something about tearing your clothes off and fucking you against the wall in the transport?" Jack's eyes gleamed.

"Yeah," you exhaled. "We should try it some time."

"Yes," Jack moaned as Gabriel gripped his cock. "We're both...wound up after a fight. Wanted you bad after Belfast. Not being able to touch you was difficult-" He gave a ragged breath. "Knew you were hurt. Would've taken whatever you could give me. Had to sit through the damn flight home with my dick aching and hard."

"No wonder you were so grumpy," you laughed softly, and kissed his cheek. "Gabriel just lifted me up and barely gave me enough time to adjust. No foreplay or anything. He just let me have it straight. I'm sure it's happened to you once or twice: he just tears into you, all hot and thick, and you're squirming, trying to take it all, wondering if you can." Your voice had gone throaty. "He had to cover my mouth, I was getting too loud," you purred in Jack's ear.
Jack groaned and arched off the bed as Gabriel ground against him.

"We only went twice, but that was almost too much. He used me hard, Jack. Like that night back at the farm. Promised I'd get to see him take you next, because even if he was rough with me, he was still holding back. He doesn't have to do that in his own bed."

Jack clenched his teeth, eyes wild. "Damnit -"

"That's it, Jackie," Gabriel stroked Jack's hair. "You take me so well. She's got a filthy mouth, but it's all true. Going to put you between us. Don't know if Lucky's feeling up to letting you fuck her," he flashed a wide grin at you. "But she still wants to play with you."

You sat back against the headboard, watching Gabriel's hand pump Jack's cock, their hips moving in tandem. Sweat trickled down Gabriel's back and Jack's fingers dug into the sheets. Despite the emitter, you still ached, but you might be able to manage another round.

"Come on Jack, I so rarely get to see you like this. Usually, I'm too exhausted to be able to appreciate it." You stroked his hair. "Want to see you squirming under Gabriel. And after you've come, I'll join in."

"Damnit baby," Jack shuddered.

"That's it Jackie," Gabriel growled. "Don't bother trying to hold it in tonight." Gabriel put more power into his thrusts and he pushed Jack flat against the bed, control fraying.

You shut up and listened to their sharp breathing, low moans, and the wet smack of Gabriel's thighs against Jack's ass. Jack gave a guttural groan, and threw his head back, panting hard. Gabriel swore as Jack's thighs tightened around his waist, his hand speeding up.

"Gabe -"

Gabriel lunged forward his mouth claiming Jack's and you sighed as Jack stiffened, his face and chest flushed a bright shade of pink. He smiled, eyes fluttering shut as he spilled his seed all over Gabriel's fingers. It dripped along his torso and you bit your lip. Yeah, aches be damned; you were getting in on this.

Gabriel's hips hit an erratic rhythm, and he tensed, thick muscles flexing as he spent himself inside Jack, his face drawn tight in a snarl.

They stayed like that for a moment, Gabriel breathing hard, while Jack nuzzled his neck, his hair damp against his head.

You waited for Gabriel to pull back before reaching over to stroke Jack's hair. "That was beautiful. Couldn't look away."

"So you're joining in?" Jack grinned up at you, and his cock twitched, already half hard.

Gabriel extended his hand and you grabbed the lube off the nightstand. He took it, rolling his eyes, and put his hand out again. You took it and he yanked you forward, and kissed you, teeth rough against your lips. He laced his fingers through your hair and nipped your throat. You jerked backward and Gabriel let you go. He laughed, low and pleased.

"Thought I'd give you a reason to squeal, you little weasel."

"Pfft, if it'd been the other way around, you'd be telling Jack all about it," you said, rubbing
your neck. "No harm in going to the infirmary just to check things out."

"I'm with her on this. If it's getting worse-" Jack sat up.

"I'm fine. Angela gave me a clean bill of health and didn't even slip in a jibe about sparring. So quit fussing." He kissed Jack as punctuation to his argument and Jack clasped the back of his head, groaning into his mouth.

Jack broke the kiss and tugged at your shirt. "You're overdressed."

"One track mind," you muttered and began to strip.

"If you wore something silky or lacy, he'd probably let you leave it on," Gabriel purred. "I know I wouldn't mind."

You blinked. "Huh."

"She can dress how she wants," Jack said, though he'd averted his eyes and was turning pink again.

You remembered how much he liked your assassin butler outfit. Hell, he seemed especially keen on your Overwatch combat blues. And there was that lacy sex worker ensemble Gabriel had picked out for you... Or you could just borrow their clothes. You had the feeling either one of them would like you in nothing but one of their t-shirts.

"Don't feel pressured," Jack said awkwardly, misinterpreting your silence.

"Just wondering if I could borrow your overcoat while I rode you. But I wasn't sure if that was insubordination or not paying proper respect to the uniform..."

Jack groaned softly. "Fucking tease."

"That's a "yes," then?" You grinned at Gabriel.

"Only if you're not wearing anything else underneath," Gabriel said, shifting back on his knees. "You ready to go again, Jackie?"

You relaxed as Jack slid two fingers inside you. You were already wet from watching them. You reclined against the pillows as Jack knelt between your thighs, his cock stretching you pleasantly as he slid in.

"You don't get to call the shots this time," you told him, wrapping your legs around his waist. "I'm still sore, and you get pretty rough."

Jack sighed, kissing your throat. "I swear, every time Gabriel wrecks you, you just come back pushier."

"Self-preservation," you said, stroking his chest.

"So you don't like telling me what to do?" Jack purred, thrusting into you. You shivered and tightened your grip on him.

"Didn't say that all." You tilted his chin up. "Now behave."

He laughed at that kissing your cheek. "What are you going to do if I don't?"
You bit his shoulder. "I'll get meaner."

Jack stiffened then and then rested his forehead against yours. Gabriel had both arms around his midsection, just above your legs.

"Be nice, Jack," Gabriel murmured.

"Mmm, but we've been here before. The only difference is she isn't handcuffed." Jack kissed you hungrily, thrusting again and you glared at him. "Oh, I know that look. That look says "tie me up, sir, because I'm about to do something that's going to get us both in trouble." He stroked your breasts, shaking his head.

"Nope, that's not how it's going to go this time," you said, pressing your palms against his chest. You clenched around him and he gritted his teeth. Gabriel rocked his hips and Jack gave a sharp cry.

"Oh yeah?" Jack rolled his hips and you moved with him, legs still keeping him anchored. He took the challenge and jerked again, sinking deeper inside you.

"Gabriel," you said, pursing your lips.

"What do you want me to do, hermosa?" Gabriel grinned at you teasingly.

"Make him stop." You smiled coyly at Jack's smug shit-eating grin.

"Can't handle me yourself?" Jack murmured, squeezing your breasts. "After all that talk?"

You were going to enjoy this.


"Yes, baby girl?" He rumbled, words breathy and harsh.

"You asked me what I wanted earlier. I know the answer."

"Oh?" Gabriel leaned closer.

"I want to watch you wreck Jack like you did me, papi. I want him as disheveled and cum-stained as I was. I want him between us, pushed to his limit and incoherent. Please, papi?"

"Oh you conniving bitch," Jack growled in your ear, excitement brightening his eyes. "I'll get you for this."

Gabriel gave a long slow exhalation. "Once I start, who says I'll stop with him?"

"Please, papi?" You tightened your hold on Jack. Because there was a chance they'd exhaust each other, and if not, well, this would be worth it.

"You hear that Jackie?" Gabriel's lips brushed against the shell of Jack's ear. "She wants me to fuck you senseless. You won't be able to sit down tomorrow. How's that sound?"

"If you want to play like that you'll get what's coming to you," Jack ground out, glaring over his shoulder. "Both of you."

"Mmm, I'll take that as a "yes," then," Gabriel purred, and slammed his hips into Jack.
Jack swore and you cupped his face. "Remember your safe words, Jackie." You kissed him hard, pinching his nipples while he writhed between you. You could feel the force of Gabriel's thrusts through Jack's body, and you clung to Jack, holding him in place for Gabriel.

"Thank you, papi," you murmured, just to see Gabriel bite his lip, his eyes on your face.

"Don't thank me yet, baby girl. You can thank me when I've finished with him, and moved on to claiming that pussy again. Don't think you're getting out of this scot free."

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Jack lay boneless between you, head lolled back in your lap. You were all sweaty, and Jack was a sticky mess, his cock still hard in Gabriel's fist. Gabriel was on his knees, Jack's hips in his lap. He gave a long leisurely thrust, his hands matching the rhythm and Jack sighed against you.

"Don't think I have another one in me after this," Jack groaned. "You've emptied me out."

"Filled you up too," you said, noting that you would have to change the sheets after this.


"Want to stop?" You kissed his nose and he shook his head.

"I can go again." He flashed that cocky grin, and you took in his chafed lips, flushed cheeks, and damp hair. He stretched out on the bed, body glistening with a sheen of sweat, taut tension highlighting his muscle definition. He was breathing heavy, but he looked good like this, slippery, hard, and one orgasm away from exhaustion.

"Why don't you sit on his face?" Gabriel rumbled, his eyes on you. "You're up next."

You looked down at Jack and he sighed happily. Getting a pillow, you propped up Jack's head and knelt over him, facing Gabriel. Jack gripped your thighs, tongue tracing the outline of your slit, before he pushed inside, the wet muscle opening you up. You were still aroused from your last round and from watching them. But Jack licked your clit and you jolted forward. Gabriel leaned over and kissed you, his tongue curling against yours.

"That's it, Jackie. You're so good with your mouth." Gabriel squeezed Jack's cock and you felt him gasp beneath you. Gabriel picked up the pace and Jack sucked on your clit, his shuddering breaths muffled against your pussy.

You leaned forward, planting your palms on either side of Jack. Gabriel wasn't holding back any more and Jack whined against you, his fingers gripping your thighs with bruising force.

Unsurprisingly, Jack peaked first, cock leaking onto Gabriel's hand while he shivered beneath you, teeth sinking into your thighs. You squealed, jerking forward, and Gabriel smirked and tweaked your nipples. He took a sharp breath, and smiled fiercely at you, rolling his hips as he came inside Jack.

You shifted to the side, and Gabriel lowered himself against Jack's body, licking your slick off his lips.

"Got you so sloppy, Jackie."
Gabriel kissed him, and you got up to grab Jack some water and a towel. When you returned, Jack was flat against the bed, arms spread wide, a blissful grin on his face, Gabriel pulled out, and you handed him the towel to clean Jack up. Unscrewing the lid, you nudged Jack.

"Drink."

He laughed at you, and swiped the bottle out of your hand. "Thank you, baby."

"Least I could do," you said, flicking his rosy nipples.

"Not done, hermosa," Gabriel said. "Going to get myself cleaned up, then it's your turn."

"Jesus, Gabriel, how long can you go?"

"Should have thought about that before you wound him up and started begging papi to wreck me," Jack dragged himself out of the large wet spot and rolled onto his side. His eyes fluttered shut. "I can't feel my legs."

You rubbed his low back and he curled around you. "Need more water?"

"Nah. I'll get some later. Just need a break."

You went lower, rubbing his thighs and calves. Jack blew out a long breath.

"Guilty conscience?"

"Hell no. You deserved all of it and more. But want to make sure you're not hurting. You normally take pretty good care of me. Want to make sure I return the favor."

"Back's a little sore. Unrelated." Jack rolled onto his stomach and you worked on his back, kneading harder than you would have liked. But Jack soaked it up, making contented noises as you undid the knots in his shoulders.

Gabriel emerged from the bathroom sat down beside you, a hand resting on Jack's ass. "You OK, Jackie?"

"Melting," he said, facedown in a pillow.

Gabriel watched, eyes half-lidded as you massaged Jack's back. His gaze didn't leave you and it felt like he was going to pounce at any moment.

"Gabriel's getting impatient, isn't he?" Jack rolled back onto his back, kissing your fingers.

"Come here," Gabriel said, crooking his finger and you sat down beside him, resting your head against his shoulder. "You OK? I was pretty rough earlier and even if you were directing him, Jack wasn't exactly gentle."

"Can't take it too hard," you admitted, nibbling on his ear. "But I still want you." Gabriel lowered you against the bed. He slid two fingers inside you and you winced, inner walls raw.

He shook his head. "Hurts, does it?"

"Yeah," you huffed.

"Rain check, then," he said, kissing the spot between your breasts.
"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. I'll just take it out your ass later," Gabriel chuckled. "Just relax for a moment. I need to get Jack cleaned up."

Jack raised his head. "That was an option?"

"Not for you," Gabriel purred. "I know exactly how much you can handle."

Jack sat up, leaning over to bite your fingers. "Next time, baby."

He limped to the shower, Gabriel steadying him by the shoulders.

The sheets were damp with sweat and other fluids. You sighed and climbed out of the bed. You changed the linens and got more bottled water. The ache between your legs grew more pronounced, so the emitter went up next and then you peeked your head into the bathroom.

The shower was running and the mirror had already fogged up.

"-wore me down too, Jackie," Gabriel said and you smiled to yourself.

"Haven't done that in awhile," Jack said, voice soft. "Going to be sitting funny tomorrow."

"Warned you."

"Yeah. Can't believe she pulled that. That was her idea, right?"

Gabriel chuckled. "I was as surprised as you."

"Damn. She's getting more devious."

You eyed the toilet, debating on flushing it. No, they'd just get you back. Rolling your eyes, you brushed your teeth.

The shower curtain jangled and Gabriel stuck his head out. "Almost done. We can fit you in here, if you want to rinse off."

"Mmm." Nodding, you finished up. Now you had three toothbrushes, one in each bathroom. It was simply more convenient that way. And maybe you liked their bathrooms better than yours, if only because they had better showers.

You pushed back the curtain and climbed in behind Jack.

"Miss us?" Jack asked, spots of foamy soap still clinging to his heat-flushed skin.

"Had to brush my teeth," you said, trying to wipe some of the suds off him.

Gabriel scrubbed Jack's back, pressing wet kisses as he went lower. "It's OK to say you felt left out."

You rolled your eyes. "I'm fine. I need to get the sweat and cum off me."

Jack stood up straight, blocking all the warm water. "I think you look cute like that."

"I'm sticky," you scowled. "Stop hogging all the water."

"You can admit it," Jack teased, rivulets of water running down his chest. "We won't tell."
"Maybe she just missed me and doesn't want to hurt your feelings," Gabriel rose, one arm around Jack's waist. He grinned at you over Jack's shoulder.

"I didn't miss anyone. You've only been in here for like ten minutes. I just want hot water," you grumbled, crossing your arms over your breasts. "I'm cold."

"Then I'll warm you up," Jack embraced you, and you couldn't stop yourself from relaxing against him. "That better? Don't want you to feel excluded."

"I just wanted to wash off."

"Nobody fed you after the op, did they?" Jack chuckled, tweaking your nose.

"Forgot," you admitted.

It took some work, mostly because the two bigger men were blocking the water flow, but you got cleaned up. It did not help that they kept teasing you about feeling neglected. You got out first, drying off before grabbing the cocoa butter off the shelf and placing it on the sink. Gabriel always forgot to put in on then complained nonstop when he got ashy.

"We embarrassed her," Jack laughed, and Gabriel joined in. You shook your head, unwilling to give them the satisfaction. The water shut off as you exited the bathroom. Still chilly, you grabbed a clean t-shirt out of Gabriel's drawers, and climbed into bed.

They weren't far behind. Gabriel surveyed the bed. "Thank you, baby. I was going to get that." He leaned over to kiss you, smelling faintly like chocolate. "Didn't expect you to take care of everything."

"It's what you do when you're in charge, yeah?" You passed a water bottle to Jack and he studied it for a moment before opening it up and downing it one go. "I pushed you guys tonight. Gotta make sure you're taken care of." You rolled onto your side, pulling the blankets up to your chin. "But I'm tired, so I probably forgot something."

You could feel them watching you. Jack sat down beside you. Gabriel took the other side.

"Scoot over," Jack said, nudging you.

You did and he got under the covers, wrapping his arms around your waist.

"Thank you," he said in your ear.

Gabriel had a funny smile on his face, and he pulled the covers back, and slid under them, despite the fact he'd kick them off later. "I'm the one supposed to be giving you two aftercare."

"OK," you said, sleepily. "No one's stopping you."

Gabriel laughed and turn off the lights. It took you no time to fall asleep, cozy and warm between your lovers.

Chapter End Notes

Well, hope you enjoyed the flood of smut, because after this we're ramping up the plot
stuff. But don't worry, there is still an overabundance of what I consider fluff.

I'm supposed to be job hunting. I've done some searching, and found a little more than I expected. But I've been procrastinating and struggling through some angst scenes, because I don't want to be a responsible adult, I just want to write self-indulgent fanfiction. :P Catching up, because I need to write ahead then edit if I am to maintain this nice release schedule.

As for how I do this, I'm sticking with the demon possession theory, by the way. I average 2.5k words a day, some days are for editing and I only write about 1k. Some days I'm prolific, and do 5k. My personal shocking best was 7.5k. Yeah, this is highly abnormal for me. On my original work, I normally do 1.5k/daily if I'm lucky. Maybe after this I'll be able to do better volume. Or I'll take break from writing because damn has this taken over my life.

That being said, fanfiction and original writing are two different beasts.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Your duties include lying to your superiors, pacifying senior agents, and playing mind games with Lacroix.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You sat in Lacroix's office rubbing your forehead. You'd just watched a video of Chung Yee Wen's aged father apologizing for his son's weakness and then hanging himself. That, and a cryptic invitation for tea, had been sent straight to Jack's mailbox from On Sing.

Lacroix looked annoyingly dapper. He had always been stylish, but since his wife had moved in, he was putting in extra effort. His hair had grown longer, falling rakishly in his face, and he never failed to accessorize: pocket squares, a variety of glasses, sometimes a damn corsage. You even noticed a rotation of tie clips and cuff links, if only because they looked expensive, and with your background how could you overlook that? And he wore jewelry too, his wedding ring prominently displayed. Did Ziv factor into this somehow?

"What do you think?" Lacroix asked.

"...Well, that's fucked up." You turned it over in your head. "Obviously, they know Chung talked. But what are they trying to convey?"

"Family is the most obvious lever. I used it against the Chungs, On Sing did too," Lacroix said. "Of course, this doesn't mean they won't kill the rest of Chung's family. Most likely though, the elder Chung negotiated for them to be spared, and took the dishonor on his head."

"Is this just an intimidation tactic or are they trying to apologize for attempting to assassinate Jack? Because not going to lie, I'm confused."

"Possibly both. On Sing plays a complex game. The talks with Talon have stalled." Lacroix smiled knowingly.

"What have you been up to?" You could not help but sound accusatory.

"Athena, Agent Mihret, and I did some research. On Sing is a family affair heavily vested in some esoteric ancestry cult. Talon's end goals do not quite match what On Sing seems to be about. Yes, they are criminals and quite possibly insane, and they are even more extreme than the Shimada in their quirks. In the past, they have rarely been outright violent, more content to be the power behind the throne. This current turmoil points to some kind of interior power struggle. Mostly they seem content to keep their influence in Asia, rarely venturing out of mainland China."

And the PRC wasn't a big supporter of Overwatch. "So you think if they agree to stay out of our way, we can turn a blind eye?"

"Yes. Jack doesn't like it. Neither does Ana, but Ana understands that our reach has limits. Gabriel...well, I suppose it depends on whether or not On Sing makes another move against Jack."
Lacroix looked at you slyly. "What about you, Chanceux? Can you forgive and forget?"

You pursed your lips. "Why do I have the feeling I'm really not going to like what you're about to tell me?"

"On Sing wants Fong Kee back, alive and in one piece. He knows it, and while he's been unfailingly polite and quite charming, he won't talk. And I suspect, that it will take a great deal of work to break him." Lacroix shrugged. "I have Agent Mihret doing the research, but I've seen the type. Everyone has a breaking point, but some people die first. Winston hasn't been able to find his cyanide tooth or whatever suicide implement he has hidden on his person, but I'm certain he has one, probably embedded inside his body."

"So we just...give him back?" You sighed.

"It's a possibility. Fong Kee is apparently an "esteemed and venerated elder." And On Sing is all about filial piety, though they seem to swing more Daoist with heavy Legalist influences and less Confucian and definitely not Neo-Confucian. It's an odd combination really."

You just blinked. "But the sniper's father-"

"Not high enough on the totem pole. I didn't say they were fair. Also, now that we're talking about it, I'm pretty sure they're having a schism, and Chung's family backed the wrong side."

You folded your hands in your lap. You would never trust On Sing, but you could see the value in a ceasefire. And you were morally flexible enough to maintain a detente. Sure, you didn't like those assholes: you might stab them through the neck if you could get away with it. But if you could keep them from joining up with Talon, that would reduce your pool of enemies, and with so many enemies, you had to be practical.

"If we can trust them to maintain a treaty, I won't fight it."

"That is far more reasonable than I was expecting."

"Of course, part of that treaty will involve telling us who put the hit on Jack and handing over any responsible parties. After all, these criminal masterminds won't respect you unless you show you're willing to get your hands bloody."

Lacroix actually laughed at that. "You aren't wrong, but that view is far too simplistic."

"On Sing seems to view blood as currency. I'm just speaking their language."

"That observation is on point." Lacroix offered you a cigarette and you took it. You waited for him to produce his lighter before pulling your own out, lighting your damn Gitanes, and dropping it back in your pocket.

You smiled at him. "Thanks."

"So petty," he laughed, unbothered.

"Don't forget to change the paperwork then," you said, because you could take this to another level of petty if need be. "The OW- I can never remember the numbers for the Technological Evidence Permanent Confiscation forms. Whatever. You did the intake, you can fill out another Technological Evidence Loan form, if we plan on giving any of Fong's possessions back. But we're keeping the hard-light gauntlets and the omnic. Killed those fair and square."
"...He did have some interesting tech in his jewelry," Lacroix said. "I think we can leave the paperwork as is. I don't think his possessions are part of the exchange deal. But I'll change the form if necessary." He didn't look remotely concerned. "Amélie wants to do a trip around Zurich with you and Ana."

You blinked. You thought she was just throwing ideas out there. Well, she was going stir crazy. They weren't going to let her off base without guards, and you'd done enough bodyguard duty to be competent.

"You look so surprised. Surely she mentioned this over dinner?"

"I thought she was being polite," you admitted.

Lacroix did that Gallic shrug. "She asked specifically for you and Ana. Maybe Angela would enjoy coming, but Amélie didn't mention her." He paused. "I think we'll hold off till the Hanzo Shimada affair is sorted. No need to complicate that."

"We involving Genji?"

"Not initially, though Gabriel will be informing him of his brother's...request today. Thoughts?"

"Genji wants him alive and unharmed. Hanzo Shimada could be a great information resource. And he's not bad in a fight."

"From what I remember, he shot you didn't he?" Lacroix smirked.

"With a goddamn arrow," you muttered.

"Such forgiveness...?" Lacroix tapped his cigarette on the brass ashtray. "Oh. Is that how you secured Genji's cooperation for Operation Candle Arc?"

You thought about it. Genji had said he would have done it if you'd just asked. "No. But it didn't hurt my case."

Lacroix nodded at that. "Ziv has been tracking Bái Shé's movements. They've kept her low-key since London. Mostly hacking work. We might have to set some bait after all."

You digested that, reading between the lines. They didn't trust her on violent ops then. And perhaps they were doing more behavioral modifications. "Sooner is better, Lacroix."

"Be patient, Chanceux. We only have one shot at this. Best to do it right."

You sat at your desk and selected three relatively tame pictures of Gabriel. One was him in bed, one nipple peeking out from the blanket, while he pretended to be asleep. There was one of him in gym shorts and a t-shirt, throwing a basketball. You cropped out the part where Jesse got hit in the head. It was a good shot, and you were pleased. The third was him grinning over a box of doughnuts, half a jelly one jammed in his mouth. You sent them to Maggie, wondering what you'd get in return.

Your phone rang and you picked it up. "Strike."
"We have a slight...situation," Captain Amari said, sounding very tired. "My office, please?"

"Yes, ma'am. On my way." You winced, because there were so many things that could be going wrong, and the fact Captain Amari had summoned you...well, that made it more serious.

You adjusted your gloves, straightened your collar, and strode out of the office.

The door was open when you got there, and there were wet tissues all over the office. Scattered paperwork littered the floor, marked up with large bootprints. And one of the chairs had been broken down into scrap. Your lips quirked.

Captain Amari slumped in her chair, hat on the desk. You saluted, and shut the door behind you.

"Athena, launch privacy mode," Captain Amari looked up at you, shaking her head. "At ease, agent." She turned the electric kettle on and got out her tea service. You took the unbroken chair and looked at the floor.

"Redecorating?"

"I will keep all the cookies to myself and give you saltines."

"Sorry, ma'am. Just...surprised by the state of your office."

Captain Amari just shook her head. "Me too. Sorry, I'm just...tired." She busied herself making tea, hands flying with practiced grace.

"Amélie wants us to accompany her to something cultured. Like an art museum," you said, wondering if that would cheer her up.

"I've heard. It sounds delightful. She also mentioned a salon trip. Can't do that on Overwatch's dime no matter how nice it sounds, but she's offered to fund the entire venture."

Captain Amari looked up at you. "How do you feel about it?"

"Out of my depth, ma'am."

Captain Amari set a cup and saucer in front of you and opened a fresh package of stroopwafels. The flat, waffled-ironed wafers had caramel filling. Captain Amari poured you something very dark. You sipped the tea, found it pleasantly bitter, and took a bite of the heavily sweetened biscuit. They were a fine combination.

"Thank you ma'am."

"My pleasure. I think the point is to learn something new, agent," Captain Amari sounded amused. "And to give Amélie a break from our dry military lifestyle."

"She suggested the opera first. Then a puppet show." You scratched your head. "That seems a pretty big range."

"Puppets have a little more culture attached them than you may think."

You had once transported some of those Indonesian leather shadow puppets with some less legal goods. Those were cool. "Yes, ma'am."

"We'll talk about it later. All right, so...this mess. I'll be blunt, Gérard was right. We're
getting pressure to pull Reinhardt from active duty because of his age and possibly because of some of the politics of the old Crusaders. Now, it's not retirement, not yet, but frankly, it's ridiculous."

"He's not that old," you said, trying to recall how old he actually was. And as for politics? Did Reinhardt have any?

"Damn straight he's not. He's only a little older than me," Captain Amari said sourly.

You did the numbers. Well, Captain Amari was a bit older than you thought. And definitely did not look it. You'd always assumed she was Jack and Gabriel's age, but...actually that explained a lot. She was the mature one.

"The language is coached with faux concern for his health under the pressure of such a "heavy" role, along with implications of his impending senility. Bah! Reinhardt was never a genius, but he hasn't lost what he has. And he's certainly capable enough on the battlefield."

"I wouldn't fight him," you muttered. "He didn't suggest that, did he? Like whoever wrote the order could come take him one on one and-"

"Yes," Captain Amari sighed. "Yes. And more."

"...Surely it wouldn't be hard to give him an "administrative post," and then send him to the field as an "observer." We lie bureaucratically all the goddamn time! Why can't we do that for Reinhardt? At least till Lacroix can leverage whoever passed down this shit order." You paused. "Ma'am."

"Oh that's the plan, but Reinhardt is a man of great...feeling."

You studied the tissues on the ground. Oh boy.

"Yes. He's very upset with Jack and me. I tried to explain, but...I was being Captain Amari, not his friend Ana. It was the wrong choice and he did not stay for the entire explanation." Captain Amari shook her head. "You understand that role distinction better than most."

You nodded.

"It doesn't help that Torby is ranting about how we've betrayed him and...unintentionally winding him up more. Those two..." Captain Amari shook her head. "Anyway, Athena's tracked him to Torby's workshop and well, you might have to give him an overview of Shit Spiders, if only to explain the deception. We're not pulling him from the field. We're not retiring him. We're just giving him a different job title and sometimes he'll have to wear his dress uniform. He likes that though," she added after a moment.

"Wait, you want me to-?"

"Out of all the people briefed on Shit Spiders, who is the best candidate?"


"Winston," you said.

"...You're probably right, but I feel like Reinhardt will take you more seriously. He treats Winston like a child. Likes to offer him currywurst. Winston politely takes them, but..."
"...Yeah, OK." Winston didn't like spicy. You rubbed your forehead. "Do you know where I can get some currywurst?"

They had to smell you coming. Currywurst was not a subtle scent, all grease, pork sausage, and spice. And you were laden with twenty orders of the stuff, drinks, and fries. You descended to the bowels of Overwatch R&D, farther underground than even Winston went. You'd never come to Torby's workshop before; he always met you up in the med center.

"Athena, tell Torby I'm outside and I have food."

There was a long pause.

"She has currywurst!" Reinhardt did not have an indoor voice.

"Really? You want to deal with a Blackwatch wetworks agent right now? She's probably here to recruit you while you're vulnerable!"

"I can hear you," you said to the reinforced metal double doors. "And this is heavy."

One large door opened smoothly, and Torby glared up at you, black smudges all over his cheeks. "Why are you here, Lucky?"

"Just to talk. Nothing bad. I promise." You would have held up one hand or made some kind of oath-giving gesture, but your arms were too full. "And no, I'm not here to recruit anyone for Blackwatch."

Torby gave you a straight up glare.

"Torby, you make my damn prostheses. I have no desire to piss you off. And I know Reinhardt is your best friend, so please, if you don't trust me, at least trust that I have very good reasons not to cross either of you."

"Torby, stop being rude and let Lucky Lady in," Reinhardt said, clapping a large hand on Torby's shoulder. Torby staggered a little and glared, head snapping between both of you.

"Fine! But when you're trying to sneak your black spray-painted Crusader armor into a position to assassinate some idiot, and the clutch gets stuck, don't come crying to me!"

Reinhardt held the door open for you and you walked into a well-organized junkyard. The room was set up like a warehouse, but it was chock full of machining tools, scrap metal, broken down omnis, and other half-finished projects. Reinhardt's crusader armor was on full display and you took a moment to admire the workmanship. Valdez's hadn't been nearly that solid and intimidating.

"Beautiful work, yes?" Reinhardt asked wistfully.

"Yeah, it's very impressive." You blew out a breath. "I couldn't begin to move in that. And that hammer...yeesh." If you came across anything wielding a hammer that big, you needed to just turn around and run.

"So, why are you here, Lucky?" Reinhardt asked solemnly. "I trust you have heard of my
troubles.” Reinhardt watched you with a sad smile. His gray-blonde hair was disheveled, his eyes reddened, and his nose too shiny and a little raw.

"Can I hand this to you, because it's heavy? And then if we can find somewhere to sit down, we can just talk?" Reinhardt hefted the bag of currywurst with ease and gave you a skeptical look, like he was surprised by how comparatively weak you were.

Reinhardt directed you to some crates and you got out the bottles of pilsner and the boxes of fries. Torby followed, giving you both dirty looks.

"You keep avoiding my questions," Reinhardt said, studying your face after you had set up the food.

Torby took a seat and watched you with silent wariness verging on hostility.

"Because I have to give you a long explanation and now I'm hungry because I had to go into the city, pick up a giant order of currywurst, and carry it back." You randomly picked up a box and tore into it. The seasoned pork sausage was spicier than you expected and you sighed happily.

Reinhardt eyed the food sadly. He picked up a box. "Is this my farewell meal, Lucky?"

You passed him a pilsner. "No. I am here to talk about that, though. Athena enact privacy mode."

Torby raised a brow.

"Torby's already on Operation Shit Spiders. You're not cleared to get the formal briefing, so I'm going to summarize it. We've got enemies in the UN trying to take us apart, not just bureaucratically, but explosively. Shit Spiders is the op we're doing to clean out the traitors and keep Overwatch going. You've been ID'd as a linchpin member of Overwatch. If they get rid of you, they destabilize us. So this move was either meant to really demoralize you or make you rage quit, and probably make Jack and Captain Amari look bad."

Torby took a currywurst and pilsner. "Fucking politics." He muttered more unpleasantries in Swedish.

"You need to watch your back too, Torby. They'll probably come after you next." You sipped your lager. "Lacroix thinks they'll try to smear you with some kind of awful massacre done with one of your weapons made back in your Ironclad days."

"They were all awful," Torby hissed, feelings clear on his face, and you had the decency to look away.

"I'm not arguing any of it. Just letting you know what's going on." You massaged your forehead. "I'm only the messenger. I think Captain Amari picked me because I can eat currywurst."

"No, everyone else is a jackass," Torby muttered. "Except Winston."

"What is the message, Lucky?" Reinhardt took a bite of the currywurst, and it was half gone. He still managed to look disappointed, mouth drooping, his good eye soulful like an injured deer's.

"You're getting a title change, and maybe a few more administrative responsibilities. That's it. They'll still send you into the field as an "observer." An observer with two tons of combat armor and a giant smashy hammer. I don't know if we're going to be able to weed out the asshole who
pushed for this, but Lacroix and Ziv are looking into it. We'll disappear him for you if we can."

"No, Lucky. That is not how Overwatch should operate," Reinhardt said, shaking his head.

"That's why I'm Blackwatch." You shrugged. "You're an honorable decent man, and Overwatch needs people like you. But it needs people like us too."

Reinhardt finished his second currywurst and shook his head at you. "Assassination. Blackmail. Torture." He tapped each word out on a finger like a counting rhythm. "I know some of what Blackwatch does, and the way it operates troubles me. We should not be those kind of people. We are the ones who fight those kind of people. We have to stand in the light, Lucky, so that others may look to us and follow suit. If we have to resort to those methods, how are we any better?"

You rubbed your forehead. This was not the debate you wanted to have, ever. Because you weren't much for philosophy. That was a luxury for people who never had to dirty their hands.

"Torby tell you how I got these?" You pulled off your glove, flashing your prostheses.

"...Saving Reyes," Reinhardt said.

"And that's why I'm not recruiting you for Blackwatch, because you are not supposed to know that, and you should have lied about it." You gave Torby a pointed look.

"Bah!" Torby snorted and ate his fries.

"I was stationed in a little shithole base in Canada. Gabriel was visiting. Long story short, we were sold out by our base commander - on orders from higher up. They killed my people." You flexed your fingers, glad you'd swapped out your blades for the basic models. "My captain. My friends. My lover."

"I am sorry for your losses," he said, and you knew he meant it, from the gentleness in his bass voice, to the shimmer in his eye: Reinhardt was a soft touch.

"And then we had to sweep it under the rug to better investigate. Gabriel and I survived an "accident." My history was redacted: I was a floater agent, my unit was never my unit. My real name is buried. And now I'm Lucky Strike." You downed your beer and tried to soften your posture.

"I knew most of that already," he admitted giving you a long, soulful look, and you threw your hands up.

"Torby!"

Torby just picked up another currywurst and shrugged. "Had to explain the stupid name."

You took a moment, lips pressed firmly together, eyes shut. "How do I fight that, Reinhardt? I'm no Crusader. I'm barely a match for the next gen omnics. It's like Torby said, politics. You can't punch your way out of them. Our enemies won't all meet us on the battlefield. They'll come at us from all angles. They'll regulate your armor size. They'll target your families. They'll hire assassins to ambush you on ops. Some of these people are so rich, they'll never see a day in court. There's no honor here, only survival. I don't have your scruples, but I know there's a line. Blackwatch is on a knife's edge. Too little, and we're ineffective. Too far, and we're monsters."

"I don't have an easy answer," Reinhardt said, gently. "And I am sorry if I have given
offense. I just think all of you Blackwatch agents deserve better. You deserve better." The force of his words surprised you, but that was Reinhardt, all feelings and nobility.

"Thank you," you said.

"In the past year, Reyes has done a better job filtering out the scum," Torby said gruffly. "I figured getting Ana and Jack involved was part of it. Maybe even that shithead Lacroix. Guess you get some of the credit too."

You crammed a currywurst in your face, because Torby would make fun of you if you got emotional on him. And then Reinhardt would hug you and probably crack your ribs. So you ate your sausage, and drank your beer, tried to look nonchalant. "Appreciate the recognition," you said, feeling vaguely queasy from the amount of oily food you'd eaten in such a short span.

"Don't get used to it," Torby muttered.

"Yeah, I know." You grinned wryly. "I am very accustomed to being vastly underappreciated."

"I'll tell Jack you said that," Torby smirked.

"...Damnit, that's not what I was talking about." You scratched the back of your head.

"We will talk to him. And Reyes," Reinhardt said solemnly. "These young men don't know how to treat a lady nowadays."

Jesus Christ, Reinhardt knew too? Fuck. You rested your face in your hand.

"Americans," Torby said.

Reinhardt shook his head. "Youth is wasted on the young."

You were being trolled. Everyone was out to get you now. You weren't sure how this happened, but you were going to blame Ziv.

"Right, I just came down to say you're not getting put out to pasture. Sorry if Jack and Captain Amari couldn't clarify that. I assume they have to be on the record formally or something. But Captain Amari wanted me to assure you that you can still go out in the field and smash things. You'll have a little more paperwork though, but you'll also have more occasions to wear your dress uniform."

Reinhardt sat back against the crates, the wood creaking under his weight. "That is a relief."

"That's just a delaying tactic, Lucky." Torby gave a disgruntled snort.

"Which is why we're running Shit Spiders, Torby." You took another beer. "I know they'll push for your retirement eventually. The next countermeasure will be to promote you to instructor. That way you can "oversee" your pupils in battle. Oh no, Instructor Wilhelm is just here to grade their performances from a safe distance. We can't let all that experience go to waste!" And then you drop the hammer and show those whippersnappers how it's done."

Reinhardt stroked his beard. "I see."

"Sound like a plan?"

"Thank you, Lucky," he said after a moment. "For the currywurst, the good news, and the
You nodded. "I know."

"Not everyone does," Reinhardt said with a frown. "There are rumors-"

"Don't care," you said. "I know the truth. And so do you. That's what matters."

You were at your desk when he came in, eyes narrowed as you examined yet another R&D proposal from Vo pertaining to edible explosives. You sighed, rubbing your forehead. She wasn't letting it go. And to be honest, you were a little curious. You didn't outright deny it this time, instead putting in a request for a white paper. There, Vo hated paperwork. Either she'd put the time in because she really meant it, or she was just trolling you too.

You raised your head when he stepped and, and stood, saluting. "Director Petras. Commander Reyes isn't in right now."

A little soft around the jaw and the midsection, Petras still projected a friendly, competent mien. He had laugh lines, and his hair was a respectable shade of blonde. But he reminded you of a televangelist. There was a waxiness to his presence, created by a combination of Botox and spray tan, and emphasized by his overuse of musky cologne.

"At ease, Agent Strike. I know Gabriel is a busy man." He smiled brightly at you with too white, too straight teeth. You wanted to feed them to him. "I stopped by hoping to have a word with you."

"Have a seat, sir," you said, quashing any panic. "I can offer you coffee, but anything else I'll have to send out for."

"No, no don't trouble yourself, dear." He pulled up a chair in front of your desk. "I've been meaning to talk to you for a long time. Ainsley still speaks of what a good friend you were to her in Paris. Something about helping her find her way?" Petras smiled widely, eyes hard.

Oh boy. "...Ainsley did the talking," you said after a moment. "I provided a sympathetic ear and tea."

"That is a diplomatic way of saying my niece doesn't shut up, isn't it?"

You forced yourself not to shrug. "I am not much of a conversationalist."

"Very diplomatic. It seems Korpal was right about you. A shame about that carjacking. I know his in-laws have posted a large reward to bring his killers to justice. I didn't realize Chennai could be so dangerous."

It was a reward that would never be collected.

"I have never been," you said, weighing your words very carefully.

"Ah, but where are my manners? You and Morrison saved Ainsley that day. And I am very grateful. She's like a daughter to me." He leaned forward, smile sharp. "I find it interesting that you work with Morrison on a semi-regular basis."
"Sometimes Commander Reyes requires a liaison," you said.

"Yes, Korpal did explain your role is...smoothing things over. I find it refreshing to see one so young that is so ambitious and reasonable."

"Thank you, sir." That cologne was giving you a headache, and when you took a discrete breath through your mouth, you could taste it in the air. Ugh.

"I think we could come to an understanding, Agent Strike. You hear so many things, and I'm a busy man. I could use a set of ears and eyes on the ground."

"And what kind of things would you be interested in hearing about, sir?" You met his cool gaze, channeling Lacroix's sangfroid.

"This and that." He waved his hands. "I like to know my people. Morrison is very different than the paragon he portrays for the media. I'd like a...better understanding of his character. Commander Reyes as well, if possible. While he is the strongest candidate, I'd hate for any...surprises."

He wanted dirt on both Jack and Gabriel? You managed something that resembled a smile.

"That can be arranged," you said. "I suspect you know most of Commander Reyes foibles. He isn't...subtle."

"How do you keep him in line, Agent Strike?" You stiffened as he reached out, running his fingers down your bare forearm. "You aren't the classical ideal of femininity, but there is still something very compelling about you. It must be difficult, being young and attractive, without a patron to ensure you aren't...taken advantage of." His hand rested on your wrist.

"Commander Reyes values good advice. I tend to choose calmer moments to speak to him." You kept your voice even, resisting the urge to break his arm. "I am a field agent too, sir."

"But it would be very easy for someone to threaten you out there," Petras said in a low voice. "Comm malfunctions. Faulty gear. Late backup. There are so many things that could go wrong. It never hurts to have friends in high places. Think of it as...accident insurance."

You sucked in a breath. Because the job offer was the carrot. And here was the stick. You weren't sure if the sexual harassment was a power play or if he was really interested. "That would be a shame," you said, resisting the urge to threaten him.

"Indeed." Petras licked his lips and he reminded you of a fish. Your stomach turned.

"I prefer not to mix business and pleasure, sir." You tilted your head back, meeting his gaze. "It complicates things immensely."

"Don't tell me you're one of those man-hating dykes," Petras scowled, tightening his grip on you.

"I won't tell you that then," you said. You reminded yourself that while you could kill him right now, it was not a tactically-sound decision and would jeopardize everything you were working toward. You reminded yourself that you had several plans to kill him, and tonight you would sit down and review them all. Maybe lengthening the process by a few hours. You reminded yourself that you hadn't taken any oaths swearing off torture...

"You should at least try a real man," Petras muttered and not laughing took all your self
"You want my observations, Director. You want my loyalty. I am in a unique position to provide needed services. That is what I can offer." You smiled thinly at him, shaking his hand off.

He gave you a sour look. "Yes, yes. I understand."

"I'm so glad," you said brightly, your smile too wide and full of teeth.

"I'll be in touch, Strike."

You just inclined your head, watching him stalk gracelessly from the office. Now you needed a shower. Then a round on the mats. And some goddamn air freshener to get rid of the stink of his cologne.

You resisted the sultry invitation of the whiskey bottle, then sent a message. You gave yourself ten minutes before exiting the office. The hallway was empty.

"Athena, anyone in my vicinity?"

"Yes, Agent Vo is down the hall."

Agent Vo was unpredictably deaf: she had selective hearing when it came to things she didn't like, but an uncanny knack for stumbling into conversations about getting food. All you could verify was that she really did have a lot of inner ear damage from her vocation. You'd given up talking to her and just sent her written messages. She ignored you half the time, but just the social half. She usually paid attention to work.

"I need to make it to Lacroix's office without running into...my last visitor."

"The way is clear. He has gone up to the Strike Commander's office. You should wear a comm, agent. It will make this easier in the future."

"Yeah," you said grimly. "I think I will."

Lacroix sat at his desk, and you shut the door too hard behind you.

"Tell me what happened," he said, not looking up.

So you did, you gave him a full report, suitably laden with expletives. And when you were done, he sat back in his chair and waved at you to sit. You dropped into the seat, teeth gritted.

"You think too much like a soldier, Chanceux. And I tell you time and time again, you are not one."

You glared at him. "What does that even mean?"

"You could have easily strung him along and then presented a less than appealing image further down the line. Outright denying a man like that makes him want you more, if only as a sop for his wounded ego," Lacroix said bluntly.
"Really? I should have played along? Jesus, I didn't even know he was here!"

"You should not have been surprised," Lacroix said sharply. "Korpal named you as a resource. Of course, Petras would come evaluate your suitability."

"Fucker threatened to frag me if I didn't go along with it!"

"And he would, if he had any control over what operations you ran. But he does not. And he still has need of your intel. He can't touch you on a Blackwatch run," Lacroix said, unmoved. "You misjudged and played your cards wrong. Fortunately, it doesn't yet affect the op, but it does affect your personal dealings with Petras. Whether he wants you or not doesn't matter. You told him "no" and he doesn't like that."

You massaged your forehead. "Thanks. Good talk."

"You didn't come to me because you wanted sympathy, Chanceux," Lacroix said coolly. "You came because you wanted a plan of action. Quit whining."

"You're the worst," you told him.

"No, you're a fool. You reacted like a soldier, seething with outrage and barely hidden emotion. You didn't take the time to be analytical and smart. Yes, you could have broken his arm, neck, whatever body part struck your fancy. But that doesn't help us. If you are a spy, you play the game. If you want be a soldier, you have to build a reputation. You know why Ana doesn't have the problem with rumors that you do? Everyone knows that even if she is charming, she has iron teeth and immaculate aim. She doesn't have to threaten, because everyone understands that Ana is a force of nature, not a cog in the machine. Ana could be carrying on affairs with six different men or women, and if it came out, you know what would happen? Nothing. Because people respect, like, and fear Ana, in that order."

"I'm not Captain Amari," you ground out.

"You could be like her," Lacroix said. "You could be like Amélie. She would have had him wrapped around her finger on the end of her lead. And she wouldn't have given him a damn thing. This loose cannon rebel agent behavior can only take you so far, Chanceux. And if you're not careful, it will get you killed."

"I didn't snap at him," you snapped at Lacroix. And it was mostly intentional.

"Yes, congratulations, you didn't completely botch the pitch," he retorted. "It was barely passable work, Chanceux. Do better next time. The proposition will surface again. And you should make a plan for it. Ana and Amélie would have handled it in completely different ways, that is true. You picked the middle route, and in this case, it isn't enough. Choose your method. Predict his angles. What will he offer? What will he threaten? And how do you persuade him to do what you want, while not showing your own hand?"

"I don't know," you scowled.

"Obviously." Lacroix steepled his fingers. "Take a day to think about it. We will continue this discussion later."

You left his office, muttering obscenities.
Jesse and Genji were both on runs. You contemplated getting Vo, but as mean as she was, she was not actually good for sparring. You'd heard a rumor she'd eaten someone's eyeball in a bar fight, and you didn't actually want to find out if that was true. You went down your list. Reinhardt was on an op, and forget that because you weren't suicidal. Jack and Gabriel were busy, which was fine. You didn't want to talk to them about this till you'd calmed down. Captain Amari was on an op. You didn't want to fight Winston. Because you would lose.

Sitting in the office, door locked, you called Ziv.

He listened to your invitation, laughed, and hung up on you.

That little shit.

Sulking, you realized that you did not have very many living friends. You contemplated going to the Overwatch gym...

Your phone rang. You looked at the ID. It was Lacroix. You strongly contemplated ignoring it.

"Yeah?"

"If you're so hard up for a fight that you asked Mihret, I'll meet you in the gym."

"And you give me shit for being overprotective of him."

There was a long silence.

"I will see you on the mats, Chanceux," Lacroix said so coolly, you could feel the ice forming on the receiver.

Chapter End Notes

Caught up to my "four chapters ahead" working standard.

More job-hunting, though haven't put too many applications out. Will do more tomorrow.

I did clean my house. Am turning in my pet owner license though. One of my dogs opened a box of Glide dental floss and ate it. It's like they're trying to kill themselves. I don't know who. I don't know when. But I found all the pieces of the box except the little spool of thread and the metal floss cutter. I stuffed them full of rice and bread, and they're not having trouble passing anything, so I'm hoping they're all fine. Last night I caught Shepard trying to eat a lock wrapped in bubblewrap. You have to understand, he stole that out of a box on my bed, carried it to the living room, and hid it under a cushion while trying to discretely chew it up. This is what I'm dealing with. Someone also got a spatula off the stove when I wasn't looking. The household joke is Shepard keeps asking me to buy "delicious Tide pods."

So, warning on the future. There's some heavy dialogue and psychological shit coming up eventually. I called this my "therapy fic" for a reason, and that reason is rearing its head. Just a forewarning. It goes with the story, but there will be issues hanging out
everywhere, (and part of me is like "ain't nobody got time for that"). Issues for everyone! But mostly reader. Because seriously, you don't go through shit and come out normal.
You were unpleasantly surprised when Amélie and Ziv showed up in the gym. Ziv was in his lab coat and cargo shorts, smirking at you. Had he cut his hair? You blinked. He seemed taller than you remembered, and that annoyed you. Amélie had her hair back in a fashionably messy bun, still in a maroon unitard, white leg warmers, and black ballet slippers. She looked terribly amused.

It was Lacroix's outfit that really surprised you. He wore a skintight black tank top, black lycra pants with a silver stripe down the legs. Lacroix was much leaner than Gabriel and Jack, though his body was all muscle the exposed skin revealed several shocking scars. He had silver gloves and a soft-soled pair of black and silver boots.

"Of course, you know savate," you muttered. Savate was a martial art required special shoes, which was about as French as you could imagine.

"It's a national past time," he said, smoothly, all traces of annoyance masked behind a friendly smile. "Don't bother with the boxing gloves."

"I have metal fingers."

"I don't care," he said, smile not very nice. "I'm wearing my shoes."

You blew out a breath. "Yeah, OK. Rules?"

"Stay in the ring. If you get pushed out, you lose. If you tap, you lose. If you get knocked out, you lose. And I don't bother with Queensbury rules."

"I don't know what that means," you said.

"He's OK with back punches," Ziv said.

"Yeah, who isn't?" You scowled.

Amélie and Lacroix exchanged looks and Lacroix's lips curved in a smug smile.
Amélie giggled. "Bonne chance, Chanceux! Beat the pants off him! I will not be angry so long as he is alive afterward."

"Punch the chutzpah off her face, Gérard!" Ziv cheered. He would be Lacroix's fucking cheerleader. That little bitch.

The red mats had a white ring drawn on them, and you and Lacroix squared off in the middle. You took a shuddering breath and smiled, because you got a free pass to hit Lacroix today.

"Allez!" Amélie called out, arms raised in a figure Y. "Do not hold back, Chanceux! Make him work for it!"

Lacroix lashed out, foot nearly hitting you in the face. You slid backward, conscious of the boundaries of ring. Springing forward, you blocked his left cross, which had morphed halfway into a left hook.

You backhanded him in the face, the smack so satisfying, you could feel it in your bones. The look of surprise on his face was just as good. Eyes wide, mouth open, just a trickle of blood from his split lip... You'd treasure that memory for a long time.

Amélie whooped.

Lacroix dropped low, and you recognized a sweep, even if he dressed it up like he was falling down. You jumped but he got a quick jab past your defenses, into your stomach.

Sucking in air, you landed unsteadily on your heels, and slid into a wider stance, for stability. Lacroix was already moving, snapping a front kick at your head. You retaliated with a shin strike, sending him wobbling backward. Lacroix hissed, but didn't go down. He lunged forward, and you slipped past him, feeling him overshoot his mark. You were still grinning when you got the wind knocked out of you. The blow drove you forward to your knees, and you gritted your teeth, realizing that he fucking kicked you in the back. You pushed off the ground with your palms, driving a back kick into his chest. Spinning around, you followed it up with a roundhouse kick.

You didn't have to hold back with Lacroix, because obviously, he wasn't holding back on you. Unlike Jack and Gabriel. You met him blow for blow, slightly surprised by how well he could stand up to your hits. You'd never thought of him as a good barehanded fighter. He was the kind of assassin who used a discrete but classy weapon: a poison ring, a pearl-handled derringer, the occasional ceremonial dagger borrowed off the mantle place of the supervillain's study. He was graceful; you'd always assumed that was because he could dance. You obviously assumed wrong.

Here was the pattern: Lacroix's attacks were never quite what they initially appeared to be. His roundhouses would morph into low shin kicks. His front kicks would hook around and become axe kicks. You could never be quite sure of his angle or true target. Deception was his style. And shockingly, despite his lighter build, Lacroix was a good solid fighter. But you were better. You could take him.

You weren't in any hurry though. Petras had gotten under your skin and you needed something to hit. You threw elbows and knees, because savate wasn't your style and you weren't limited by its rules. You fought hard and dirty, managing to catch a punch and throw Lacroix over your shoulder. The sound he made when he hit the mats, was almost as satisfying as slapping him.

Amélie was laughing and clapping, shouting strings of French that ended in "Chanceux!" Ziv kept telling Lacroix to "kick your ass," bits of Hebrew vulgarities slipping into his speech. You
should have charged them admission.

You knew the smile on your face was savage. But Lacroix's was cool, almost pleased, even if he was taking more damage. He had impressive footwork, and perhaps he fenced too. You could see him with an epee, and one of those silly mesh insect suits.

Lacroix bounded off the ground and you crooked your finger at him. "So brash," he shook his head. "You really shouldn't play with your opponents, Chanceux."

"What do you call all that feinting?"

"That is how I fight, Chanceux." He circled you. "It is a pure expression of whom I am."

"A sneaky son of a bitch?"

Lacroix gave a graceful shrug. "If that is how you interpret it. Your style is quite interesting. A little bit of Gabriel, a little bit of Jack, some of Genji, and two or three people I don't know."

You frowned at him. Because Lacroix was always too insightful for your comfort.

"I would guess Shin Sato and Aishani Patel. Maybe Simon Razafindrandriatsimaniry?"

Holy fuck, he said it right. You blinked, and that hesitation was a mistake. Lacroix sprung off the mats, legs parallel to the ground. You went to block, but he locked his knees around your neck, twisted his hips, and flipped you forward onto your back, finishing the move with a punch to your chest.

You snarled, when you had the air back in you, but he kept his knees at your throat, not squeezing, but not letting you up.

"That's not savate!" You wheezed.

"Vovinam," he said brightly. "And I win, because you're outside the ring."

Sure enough, he'd managed to knock you a few inches out of the white circle.

"Fuck!" You sighed as he unlocked his legs and rolled into a crouch in front of you. "You said Simon's name right. Damnit."

He laughed.

The whole match had been a fucking feint. He'd gotten you used to savate's limitation of kicks and punches, then gone and thrown a flying scissors to your neck. Vovinam was a modern Vietnamese martial art, taking influences from Chinese and other East Asian styles. Rubbing your neck, you looked up to see Jack standing on the edge of the mat, dressed down in black fatigues. He was staring at Lacroix, head tilted slightly to the side, eyes narrowed, mouth a small "o." You shared his incredulity.

"He kicked your ass," Ziv grinned, taunting you just out of arm's reach.

"Ah, but she made him work for it," Amélie said, hands on her cheeks. "And poor Gérard is going to be so sore later. He will complain about his back and joints. He will take a long bath in salts and oils. He will laze about the living room making sad eyes, and I will have to make a great fuss over his war wounds."
You had the feeling that Amélie really liked seeing Lacroix get beat up. Oh god, had this been foreplay for her? Shit.

Lacroix only preened at your slightly horrified expression. "You are talented, Chanceux. But you are too obvious. This was not a battle of strength, this was a battle of wits." He tapped your forehead. "You might have hit me harder, and more frequently, but I had a better strategy. Fight smarter, not harder."

You sighed, dragging yourself to your feet. You got the message loud and clear. Each game had its rules, and you had to tailor your strengths and strategy to win. "Yeah, yeah I just needed to hit something."

"Kicked your ass!" Ziv sang, skipping out of the gym.

"Going to murder him," you grumbled.

"You have to catch him first," Lacroix said.

"Darling, you're getting blood all over the place," Amélie knelt beside you and dabbed at his face with a monogrammed handkerchief. She nudged your arm. "Don't let him talk when you fight him. He is masterful at distraction. Just keep hitting him."

"I-" You weren't actually sure what to say to that.

"Ma cocotte-" Lacroix protested.

"Mon loup," Amélie laughed softly. "Picking fights with young ladies in distress. You should be ashamed. Now I have to get you all cleaned up." She patted his cheek and kissed him gently. "Come along."

You blinked as Amélie led Lacroix out of the gym, spouting long streams of French. Her tone made it sound affectionate, but you were glad you didn't quite understand what she was saying.

"Hey," you said, to Jack. "That was really weird."

Jack shook his head. "You OK?" The gym was empty, but you didn't trust appearances. "Petras is gone," Jack added. "...well, we can talk about it later."

"Yeah, I need a shower."

Jack just gave you a tired smile. "My room?"

"Yeah," you said as he leaned over and wiped the corner of your mouth with a tissue. It came away red, and you sighed, because you hadn't even noticed you were bleeding.

Jack's fingers lingered on your face, and you warmed under the quiet concern in his gaze.

"Your room," you repeated.

When you got out of the shower there was a slice of cake and a bottle of beer sitting on the
coffee table. Jack lay stretched out across the couch, a pillow over his face.

"Thanks." You sat on the edge of the couch and grabbed the cake first.

"Need an emitter?" Jack asked, pushing the pillow off his face.

"Nah, it was just Lacroix. He hits like a normal person. Maybe a little bitchier."

"Gabe's on his way up. He's picking up some real food."

"Cake is real food," you said as you took a bite. "Thanks. I needed that." You leaned back against Jack's stomach and he reached over to rub your back. "How was your day?"

"Petras swung by, made some backhanded remarks about my performance. Told me there was a review coming up."

"Oh." You looked down. Jack had his eyes closed, mouth pressed in a tight line. "Ana and Gabe know. I'll talk to Lacroix about it later. Once he's recovered from the beating you gave him."

"He won," you said absently, taking another bite of cake.

"Technically. We all know you just let it go on too long because enjoyed hitting him."

"Yeah," you said. "It was therapeutic." You treasured the look on Lacroix's face when you backhanded him. Yes, you'd won in the long run. "Weird dynamic though. I mean, I barely know Amélie and she's trash-talking her husband and cheering for me." You weren't really surprised that Ziv had taken Lacroix's side.

"Maybe it's her sense of fair play? Or it's just therapeutic for her to see him get thrown around. She does live with him."

"Yeah, that would do it."

You looked up as the door opened. Gabriel grinned at you, kicking his boots off, a large bag on his arm.

"Picked up sushi," he said and vaulted over the couch. "Heard someone had a rough day." His gaze lingered on Jack.

"Petras is putting me up for review," Jack said, staring at the ceiling. "Not sure what he's going to throw against me, but I'm sure he can find something."

You winced at that.

Jack sat up, and Gabriel was already unpacking the little plastic boxes, dumping packets of soy sauce and wasabi in the middle of the coffee table. Jack got up and grabbed two more beers.

"Talked to Lacroix about it yet?" Gabriel asked, taking off his hat.

"Was going to. Found Lucky beating him up in the gym."

Gabriel turned his head, squinting at you, chopsticks frozen mid-air. "What?"

"Everyone else was busy or out." You crossed your arms. "I was mad. Didn't Athena tell you some of this already?" You looked at Jack.
"She said Petras had visited you. Didn't have details since she doesn't monitor Blackwatch and whatever conversation you had with Lacroix was private." He opened his beer and took a drink. "I really like this with the pickled ginger..."

"Petras wanted me to be his spy on the ground. He wants dirt on both you and Gabriel." You picked at the sushi, appetite gone.

There was a moment of silence as Gabriel and Jack grabbed lids, Gabriel mixing wasabi with his soy sauce, Jack just sticking to the soy sauce.

"Figured it'd be something like that," Jack said.

Gabriel nudged you. "What else happened?"

You rubbed your forehead. "Petras made a pass at me. Threatened me with all the things that could go wrong base-side while I was out on an op, and claimed sleeping with him was good insurance." You stared at the coffee table, fingers twitching.

"What?" Gabriel's voice went low and hard. Jack stiffened beside you.

"Yeah. I was pissed. Managed to diplomatically convey that I was off-limits, but then Lacroix reamed me for nearly fucking up the opportunity. Said men like that don't take outright "no" for an answer and I should have handled it better, strung him along or something. And he's fucking right. I was just too shocked and angry to think straight." You took a deep breath.

There was a crack and when you looked at Gabriel, you saw his bamboo chopsticks snapped in half on his lap. His eyes were closed and his hands balled into fists. You glanced over at Jack. His face was cold and blank and he looked straight through you at Gabriel.

"He lay hands on you?" Gabriel asked, not looking up.

"I just shook him off my arm," you said. "I'm fine, Gabriel. Just pissed that he came into my place of work, went after both of you, and threatened me." You drained the rest of your beer. "And I'm mad at myself for not doing a better job at playing my role."

"Stop." Jack said in a voice you expected to hear on the battlefield. He placed his fingers on your lips, eyes icy.

Your eyes widened and you sank back against the couch, arms crossed tightly.

"You did nothing wrong," Jack said, reaching over you to stroke the back of Gabriel's neck. "Gérard can eat a dick."

You exhaled slowly. "I-"

"Relax. Gérard will give you all the espionage criticism you need. But that's not what me and Gabe are for," Jack said, not giving you room to argue. "You OK, babe?"

Gabriel leaned into Jack's hand. "Need a moment. Not upset with either of you."

You rubbed his back, not sure if you should speak.

"So everyone else was out and you needed a fight? Is that why I came on in on you bitch-slapping Gérard in his figure-skating outfit?" Jack asked, in even tones.

"It was a long time coming," you replied. "But yes. He's better than I expected."
"Who won?" Gabriel asked, not looking up.

"Lacroix," you said, unable to keep the petulant note out of your voice. "He only won because he managed to knock me out of the circle. But he's also going to be sore as fuck tonight, and I got to hit him a bunch, so I'm the real winner."

"It was surreal," Jack said. "I come in and Mihret is cheering for Gérard and Amélie is shouting just as loudly for Lucky to kick his ass, only in nicer Frenchier terms." He continued rubbing Gabriel's neck. "She let it go on too long though. He was getting tired. He had to risk a flying scissor kick to win."

"I wasn't thinking about winning. I was thinking about hitting someone. Which I guess was the point of the lesson," you said, tilting your head backward. Lacroix's thoughts were circles within circles, and he taught his lessons with a kick. If you wanted to win, you had to think bigger and further than your next counterattack.

"I thought Amélie had a good point," Jack said. "She said, "don't let him talk. Just keep hitting him." He did a pretty good job of distracting you."

"Yeah. Speaking of that, who do I fight like? Lacroix said he could see you two in my style, and Genji. But then he mentioned Captain Patel, Shin, and Simon. And that's what really threw me off."

"Gabe would know better than me," Jack said.

"You reflect Sato and Aishani the most. Sato was a dirty fighter. Aishani was a practical one. Neither relied on overwhelming strength or fancy dancing. Sato could do the showy moves, and he might have played with you, but when he faced me, he was all business." Gabriel opened his eyes. "I never fought your medic, so I can't say. You do some nasty nerve pinches, so maybe." Gabriel leaned over and kissed your cheek, his hand on Jack's. "Thank you. I like listening to you two. It centers me." He reached for his beer. "Sorry. Didn't mean to make a scene."

"Was your day bad?" You asked.

"Not at all, but I'm angry for you both. That bastard went after Jack. He came into my office, threatened my people, harassed my woman; and I wasn't there to help you two with any of it." He drank, then picked up the broken chopsticks, and dropped them in the plastic bag. He proceeded to grab the eel rolls with his hands. "I'm good now."

"Dibs," you said after a moment. "I got dibs on killing him."

Jack snorted.

"Think it's going to be one of those "first come, first served" deals," Gabriel said. "You sure you OK?"

"I'm a field agent. He's a gross old man. It didn't get that far." You reached for a salmon roll. You could feel Jack and Gabriel exchanging pointed looks behind your back. "What?"

"I'm giving Athena access to our office again," Gabriel said after a few seconds. "Having this kind of exchange recorded or getting you backup will be easier that way."

"OK," you said. "That seems reasonable."

Gabriel draped an arm around you. "When am I anything but?"
"What can I do for you, Jack?"

"I have some ideas," Jack murmured, leaning over to kiss Gabriel's hand. "But I think Lucky needs a cuddle more. And that's good for me too."

"Are you OK? Stress normally makes you more-"

"You think I'm going to suggest that right after someone else tried to coerce you into sex? Because that'd be pretty insensitive of me and probably the opposite of what you need." Jack nuzzled your neck and you kissed his temples. "If you want to later, by all means, but you're going to have to initiate."

Gabriel moved his arm and Jack pushed you over into his lap. "Hey! How am I going to reach the food from here?"

"How good are you at catch?" Jack asked, picking up a fatty tuna roll.

"...Not as good as Genji," you said. "So don't." You handed Gabriel your chopsticks. "Salmon roe please?"

Gabriel's lips quirked up and he grabbed one for you. Eyes warm, he placed it against your lips and you let him feed you.

"Are you absolutely sure you can't catch any?" Jack asked, reaching for a sea urchin roll.

"Well, what the hell. Go for it." You opened your mouth.

You could only sigh when Gabriel intercepted it, snagging it out the air between his teeth and devouring it one extra loud bite.

"He wants to meet in Lucerne instead?" You rolled your eyes, swallowing your protests. You'd already made reservations at that nice bakery downtown. They had great little raspberry-lemon cream cakes. You'd been looking forward to those all week.

"It's still our backyard," Gabriel said. "Jesse has already gone ahead to scout. Lacroix is coming too."

You looked up from your desk. "Like sitting in?"

"Listening in, since he wasn't explicitly invited." The sparring match hadn't changed anything between the two of you. Lacroix was still a smarmy shit and you were still visibly irritated by his presence. But something clicked after that encounter, and you were looking at things sideways and from the long view. Candle Arc crossed your mind, but you already had a pressure injector attached, just in case.

"Plan?"
"Shimada wants to meet at some French patisserie called Odette. Lacroix handled our reservations. Jesse is keeping an eye on the streets. We apparently need to dress up. Assassin Butler for you, suit for me. Jesse's got our gear if things get too rough."

"So we're going in with pistols and business wear." You shook your head. "Is this another date?"

"I'm buying you all the overpriced desserts you can eat and wearing a suit. What do you think?" Gabriel's smirk made you shiver.

"Can we stand Hanzo up?" You folded your hands on the desk. "Like, forget him. Let's just go out."

Gabriel laughed at that, a throaty rich sound, and you began to clear tomorrow's schedule.

You perched on a white stool, and grinned as Gabriel shifted uncomfortably on the tiny seat next to you. Instead of a hoodie and armor, he wore a black suit with a red shirt and no tie. He'd switched your accessories up. It was still a black waistcoat and white shirt, but he'd added a thin red tie, and a matching red pocket square.

The patisserie was smaller than you expected, though Gabriel had chosen a table away from the front windows. All the furniture was white and elegantly narrow. The floor was a classic black and white checkerboard pattern and the staff wore crisp white uniforms without the trace of a crumb on them. You spotted Lacroix close to the entrance, looking surprisingly bland in a beige suit and horn-rim glasses. He seemed heavily engrossed in his newspaper, and kept ordering cups of coffee.

You'd ordered black tea for yourself and a Mille Feuille - sometimes called a Napoleon - layers of cream and puff pastry stacked into a block. It was topped with glossy almond icing and you sighed happily. Gabriel rolled his eyes, sticking to coffee and a cream puff.

There was an untouched strawberry clafoutis, and a pot of white tea for Hanzo when he showed up. You knew he wasn't going to accept it, but that was fine. You would eat it. It was served warm, like a cobbler, with a prettier shape and the batter was more like flan than traditional dough. They also had fraisier, a very pretty strawberry and pastry cream sponge cake. It was basically a fancy strawberry shortcake, and you assumed he would order that and green tea, because he seemed to be a contrary son of a bitch.

"Got eyes on the target," Jesse murmured. "You're bringing me some of that, right guys?"

"Why should I, when I could just deliver it to Ana myself?" Gabriel muttered.

There was a long silence and you sipped your tea.

"Why you gotta be that way, Commander?" Jesse asked plaintively.

"Hope you're staying out of sight," Gabriel said tightly. "And not fixating on desserts. One of you is bad enough."

You shrugged unapologetically. "How often do I get to go out and have fun?"
"You should take me up on my invitations. Been going out on the town the past few weekends. And I haven't had to be bailed out yet." Jesse sounded oddly proud of that accomplishment, and you wondered what he'd been doing in town.

You watched Gabriel's jaw clench. "You better keep it that way."

"But commander-" Jesse whined.

Hanzo pushed the glass door open, his gaze sliding across the room, straight to you and Gabriel. He looked around and then stalked inside. You had never seen him in person without the face mask. He was shockingly pretty, long black hair worn almost loose, a ribbon tying off the end. His clothes were western casual, narrow ankle black pants and a too-baggy designer coat, but he rocked it like a model. He carried a long leather bag over his shoulder, and you assumed it contained his bow. You thought of Amélie and decided the rich really were an entirely different species. Science fact.

"Hi, so glad you could make it," you beamed and pushed the clafoutis at him.

He eyed it with undisguised suspicion, and shook his head. "No, thank you."

You shrugged, pulled it over to your side of the table, and cut off a slice with your fork. "More for me." You ate it in front of him. "Oh, that's nice. You want a bite, Gabriel?"

Gabriel snorted, but he opened his mouth as you extended the fork. You thought about taking it back before he could eat it, but this was a mission, and you had to maintain the air of some professionalism.

"Not poisoned," you said, as Gabriel took the bite, his eyes never leaving Hanzo's face. You retracted your fork, smiling pleasantly.

"That one might not be, but I would poison the next one on the table. Or perhaps you've already taken the antidote."

"You've been scoping out this place for the past week. We wouldn't bother," Gabriel said.

"Your lookout doesn't blend very well. You don't see very many cowboys in Switzerland," Hanzo said, perfectly at home playing the one-upmanship game.

Gabriel's frown deepened.

"So, you wanted to talk, and I assume it wasn't just to needle us. Why don't you add what you want to our tab and we can discuss business after," you said, remember Shin and Genji's coaching on Japanese manners.

Hanzo's eyes drifted to the counter. And he turned abruptly.

You ate your Napoleon and didn't even bat an eye when Gabriel started stealing bites of the clafoutis.

"We should do this with Jack," you said, watching Hanzo order. "But we should get him a hat, or a mask, or something. That hairstyle is entirely too recognizable."

"McCree, you were spotted," Gabriel said tightly into his comm.

"Goddamn ninjas," Jesse muttered. "Sorry boss. Please don't send me to bed without
dessert," he said without a trace of sarcasm. "I'll change positions. You guys are out of sniper range, but I can't watch the front and back doors."

"You can; just alternate. Getting too cozy up there."

"Boss-"

You watched Lacroix's gaze travel to the door, but he never made eye contact with you or Gabriel.

Hanzo returned with a large slice of fraisier and a cup of green tea. You grinned at Gabriel who just drank his coffee and shook his head.

"How'd you hear about this place?"

"Friend of a friend recommended it," Hanzo said, tension tightening his words.

"It's nice. I like French desserts. Decadent, but not too sweet. Excellent choice." You kept your voice relaxed, because Gabriel and Hanzo were too tightly-wound.

"Thank you," Hanzo said, staring down at the cake. He took a drink of his steaming hot tea and made a face. "They oversteeped it."

You poured yourself a cup of the white tea. "This might go better," you said.

Hanzo took another cup and let you pour. He sniffed then sipped it. "Passable."

That seemed like high praise coming from the Shimada heir. What an ass.

The cake disappeared very rapidly, and Hanzo was done at the same time you were. You caught him staring back up at the counter.

"Feel free," you said. "Gabriel could probably eat an éclair. And I don't need an excuse to have more cake."

"No."

"Are you sure? I was thinking about trying the fraisier; you looked like you enjoyed it."

"I am certain. Thank you," he added tightly

You smiled, because Lacroix had refined the weaponization of good manners. You were learning. "You're welcome."

Gabriel took another drink of coffee. "Are you sure you don't want anything else?"

"No, I have come to talk." He folded his hands on the table. "Both Talon and On Sing have approached me seeking an alliance."

Gabriel stiffened beside you.

"I thought you quit the family business," you said, fingers twitching.

"I did. Talon thinks it can lure me back, and they make quite the case."

"You going to fall for their shit?" Gabriel drawled.
"I have considered retaking the Shimada clan," Hanzo admitted. "It is my birthright and my burden. But if I did, I would legitimize our businesses. We would make the push from Yakuza enterprises to *keiretsu*-style corporations. It would be difficult, but I could do it."

You snorted. *Keiretsu* was just the modern, legalized version of *zaibatsu*, and *zaibatsu* weren't anything to be proud of. They were acknowledged clan-owned business monopolies, tightly intertwined with government affairs, and organized crime. It was much like the South Korean *chaebol* system.

"So you want to go from crime lord to oligarch?" Gabriel asked, tone deceptively relaxed.

"No. I thought about it, and no." Hanzo shook his head. "I am not that man any more. But that was part of Talon's offer. I declined." His hand reached over his shoulder and touched the leather bag, reassuring himself it was there.

You sat back in your seat. You hadn't expected Talon to scout Hanzo Shimada, given that he had chosen a vagabond assassin lifestyle. "Why?"

"If I were to do anything with the family, I would want Genji at my side of his own volition. And he's chosen Blackwatch as his instrument of revenge."

That wasn't entirely accurate, but you weren't going to open that can of worms yet.

"And On Sing?"

"They apparently have a fixation on...rightful heirs. On Sing's formed a non-aggression pact with the clan, but some factions don't consider it a legitimate alliance if I don't agree to it." Hanzo frowned. "They are...very old-fashioned."

You digested that. "I've noticed." There was a long pause. "So what do you want from us?"

"I want to talk to my brother. I know he's willing to see me." There was a pause. "But he made his allegiances clear."

You shrugged at that. "What do you hope to accomplish?"

"I want to...make things right between us. I want to know if he thinks our family is worth saving. I am adrift, and by some miracle, my brother is alive, and of course I would seek him out."

"There better be a lot of groveling," you said casually, pouring yourself more tea. "And no snide comments about his cybernetics."

Gabriel snorted. "How do we know you don't just want to finish the job?"

Hanzo glared at you both. "He's *my* brother." You remembered Genji's repetition of that phrase, and how each time it had meant something a little different. You wondered what Hanzo was trying to say.

"And you tried to kill him. That argument holds no weight," Gabriel said. "What do you have to offer us?"

"Highly specialized knowledge on the Shimada, as well as data on both Talon and On Sing," Hanzo said. "And as your "Ammit" can attest to, I am excellent in a fight."

"You shot my agent once," Gabriel said, voice low.
"She stabbed me back twice." He held up his hand. "I think we're more than even."

Gabriel's face said otherwise.

"Partners, there are some shifty, heavily-armed folks coming down the cobblestones-" Jesse crackled in your ear.

"How many?" Gabriel asked.

"About six at the front door, half a dozen at the back."

"Ballsy. They're in our backyard," you scowled.

"We need to get clear on this area," Gabriel said to Hanzo. "Why did you neglect to tell us that Talon didn't take that rejection well?"

"...It was implied," Hanzo said sharply.

"The Japanese have an amazing amount of subtext." Lacroix stood, shaking out his paper. "Chanceux, with me." You slid off your stool, reaching for your pistol.

"I'll take Hanzo and meet up with Jesse. You and Lacroix leave first."

The door opened and a woman in a white duster walked in.

"That one's been tracking me since Singapore," Hanzo said, but you weren't looking at him.

Lao stood there, brown eyes wide as they fell on you. Her arm looked different, and she walked with an uneven gait. You wondered then if they'd cut more pieces off her, replacing flesh with controllable metal.

Lacroix kept his head turned away.

"I need her alive, Hanzo," you said as much to remind him as Gabriel. "That's not negotiable."

"Run," she hissed.

And then the front glass exploded inward, bullets streaming into the room. You hit the ground.

"Never mind that, we're all going out the rear exit," Lacroix amended.

Lacroix made a brisk beeline for the kitchen, turning to provide suppressing fire. Hanzo and Gabriel followed, and you drew your sidearm, shooting at the men with assault rifles and heavy winter coats.

"They're escaping out the back!" Lao shouted, and the shooting slowed, some of her backup breaking off to intercept. You shot down two men, and the gunfire stopped.

"Lucky, you need to get-" Lao started.

You shot her in the leg.

She flinched and staggered backward.
"Jesse, you got eyes on the boss and the brother?" You asked.

"They're pinned down. Can't get to them- Oh, wait. Wow. Didn't know you could do *that* with a bow and arrow."

You laughed dryly at that, eyes never leaving Lao. "You ready to come home, old friend?"

"Not going to be that simple, Lucky," Lao rasped as blood leaked out of her leg. She brought her pistol to her head. "I have *contingencies*."


"Lacroix is escorting Brother to a vehicle. Get out here and I'll get you your gear."

"Busy!" You leveled your pistol at Lao. "Hanzo just wiped out your boys. Drop your weapon."

"Can't," Lao said softly. "Want to. I really do. I wanted to come home so badly, Lucky."

You inhaled, because you were prepared for this. "Look here Bái Shé, with your massively inconvenient serpent protocol and your silly nomenclature. I'm your old friend Lucky Shot, secondary-priority termination after that buzzkill Gérard Lacroix. And I'm betting your life that achieving a priority-kill trumps your stupid self-destruct programming."

Lao's hands began to shake. "No. No, Lucky." She turned the pistol on you. "Serpent Protocol engaged."

You shot first, because you were a good friend and a better shot, and the pistol flew out of her hand. "Come on, Bái Shé. You have to do this up close and personal." You flexed your fingers, readying the pressure-injector.

She drew a knife from her belt and charged, moving faster than you expected with a bullet in the leg. You swatted her arm to the side, barely deflecting the first hit. She went to punch you with her metal fist, and you blocked that, but not the blade in her flesh hand. It slipped past your defenses, tore through your suit, and sunk into your stomach. It didn't hurt at first, and you gripped her wrist, blood bubbling from your mouth.

"No-" She exhaled, shaking her head. "No, what have you done-"

"Shhh, " you told her, hugging her around the neck. "It's OK. What's a little blood between friends?" You shifted, and you felt the blade move inside you, a wrenching pain tearing through your abdomen. Holding her against you, you pressed your prosthetic finger to her neck, needle plunging into her flesh with practiced ease.

Her eyes widened, and she pushed you backward, staggering. You dropped to your knees then, holding the knife in place. Yanking it out would only do more damage. Your blood leaked onto the floor, a soft pattering sound that echoed in your ears.

"It's OK, Lao. Let it go," you murmured. "I'm going to take you home, now. Just like I promised."

She reached for you.

The gunshots sounded from behind you then, as you tried to say comforting words, and the
bullets struck Lao's torso. She fell, even as you screamed, blood splashing the checked floors.

You looked over your shoulder, gun raised, your arm wobbling as tried to draw a bead on her attacker.

Gabriel stood behind you, pistol smoking. He met your gaze, eyes wild. He said your name and you realized then that he'd seen her stab you. That he'd waited for you to get clear and-

"Oh Gabriel," you moaned. "No no no no no no." You dropped your gun, clutching your stomach as you crawled to Lao, her long white coat a steadily darkening study in pink, red, and rust.

Your breathing grew ragged and you couldn't look away from her too limp, too still form that continued to leak across the smooth hard floor.

"Lao, stay with me, Lao." Uneven breaths kept your voice low. "Lao. Lao."

You slipped in the warm stickiness, the knife going deeper as you fell onto your stomach. That didn't matter. Lao was so close. She was right there beside you, and you would not abandon her now. You reached for her hand. This was not how it was supposed to end. You promised your baby hacker you were going to take her home. You promised her.

Catching her cold metal fingers in your own, you tried to tell her that she wasn't alone, tried to tell her that you were here and it was going to be OK, tried to say that you'd made it this far, it was too late to turn back now. But your throat was too dry, and the words would not come. You could not move any farther; the strength had left your limbs. Your vision blurred and you laid your head against her arm, no longer able to tell your blood from hers.

Chapter End Notes

Edited that last scene so many times. I can't look at it any more.

So bad at job hunting. I just want to go up to people and say "HIRE ME DAMNIT. I AM SEMI-INTELLIGENT, CAPABLE, AND A FAST LEARNER. STOP PLAYING GAMES. LET'S DO THIS." It's like dating, but way more awkward and restrictive. Also, if there is sex involved, you might be doing it wrong.

Making Hainanese chicken rice tonight. Noms.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

The fallout from Operation Candle Arc has just begun.

Chapter Notes

Wow, you guys like cliffhangers.

*ducks*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once upon a time, you were an orphan in the ruins. And even if you grew into an outlaw and an outcast, you never quite shook that sense of loss from when everything that you were, everyone that you'd known, were lost in blood and flames.

Once upon a time, you were a soldier in a time of war. And even if you weren't very good at it, you loved your people: your captain, your hackers, and especially your lieutenant, in a way different from the rest. Then you lost it all again, like a careless child who hadn't learned how to take care of what was hers the first time around. And here you were again, given one last shot at saving your baby hacker. How many times were you going to make the same mistake?

"Lao." You opened your eyes with her name on your tongue and jolted sideways. You only moved an inch or so, hampered by the tangle of tubes and wires. Your prostheses weren't connected and you panicked for a moment. This wasn't your couch, just another unfamiliar bed: you tore at the blankets, hands too clumsy to disentangle yourself.

"Stop that."

You froze, turning your head.

Gabriel sat beside your bed, hands folded in his lap. He wore his hoodie and sweats, but no hat, and there were bags under his eyes and lines on his face.

"Lao," you said again, voice rusty.

"Water," Gabriel said, picking up a cup and placing the straw against your cracked lips. You drank without thinking, draining the cool sweet water in two gulps. "Slower. You'll make yourself sick."

The cold water hitting your stomach was a shock, and you winced, hand dropping to your
"You've been under for twenty seven hours. Angela had to do some internal work, sewing up your stomach. You took about five pints of the synthetic blood." Gabriel continued, voice rough. "The knife went into your stomach, but somehow missed everything else. You still went into shock and that complicated things, but you were goddamn fortunate."

"Lao," you said louder, breathing too hard.

Gabriel looked over at you, brows heavy and eyes hard. "Stop talking."

"Lao," you growled, gripping the side rails of the bed and pulling yourself upright. "What happened to Lao?"

"Goddamnit," Gabriel exhaled, jaw clenched. "You little idiot. You fucking fanatic. Just what the hell were you thinking?"

"Answer me, Gabriel." You clutched your stomach and glared at him. "Did you kill my hacker?"

"You mean did I shoot the Talon agent who fucking stabbed you? Who's put a bullet in you before? Ambushed you multiple times? Is that what you're asking?" Gabriel shouted back at you. "You saw me. I shot her down as soon as you were out of the way. And I'd do it again in a heartbeat to keep your ungrateful ass alive!"

"Drugged her," you snarled. "She wasn't a danger-"

"She damn near killed you!" Gabriel bellowed.

"She was one of mine!" You panted. "Operation Candle Arc was my-"

"You're off it. You're off Candle Arc. You're off Shit Spiders. You're goddamned suspended, agent, because I can't trust your judgment. Do you hear yourself?" Gabriel slammed his fist against the bedside table. "You're fucking obsessed."

"You can't do that," you said, even as you realized that of course he could. He was the Commander Reyes and you were a mere agent.

"Watch me," Gabriel said, eyes narrowed.

"Fuck you," you growled back. "I'm not your goddamn pet to put on a pedestal and swaddle in bubble wrap. I'm not your weak little plaything that you keep around to give you and Jack something to fuss over! I'm a fucking Blackwatch operative! You don't get to sideline me because you can't get your dominant tendencies under control!"

"That is enough, agent," Gabriel roared.

"I haven't even gotten started!" You screamed back.

"What the hell is going on here?" Angela stalked into the room, Jack hot on her heels. "Lucky, you're tearing up the tubes! Gabriel, you need to go-"

"You deal with her," Gabriel hissed through clenched teeth, pushing past Jack, and stalked out.

"Lucky, you need to relax," Angela said sharply. "Lay back down and-"
"What happened to Lao?" You shouted at Jack and he narrowed his eyes.

"Athena, what happened here?" He asked, as Angela kept trying to stick needles and tubes back under your skin.

"...Agent Strike has requested Bái Shé's status multiple times. However, Commander Reyes has revoked her clearance for Operation Candle Arc and Operation Shit Spiders, citing impending suspension."

Jack closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Lucky. Sweetheart. I know you're medicated. I know you're hurting pretty badly. But I heard some of what you said to Gabe and-"

"Jack. I need to know." You leaned back against the bed, arms shaking.

"-and you were completely out of line," Jack said, tightly. "He's spent the last day in the medical ward, and it isn't because he likes having a "pet" to "fuss over." Do you understand me, Lucky?" He met your gaze, jaw clenched, shoulders squared, and you recognized that Jack was angry too, you just didn't care. "Same goes for me. If I wanted a pet, I'd get a dog. At least they come when you call them."

You glared up at him.

"We're not having this discussion right now. We'll deal with it once you've recovered. So focus on that instead." Jack started to leave, and then he stopped and turned back around. "I'm really relieved that you're OK. Not happy about your attitude, but- " He sighed. "-But I'll take that over the alternative." His gave you a lopsided smile and you looked away, too many feelings churning inside you.

Part of you wanted to ask him to stay, because you were upset and didn't want to be alone, and the words hovered on your lips. But Angela was here and even though she knew about your relationships, you didn't want to do it in front of her. And Gabriel was out there probably throwing coffee mugs and terrorizing the rest of the base. The strength evaporated from you. Quietly, you laid back down in the bed, and rolled onto your side, facing away from Jack.

You closed your eyes tightly, face screwing up in a grimace. And while you knew you'd done a lot of damage with your words, all you could think of was your baby hacker, and whether or not she had bled out on the floor, believing she was going home.

Sometimes your own mind was your worst enemy. You laid there, knowing you were drugged, knowing you weren't thinking straight, but unable to stop. You knew you were being crazy, but that didn't help. It didn't stop the feelings.

The four AM despair was the worst, when the world was dark and bleak, and there was a rock in the pit of your stomach that simply knew things would never get any better, that everything was hopeless, and you couldn't do a damn thing about it. It didn't matter that your head was telling you that was all crazy talk. It didn't matter that on a purely intellectual level you knew better. You curled into yourself and tried to keep your sobs to a minimum because it fucking hurt to cry.

You couldn't stop seeing her. You were caught on an endless loop starting at Lao's horrified face when she saw that she'd stabbed you. Those wobbling steps backward. And then the blood
blossoming from her abdomen. You tried to count the bullets. The number changed every time and you knew you couldn't quite trust your recollections. Gabriel had a pistol, not his shotguns. Two shots? She could have survived. Five shots? Probably not. And then you turned your head, looking over your shoulder, filled with anguish, ready to wreak vengeance on whoever hurt your baby hacker, and it was Gabriel standing there, gun in hand. Then you remember the knife lodged inside you, even if it was gone now, even if Angela sewed you up, you could feel its cold weight digging into your stomach before you hit the ground.

And then it started all over again.

There were flowers on the table when you awoke. You checked the tag and were slightly surprised to see they were from Agent Shoal and her unit.

"Knew you'd pull something stupid and get away by the skin of your teeth. Or stomach. Whatever. Keep up the good work! Remember, alcohol isn't solid food, so we should get drinks soon." You studied the arrangement, and while you were still mostly numb, the pink and white carnations, mixed with smaller buds, lifted your spirits just a little.

Wait...how did everyone know you got hurt?

"Athena?"

"Yes, Lucky."

"Is it common knowledge that I got gut-stabbed? And how?"

"...There is news footage of a bloody Commander Reyes rushing you to a transport. Your face isn't visible and you were unnamed, but around the base, yes, everyone knows."

You sighed. "Athena. Can you tell me--"

"Please don't ask me about the operations you were removed from. I cannot, no matter how much I might wish to."

"-tell me what time it is?" You continued, like you weren't ever intending to ask that of her.

"It is 1530 hours," she announced, sounding relieved.

"What kind of medication am I on?"

"Nanites, antibiotics, a Schedule I narcotic, and your birth control implant. Your IV drip contains a mix of electrolyte solution, nutrient mix, and your painkiller."

"Any estimated release date for me?"

"Dr. Ziegler wanted to keep you for a week, but that is contingent on how you heal."

"Will you tell Jesse and Genji I'm awake and asking for them?"

"Yes, but Lucky, the Commander has made the consequences of leaking information to you...very explicit."
You hissed then, hand dropping back to your stomach. Fuck Gabriel and fuck Jack. You weren't going to let a little thing like "clearances" stop you. "Am I suspended?"

"...No. Commander Reyes has removed you from the compartmentalized intelligence sectors, but he cannot suspend you without Captain Amari's approval and/or a hearing in front of a review board."

"All right," you said. You could work with that. Somehow. Your head was woozy, and you closed your eyes. "Thank you, Athena."

"I will be here," she said.

"Yeah, me too," you muttered.

"Hey there," Jesse peeked in. "You're a sight for sore eyes." He came inside, Genji trailing behind him. Both men looked out of place in the whitewashed room, all sterile tech and terribly boring paintings. The flowers Shoal sent were the nicest thing in here.

"Can't tell me a thing, can you?" You had recovered your prostheses and felt more like yourself.

Jesse looked at the floor. "I ain't scared of him but-"

But Jesse might be a smidge more loyal to Gabriel than you. Which was fair. You shrugged. "I get it. And Genji's gotta play nice if we want him to deal favorably with Hanzo." You shook your head, not sure how far you could press your friendships. You were calmer now and you knew you'd already wreaked havoc with Jack and Gabriel, maybe you should be more circumspect.

"Oh, someone got you flowers? Who's Agent Shoal?" Jesse perked up.

"Ran Operation Cobblestone Dust with her. She was very impressed by my Blackwatch professionalism."

"Seriously?" Jesse asked.

"Well, my skills. Not my professionalism."

"Yeah, that sounds more accurate," Jesse sat down and Genji leaned against the wall.

"I'm assuming everyone in our squad made it out OK?" You said.

"Yeah," Jesse said. "...Commander's in a mood though."

You shrugged. There wasn't much you needed to add. Jesse and Genji knew what happened. They could piece it together.

"...Where's Ziv?" You asked after a moment, because maybe you'd expected him to at least make an appearance. Maybe eat a cheeseburger and some cake in front of you. Mock you about how you failed to dodge. Laugh at you, because you couldn't get out of the bed to throttle him.

"...Ziv has been banned from the medical wing. He uh...loudly declared that Lao was your
friend, and you should know the truth, and anyone who said otherwise was "a sadistic, 
emotionally-retarded, pig-shit that needed a cran-i-o-dectomy-" Jesse paused, trying to remember 
the exact phrasing. "To yank their overly thick skulls out of their military-enhanced sphincters," 
and he didn't get any further because Lacroix physically dragged him out of the room before 
anyone else could react." Jesse gave you a small smile. "I think it was his finest moment yet."

"...Huh," was all you could say to that. "Athena...you don't happen to have that exchange 
recorded, do you?"

"Unfortunately, if that exchange occurred, it is classified under Operation Candle Arc."

"...Damn." You looked at Genji who seemed bored. "Had some bonding time with your 
brother yet?"

"No."

You waited for an explanation, until you realized that he wasn't going to add anything else.

"Well, I'm great," you said. "Going a little crazy, full of drugs, and left in suspense about 
the outcome of the most important op I've run in months, but yeah. Angela might let me eat 
pudding in a day or two. Pudding, guys."

"...Ain't nothing wrong with puddin', sourpuss," Jesse laughed.

"That wasn't sarcasm. I'm living on liquids right now. It's awful," you said.

"Well, when you get back, we can go drinking, and Genji already agreed to come along. 
It'll be fun," Jesse ruffled your hair.

"Really?" You glanced over at Genji.

"...Yes." Genji sighed, looking world-weary and regretful of every decision he'd ever made, 
especially agreeing to go out with Jesse and you.

"Sounds great," you said. Because you planned to have an answer about Lao long before 
you left the infirmary.

You awoke to your nerves prickling, and when you opened your eyes, you saw Lacroix 
sitting beside you in the dark.

"Relax, I am watching over you."

"You're fucking creepy," you rasped and he laughed at that.

"Good to see you haven't lost your vitriol, Chanceux. I was worried that might have leaked 
out with most of your blood."

"I swear I'll strangle you with these tubes if you're here to give me shit about Candle Arc."

Lacroix handed you a cup of water and you took it, sipping slowly. "No, Chanceux. I am 
out here in the doghouse with you, as they say. And what happened in Lucerne is obviously not
"Wow, that might make you the first CO I've spoken to who feels that way," you set the water down. "Why are you here in the middle of the night? Because that is seriously creepy."

He shrugged. "Wanted to check on my favorite student."

"So you visited Ziv and figured you'd hit the infirmary on the way back?"

Lacroix laughed softly at that. "I am sorry that I was not there. We were supposed to take her together."

You replayed the events in your head. Lacroix had escorted Hanzo and Gabriel had come back for you and-

"... Couldn't be helped." You looked at him, squinting. "Is that a black eye?"

"Oh, you did notice." Lacroix gave that infuriating shrug. "I'd hoped you would not."

"Gabriel?" Well, that explained the late night visit, if he was avoiding a pissed off super soldier or two.

"Jack," Lacroix said, after a moment. "Apparently, we neglected to tell anyone our contingency plan if your Lao decided to take the suicide route. So when he asked and I told him, yes, we did plan on serving as bait... well, you can extrapolate."

"It was kind of obvious," you said dryly. "I mean, we were the priority targets. Just reroute that and-"

"Yes, I thought so too. But soldiers, Chanceux."

"And it wasn't like I was planning on getting stabbed. I was too focused on getting my shot in. She pulled a one-two and-" You sighed, hand drifting to your bandages. "You can't tell me anything either, can you?"

"Non." Lacroix actually looked sheepish. "But you don't need me to tell you, Chanceux. You're a clever girl. You have your ways."

You sat there a moment. "You know I'm drugged to the gills, right?"

"You must be, to think you have gills, Chanceux." Lacroix crossed his legs in a figure four. "I can empathize. Sitting in bed for so long made me stir crazy. But it gave me time to catch up on all the nuances of my paperwork. Terribly boring stuff, but necessary."

You narrowed your eyes. "I see." And you did. Being petty paid off. You knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Do you?" He sounded delighted. "I see someone sent you flowers. They don't know you very well, do they?"

"Overwatch people. It was a nice thought," you said. "Though I guess I can't eat them, not with my stomach like this."

"Chanceux, you do not eat flowers, except at overly-sentimental restaurants," Lacroix sniffed.
"Yeah well, wasn't sure what they were for. Never actually got a flower arrangement before. It's novel. I mean, it's total waste of money. You drop a bunch of money for something that'll be dead in days. Yeah it looks pretty, but then-"

"You have no romance in your soul," Lacroix sighed. "The transience is the whole point. The fact they do not last makes them more beautiful. That someone "wasted" money to gift you with temporal beauty, fully aware that it was a frivolous purchase, is the point of the entire process."

"...I'd rather have cake," you muttered. But now that he'd explained it, you kind of saw his point.

"Yes, but you cannot eat cake right now, and having to stare at it would just be cruel, non? Enjoy your flowers, Chanceux. Maybe someday after that you will be able to appreciate poetry. Nothing too long, and only ones that rhyme, but it is a start."

"Fuck off," you said, giving him the side eye.

Lacroix just flashed his shit-eating grin. "Bon soir, Chanceux. Enjoy the drudgery of paperwork."

You'd gotten the hint the first time around. You just had to wiggle around some of the restrictions.

"Bon soir, Lacroix," you said, enjoying how he winced at your accent.

Gabriel despised hospitals with the intimate hatred of someone who had spent too much time in their confines. Even in Overwatch, with cutting edge tech and friendly, competent doctors, he hated the smell, not just the astringents and infections, but the desperation. Hospitals hosted a bitter lottery of tragedy and triumph. He been an involuntary participant many times, and found that experience did not make it any easier. He had no tolerance for the agony of waiting, for any news, good or bad.

Bowing his head, Gabriel forced himself to remain motionless. Jesse, Mihret, and Gérard were here. Mihret did enough pacing for all of them, muttering curses or prayers -one could never tell with him - under his breath. Gérard sat impassively, eyes occasionally flicking between the doors. Jesse leaned against the wall, foot tapping softly on the floor, this was taking entirely too long.

"Sorry about the delay. Petras needed something," Jack spat the name, and Gabriel's teeth clenched when he thought about the bureaucrat. It was only Jack's pointed reminder that had kept him calm the other night. They had just gotten you to acknowledge that you were leaving your belongings in their quarters. Expressing possessive anger would only spook you.

He looked up to see Jack, still in full uniform, holding out a steaming traveler's cup and a paper bag. "Ana dropped it off before heading out to deal with a situation in Haikou. I was supposed to go, but-"

"Thanks," Gabriel exhaled and took the drink. It was tea, of course, but he didn't care. He
scooted over on the bench and Jack sat down beside him.

"Why don't you go get a shower and change clothes? I'll wait here." Jack rested his hand on Gabriel's shoulder.

Gabriel looked down at his torn up suit. Stiff with blood, he knew there was no point in trying to salvage it.

"You smell like deer season," Jack said firmly. "Just go rinse off. I'll stay."

"Yeah, all right." Gabriel stood, legs stiff.

He didn't miss Jesse's sigh of relief or the fact Mihret was staring at his ass. But he didn't care either.

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"So wait, explain this plan to me, Gérard." Jack had managed to banish Mihret and McCree from the waiting area, giving Athena instructions to update them as soon as there was news. But Gérard lingered, stony-faced. "I was reviewing the documents for Candle Arc. You and Lucky never actually specified how you were going to get around the self-destruct command."

Gérard sighed deeply, a full-body motion that conveyed both weariness and mild disdain for the question he'd been asked. "...I thought it was obvious, Jack."

"If it was obvious, I wouldn't be asking, would I?" Jack said coldly. Yes, the answer looked obvious when one took the time actually read the exceptionally dry report Lacroix had prepared. But Jack wanted to make sure there were no misunderstandings. "Cut the crap, Gérard. I don't have the patience for your elusive half-truths and run-around answers. Just say it."

"Bái Shé had two priority targets. The erroneously named "Lucky Shot" and myself. I was going to serve as the distraction, in case the bad naming interfered with her protocols." Gérard leaned backward in his chair. "There was no guarantee she wouldn't kill herself, but we figured that we'd be the priorities. Logically, if they were going to lose her anyway, they'd want her to take out me or Lucky, especially if she was prone to committing suicide over carrying out the hit."

Jack inhaled sharply, a little surprised that Gérard had been so blunt. "You were going to turn her assassination program on yourselves?"

"Well, me, but-"

Gérard never saw him move. One moment, Jack was sitting on the bench, arms crossed, the next he was standing over Gérard, fist smarting. Gérard lay on the floor, chair toppled, holding his face.

"You fucking idiot. You think we can afford to lose either of you? You two assholes thought it would be a good idea to play bait for an experimental cyborg assassin and leave those details out of your mission plan? What the hell is wrong with you?" Jack snarled, fists still clenched.

Gérard blinked. "We thought it was obvious enough. Her priority targets were clearly stated in the mission briefing."
Jack worked his jaw, grinding his teeth, the connections forming in his head. "Did you suggest that to her?" His fists tightened, and he reminded himself that the Strike Commander could not be seen beating up a subordinate in the goddamn medical center.

Gérard, that fucking bastard, had the nerve to laugh as he climbed back to his feet. "Chanceux isn't stupid, Jack. She realized it on her own. I told her I'd be the lure; we were supposed to take her together, me with my irresistible charm, Chanceux with her concealed drugs." Dusting off his suit, the spy shook his head. "But it didn't go that way."

Jack had already read the post-mission summaries submitted by McCree and Gérard. He'd pieced the sequence of events together from those and Gabriel's messages. It wasn't Gérard's fault, he knew that. His anger slipped away, replaced by a heavy exhaustion.

"For such a genius, you're a fucking idiot sometimes," Jack exhaled, and sat back down. "Gabe's going to find out eventually, but I'm not going to tell him, and you'd be wise to stay out of his way for awhile."

Gérard rubbed his cheek. "Thank you."

"...Was it your idea or hers to keep it quiet?" Jack asked after a moment.

"I don't remember," Gérard said so calmly, Jack knew he'd get nothing. "But it was probably my fault. Of course, Chanceux is in such an awkward position, trying to do her job and placate her lovers. The balance isn't there yet."

"You really don't want to continue down that line of conversation," Jack said tightly, taking off his gloves. "I think you should leave now."

"I'll be by later then." Gérard retreated gracefully, and Jack began to wonder if having you train under him was a mistake after all.

The walls of compartmentalization were fracturing now, and Jack braced himself for the onslaught of anxiety and anger that came with every trip to the infirmary. He sat back down, staring at his empty hands. Why the hell couldn't you be more careful? How close were you going to cut it? And what if-

Angela was good at her job. Gabriel had done everything right. You were healthy and stubborn as fuck. Jack silently reminded himself of these things in a slow, artificially calm loop. Because it wouldn't do to lose his cool now. Gabriel still needed him.

"Wasn't worried at first," Gabriel said, one leg pressed against Jack's. "She's handled Bái Shé before. But then I came back and she dodged the punch only to get stabbed. And you know what that idiot did? She fucking hugged the-" Gabriel stopped, realizing what had happened. "She fucking hugged and drugged the target. Didn't realize it at the time. Doesn't matter now." Gabriel rested his face in his hand. Jack rubbed circles on his back.

"You got her out alive, Gabe. That's what matters," Jack said, eyes on the operating room door.

"Yeah." Gabriel leaned against Jack, shoulders touching. His mouth was too dry and he
coughed a few times, clearing his throat. You should not have stayed back by yourself. Hanzo should have been more careful. He should have left Hanzo to Gérard, made sure you had backup. The thoughts flitted through his mind on repeat, even though he knew, from an operational standpoint, he had done everything right.

"Sometimes I forget how dogged she is," Jack said softly. "Takes the mission-first thing to heart, but is so deceptively flippant that you think she's just goofing off, until the shooting starts."

"Yeah, she's learning some shit from Gérard," Gabriel rubbed his forehead. "The whole time we were there, she was eating desserts, making silly small talk, and hinting we should go out with you incognito. I thought at first she was just giddy at the prospect of dressing up and getting cake. Almost reprimanded her on the spot, but she was so damn happy, I couldn't bring myself to crush that. Didn't want to give Shimada that impression of Blackwatch. It took me a moment to realize she was finessing him, almost like Gérard does. Not quite as smoothly, but the same principles: good manners, genuine enthusiasm, and attentive hosting. All to put the target at ease and persuade them to act civilly."

"Huh." Jack raised a brow. "Are you sure she wasn't just worried that you two would come to blows? Especially given what he did to Genji?"

"...That too. I've heard her interact with him. They needled each other a lot in Hong Kong. But this time she was on good behavior and it worked."

"Wouldn't mind going out for a meal with you two. Dressing up. Wearing a bag over my head since apparently I'm too hideously ugly to be seen in public with you."

Gabriel smiled, in spite of himself. Jack was good at distractions. "She said your hair was too distinct."

"I'll shave my head," Jack said smugly.

"You wouldn't." Gabriel narrowed his eyes. "All that ridiculous hair covers your weird lumpy skull."

"Fuck you," Jack scowled.

"I know I have pictures somewhere. Bumpy Buzzcut Morrison." Gabriel smiled wistfully, a lump in his throat. "You ever thought it was going to turn out like this?"

"No, I thought you were going to forget about me after I got shipped off to Lisbon. Figured you'd meet someone else more interesting, become a famous, and settle down, maybe get kids." Jack scratched his head.

"...You were always on my mind," Gabriel breathed.

"Mine too." Jack exhaled slowly. "Things got rocky sometimes. They still do. We're both pretty hard on each other." Jack grinned at him over his shoulder. "Didn't think bringing a third person would help."

"Didn't always," Gabriel sighed.

"...This is different."

"Yeah." Gabriel's voice roughened. "I don't even remember shooting Bái Shé. And Lucky, the way she sounded, Jack, so torn up: it was like we were back at Black Base Delta." Gabriel had
to take a breath at that. He'd carried you out the snow bleeding and drifting out of consciousness before. He would do it as many times as it took.

"You got her out then. You got her out this time too."

"She managed to pull her gun on me, dropped it when she saw who did the shooting, but-" Gabriel's tongue was thick in his mouth, and he shuddered. "The way she said my name. Like I'd broken her heart. And then that idiot crawled across the floor with a fucking knife in her gut-" Sometimes talking about trauma didn't make him feel better. Sometimes it made it more real, and Gabriel couldn't bring himself to finish that sentence.

"She's going to be fine," Jack said, gently. "She's been strangled, blown up, shot, and there was that weird thing with the toaster that she still won't explain. You kept her stabilized. You left the weapon in place. You got her here fast. You did everything right. She's strong. She's healthy. She's stubborn as fuck."

"Yeah, you're right," Gabriel breathed, remembering just how fixated you were on that hacker of yours. And he dreaded what would come next.

Jack stood outside your infirmary room, hand on his forehead. What a goddamn mess. Gabe had stormed out. You were giving him the silent treatment. He didn't want to leave you alone, not like this, but then Gabriel was sleep-deprived, running on fumes, and now enraged. You couldn't get out of bed and that limited the trouble you could get up to, especially since Gabriel had...

Fuck.

"Athena, where is Commander Reyes?"

"He made a few stops and is now moving toward the Officer Quarters."

That was a relief. Gabriel would set up the mats and they'd punch it out. Hell, Jack was feeling the pinch, his blood still churning from your harsh words. Plaything? Pet? Was that how you really felt? He crossed his arms, forcing himself to think rationally. You were in pain. You were on drugs. And Gabriel under stress was rarely diplomatic. It wasn't a good combination.

"He has...issued a statement about Agent Strike's clearances and put a gag order on all information pertaining to Operation Candle Arc." Athena sounded hesitant.

Jack groaned.

"I would appreciate it if you did not come in and upset my patient. That goes double for Gabriel," Angela said as she exited the room.

"Is she-?"

"I hit her painkiller button. If she's not asleep yet, she will be soon," Angela said.

"I'll go then. You're not...banning us, are you?" Jack tried to make it sound like a joke. It fell flat.
"Behave," was all Angela said, before turning on her heel.

Well, that solved that. He would come back later, try to talk to you when things had calmed down. Your clearances could wait; Gabriel would not.

"Commander Reyes has entered your quarters."

"Thank you, Athena."

"Commander...did you want to restrict Agent Strike's clearances?" Athena asked.

"...For now," Jack said. "Just the compartmentalized ones. Don't-" Jack massaged his forehead. "Don't pull her permanently. Just revoke authorization till further notice."

"Understood, sir."

Jack didn't think an AI could sound quite that disappointed, and he chalked it up to projection.

Gabriel lay on his back on the mat, eyes firmly shut. He pulled off his sweat-soaked shirt. He was running too hot again, from both exertion and fury. Everything hurt and he was still angry, but the blinding rage had drained out of him.

"Well, at least she's OK," Jack sighed, rolling over next to him. "Physically, anyway."

"What the hell happened?" Gabriel snapped, anger giving way to outrage. "I knew she was stuck on this, but I didn't realize she was psychotic!"

"...Are you kidding? She's been obsessed with this from the get-go. Remember Shanghai? Cambridge? Chumak?"

Gabriel swore. "Should've pulled her after Chumak. She's too fucking close, Jack."

"Yeah, I know." Jack pulled himself up, switching on the emitter before he dropped back down with a groan. "Gotta remember though, she was drugged and in pain. Both those factors make people say things they don't mean."

"...All she did was ask about Bái Shé. I tried to get her to drink, to calm down-" Gabriel didn't give a shit about Bái Shé. She'd made herself a threat, and he'd dealt with it. He wasn't going to be sorry for saving your goddamn life.

"Gabe, you told her you'd shoot her friend again in a heartbeat. That wasn't going to calm her down. I know you were on edge, and sleep-deprived." Jack reached out, gripping Gabriel's hand.

Gabriel took it, not quite ready for Jack to tell him where he went wrong. "Just let me vent. Give me the armchair general analysis later."

"She was definitely being a crazy bitch," Jack said, blowing out a breath. "No question
about it. But I doubt she meant those things. Still, you should've just told her."

Gabriel gritted his teeth. "No, because then she'd-"

"You're right. Maybe waiting is best." Jack rolled onto his side, gently rubbing Gabriel's shoulders. "Angela sedated her after you left. I backed you up and she's mad at me too. Turned over, gave me her back, and wouldn't talk to me."

"How the hell is she such a fucking brat?" Gabriel had fought with you before. You'd been a petulant shit, but you'd never gone this far.

"You're kidding, right?" Jack laughed. "She's always been vicious. Remember that former comm officer she shuffled off Antarctica? And how she keeps "losing" his transfer requests, even though they're not even Blackwatch documents? Remember that traitorous In-Sec agent she brought in, after she'd beaten him up? We both know about Chumak. And hell, when you did Chung, she was half a step behind you. I'm pretty sure she leaked Jones and Cooper's sexual misconduct reprimands to their respective parents; can't prove it, but it happened, and that seems like something she'd do." Jack wheezed out a laugh. "And, surely you noticed that Mihret is such a goddamn pain in the ass because he's emulating her. That woman has fully embraced your lessons on being petty and applied them masterfully."

"She's not that bad," Gabriel muttered. He wasn't that bad either.

"I'm not complaining. None of us are angels. But she's always had a soft spot for you, Gabe, and vice versa. Just because you missed the fact that she's fully capable of being an intransigent jackass, doesn't mean that I did. You finally got between her and something she holds terribly important, so don't be surprised when she lashes out."

Gabriel clenched his teeth. "That idiot-"

Jack wiped the sweat off his brow. "Yeah, I know."

"She could've-" Gabriel knew he had transitioned into angry streams of Spanish by Jack's bemused, but affectionate expression.

"I know," Jack said solemnly. "But either one of us would have done the same."

"...Not the point, Jack."

Jack rested his head on Gabriel's shoulder. "Guess not. You serious about pulling her from both Candle Arc and Shit Spiders?"

"I don't know," Gabriel said after a moment. Because if he was going to be honest, there weren't enough people working on Shit Spiders. He could clear Vo or Tataryn, but neither of them did very well with paperwork. "She's not-"

"She won't forgive you," Jack said, closing his eyes. "And she's not the only stubborn crazycake in my life."

Gabriel snorted. "Ana won't like being called "stubborn." You know how she gets."

"Yeah, whatever. Just listen to me. Don't dig your heels in now. Give her some space. She needs time to calm down, and really, did you have to go terrorize everyone in Blackwatch? Because we could have deescalated this just by letting McCree or Mihret tell her."
"She thinks she knows better and she's two steps away from going rogue-"

"That's all Blackwatch agents," Jack muttered. "Remember that whole list of things we actively decided not to do, because she's feral and you didn't want to scare her off? Don't be overly possessive and smother her. Don't terrorize her friends. Don't talk about kids unless she brings it up. This kind of reaction is one of those things."

"Damn it Jack, I'm not the one out of control. The other night with her bombshell about Petras, I kept my cool." Gabriel grit his teeth. He'd wanted nothing more than to make a discrete trip to New York, bring Jack along, and then they could flay that goddamn piece of shit alive. Gabriel knew exactly how to cut the skin off someone, and just how much force it took to detach the epidermis from the body.

"We both did," Jack said, kissing his neck.

"This is different. She almost died." Gabriel kept seeing you sprawled out on that floor, smeared in blood. "I just want to shake some sense into her."

"Kandahar," Jack said softly and Gabriel flinched.

"It's not like that. I didn't-" Gabriel closed his eyes. He wasn't proud of how he'd acted in Kandahar. Even if he had been on edge, it didn't excuse his behavior.

"And you won't," Jack said, calloused fingers massaging Gabriel's aching shoulders. "You just have to dial it back. Give yourself time to process it. Don't fight with her when she's like this. Nobody will win."

"She's the one who-" Gabriel scowled.

"I know. But don't do anything drastic, OK?" Jack placed a finger on his lips. "She's not thinking straight and the two of us need to be. Give her space, Gabe. We're all here. We survived. It's going to be fine."

"And when she finds out...?" Gabriel sighed, because while he knew Jack was right, he couldn't just let it go.

"...Then I guess we'll have another fight on our hands."

Chapter End Notes

I'm finally over the sinus infection. But I don't want to do adult things any more. Taxes, job hunt, go to the store again... BOOOOOOO. :P
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

The fallout continues. At least you have friends.

Chapter Notes

We've passed the 3 month anniversary. Yeesh. What have I done?

OK guys, I swear you like it when I write horrible things. Which is a little alarming, but I can't judge, considering I wrote it. -_-;;

But you get an earlier, kind of long update because you were all so full of feels and guilted the shit out of me.

**

So I've gotten a lot of questions about everyone's ages. And you can protest in the comments, but considering I've just passed 300k words on this in my draft files, it's a bit late to change anything, you know? But here's the reference and the reasoning.

So, I know that I messed up the timeline, but I'm going from a couple different sources and pictures, and it's hard to tell what's what. Example: There's that picture of most of the Overwatch (pre-fall) team accepting medals during a UN ceremony. It includes Tracer and a very blonde Jack Morrison. Read the comics though, and he's got white hair and a receding hairline while she's a new cadet right before the London Uprising. So I was like "...fuck. WHAT DO I DO?" (I left out Tracer for that reason, because the comic felt more canon.)

Then the Overwatch wiki lists Ana as one year younger than Reinhardt, even though I thought she was closer to Jack and Gabriel's age. Again, that damn picture has a very white-haired Reinhardt and a very dark-haired Ana. So at first I figured Reinhardt was 10-15 years older than them.

Long story short: I got confuzzled.

So:

Jack and Gabriel are early-mid thirties. I assumed Jack was younger than Gabriel, but I don't know if that's canon.

Ana is late thirties-early forties.

Reinhardt & Torby are mid-late forties.

Jesse, Genji, and Ziv are early twenties.

Hanzo, Angela and Amélie are mid-twenties.

Winston is in his early teens.
Personally, I picture Lucky mid-late twenties, however it's a read-insert. You do you.

As for Moira, I'd already plotted out too much of the story before she dropped so, adding her now isn't quite going to work with what I've written, and I low-key referenced killing some geneticists post-Shanghai Noon. So take that how you want. (Moira dead. Moira running around conducting unethical experiments on dl. Moira running Oasis. Whatevs.)

I would have loved to include Liao, but I'm not actually sure what s/he looks like. If you google Liao Overwatch, there are a few candidates, and I thought it was the guy on the left, but the wiki says it is not. While I had enough background to make a fun Lacroix, I didn't feel like I had enough information to generate a good Liao. Which makes me sad, because I would have liked to write him/her/whatever. (I DIDN'T WANT TO LEAVE OUT A CHINESE CHARACTER.) Lol, watch them not be Chinese.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You didn't have a tablet, and you suspected no one was going to bring you one. Lacroix had shut the door on his way out and you lay there, mind racing.

"Athena."

"Yes, Lucky?"

"I want to check up on some records." While lying in your hospital bed, alone, in the dark. Not shady at all.

"Of course," Athena said so politely, you knew she had misgivings.

"If...it violates the clearances, just say so. I won't ask that particular question again."

There was a long moment. "I will do whatever I can to help."

You closed your eyes. "I want to check up on the...fuck." You could never remember the form number. You'd have to go by title. "The Technological Evidence Loan forms." You did the math. This was Day Two going on Day Three of your Infirmary Incarceration. "Any acquisitions in the past two days sent to Winston, Torby, and/or Angela."

"...There was one," Athena said.  

"OK," you said, nodding. "All right. I want to check up on Technological Evidence Permanent Confiscation forms. Were there any acquisitions in the past two days sent to the same recipients?"

"...Yes. Two."

Damnit. You wracked your brain trying to figure out how to narrow down the parameters without brushing up against clearances. "...Were Winston, Angela, and/or Torby required to personally retrieve any of the items from the Technological Evidence Permanent Confiscation form?"

"No."
"Good." You could do this on a tablet, once you got a hold of one, but having Athena give it to you Twenty Questions style was faster. "Did any of them do the one item from the Technological Evidence Loan form?"

"...Yes," Athena said.

You smiled. "OK, one more question. If I decided to be a super destructive jerk, and had to be restrained for my own good, is ICU holding cell B available for me?"

"I cannot answer that," Athena said.

And you laughed, because you'd figured it out, and because they'd brought Lao back alive. Now she just had survive long enough for you to get to her.

You heard Reinhardt and Torby tramping down the halls, long before you saw them. By the time they arrived, you were pretty sure Angela was going to throw them out, but then you saw what they were carrying.

Torby, face pinched, slammed a vase of daisies on the window sill, splashing water everywhere. He spun around and handed you a large reindeer plush. It was almost two feet tall with stiff bristled hair and a very detailed face. Did reindeer normally look angry? You weren't sure.

"Not a word, Lucky," Torby said.

"...Thank you? That's two words."

"Lucia made me, because that oaf can't keep his mouth shut."

"Lucky Lady!" Reinhardt boomed as he ducked through the door. You watched as he dragged several ribbons behind him. He yanked them and a dozen multicolored balloon appeared, bumping the ceiling. "You are feeling better?"

"Now that you guys are here." You watched as the balloons lazily bounced around the room, lightly bopping Reinhardt in the head. "You didn't have to do all this. I was just going to lay here and gradually go mad from boredom."

"Then I am glad I talked Torby into coming along." Reinhardt smiled widely, and set another vase of a two dozen yellow and pink roses on the table. "I would have brought you currywurst, but Angela insists that you cannot have any." He dropped an enormous bear in the visitor's chair. It was at least four feet tall and looked very soft.

You gaped at the offerings.

"Don't be that impressed. He just likes carrying toys around," Torby snorted.

"Well, Gérard said you needed cheering up," Reinhardt said in the loudest stage whisper you'd ever heard. "He said you liked flowers, but I thought why stop there? Balloons and plush toys are so much more fun."

Your face froze in a rictus grin. Fucking Lacroix and his goddamn meddling.
Torby sighed at your expression, realizing that you hadn't requested anything of the sort. "That slimy-"

"It's all very lovely," you said, reassuringly. "I uh...never thought to ask for things."

Reinhardt looked around, his gaze fell on the carnations from Shoal's squad. He picked it up, frowning as he read the card. "Is this from...Agent Shoal?" He narrowed his eyes. "Did no one else send flowers? Even your-"

You sighed, shaking your head. "I uh...don't want to talk about it right now."

"Leave it alone, Rein," Torby said, because he had to know already.

Reinhardt's nostrils flared. "Lucky-" He began indignantly. "People should always receive flowers. There doesn't need to be a reason. But when you're stuck in the bed like this, they're even more important."

"That makes sense," you said cautiously.

"Smell!" Reinhardt shoved the vase of roses into your face and you sniffed, the soft fragrance tickling your nose.

"Very nice," you said.

Reinhardt pulled them back, taking a moment to inhale. Then he set them on the table next to the carnations. "Do you want to hold the bear?"

"...Sure," you said, because it did look really soft, and watching Reinhardt carry around a teddy bear was good for your soul.

Reinhardt happily presented the bear to you, and it was downy soft. It was also huge and wouldn't fit in your bed. It was so big, you could cut it open, stuff Torby inside, and then add more stuffing.

You hugged it experimentally, and it had just the right amount of give. "This is really nice."

Torby glowered at both you and Reinhardt. "You look ridiculous."

"But happy," Reinhardt said. "And that is what matters." He punctuated that sentence with a firm, satisfied nod.

"The reindeer is very cool too," you said, holding it up. You had one other stuffed animal, but thinking of Jack and the fox made you grit your teeth. True, Maggie had given it to you, but it was forever linked with Jack. "I don't know how I'm going to get this all back to my room."

Reinhardt beamed at you, and for a few minutes, you forgot your troubles.

The fact you nearly died did not bother you as much as it should have. Because you'd gotten Lao back. Maybe that was indicative of your state of mind, and in retrospect, possibly unhealthy. But even if you had to sit in this hospital bed and eat flavorless gelatinized mush for another week, you did not regret it.
It happened fast. And other, newer scars topped the your fears about mortality. Because you understood the path you had undertaken. You were facing a political conspiracy that killed most of your friends. You were facing a shadowy terrorist organization that had technology you'd never dreamed of. You were also facing independent killer robots that might eventually ask for citizenship. You knew there was a good chance you wouldn't make it out of this alive. What mattered was your people.

Even the dead ones.

This wasn't new behavior. You blamed Captain Patel and Shin. Early on, you didn't even notice you were doing it, till Lao pointed it out. And being a newly-minted soldier, you didn't handle it as gracefully as you could have.
Lao grinned, showing off the gap between her front teeth. "Heh."

You shook your head, because Nwazue would definitely not put up with that kind of behavior from you. Of course, Lao was the baby of the squad, and given the fact she was sweet, everyone went a little easier on her. Even you.

"It's just we're fighting evil robots, and everyone else is tougher than me."

"We're fighting evil robots; we need someone smart enough to shut them down in their tracks. But we have you, so we're making do." Nwazue went back to her book, rolling her eyes.

"Hey!"

Shin opened the door carrying a twelve pack of beer. "Your supplier came through," he said, giving you a warm smile.

"Well, yes. I am an import-export specialist."

"You were an import-export specialist. Now you're a certified badass." Shin put the beer on the floor next to the table. "Aww, what's wrong, Lao?" He asked when he saw her expression.

"She's upset that she has the weakest physical combat skills in the squad," Nwazue said, not pulling any punches.

Shin shook his head at the demolitionist's characteristic bluntness.

"I just don't want to be a liability," Lao said earnestly. She hopped off your legs. "Even the rookie can kick my ass! And she shoots better too. It's not fair!"

"You were the rookie till Lucky joined up," Shin said, grabbing a beer. "And I never thought you were incompetent."

Lao's face lit up at the compliment. "I just figured if we got a new squad member I'd get to be big sister, and teach them things, and boss them around, and mess with them like everyone does to me-"

"She's an only child," Shin said to you as an explanation.

You shrugged. "I've come to realize this doesn't actually have anything to do with me, personally."

"See, she's even more mature than me!" Lao sighed heavily. "Sorry, Lucky. I'm not trying to make you feel bad."

"Oh good, if you're not trying to hurt my feelings, then that makes it all better." You laughed at Lao's horrified face.

"I didn't, did I?!" She gripped your hands, eyes wide. "Lucky!" Her eyes narrowed as you started laughing. "Why are you so mean?!" Her voice went high and squeaky.

Shin sat on the arm of the sofa. "You got a reason for this sudden fixation on combat effectiveness? We can do more sparring and shooting drills if you like."

"...I don't like. But I will," Lao said, running her fingers through her pixie cut. "And I don't
just want to beat Lucky, I want to trounce you!"

"Who doesn't?" Nwazue muttered.

"What did I do?" Shin asked, eyes wide. He was genuinely bewildered.

"I see how you put me in the back on combat runs. Valdez will immediately stand in front of me when the shooting starts. Lucky will casually cover my six, because sometimes I'm bad at paying attention to my surroundings. Nwazue blows up anyone who shoots at me. And you never let me scout ahead, even though my drones have great sensors."

"You do realize that anyone shooting at you is usually shooting at the rest of us, correct?" Nwazue asked.

"I'm saying that I notice how you guys have to take extra care of me and then pretend like nothing's happened!"

There was a moment of awkward silence. Because no one actually wanted to confirm that, nor did you want to lie to her.

"Protect your support troops," you said. "Or you're f*cked. It's not personal; it's good strategy."

"You liar! " Lao yelled, outrage putting heavy emphasis on both words.

"It's what we do. You and Simon need the most defense. You get it. We're a team. We need you to do a lot of things we can't. So yes, we do take special care of you, Lao. And it is personal, because none of us want to see anything happen to you," Shin said soothingly. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Even Nwazue."

Lao's eyes widened and her lower lip began to tremble. "That's not fair, Shin!"

"And here we go again," Nwazue sighed.

"Then you'll get extra sparring and shooting practice, and you'll be too tired to play video games and start impromptu dance parties in your room."

"Fine. I'll get better and then I'll show the rookie how it's done. And once I'm really good, you guys can rely on me instead of Shin," Lao said, puffing out her chest.

"Yeah, that's going to be awhile," Nwazue said. "Just get used to us looking out for you, OK?"

You found yourself nodding in silent agreement. That's just how it was going to be.

It was Day Four of your Infirmary Incarceration. You stared suspiciously at the bouquet of tulips next to the blooming cactus. Beside it was a single calla lily in a stand.

The next row held a Venus flytrap and a vase of pink lilies. Then there was a tiny bonsai in an elegant terracotta pot. The nurse had brought them all in on a cart moments ago, his eyes widening slightly at the balloons and plushes already taking up space in your room.
What the hell had Lacroix been telling people?

His name badge said "Bayan" and he was cute: wavy brown hair with golden highlights, honey-toned skin, and a sharp nose and full lips. He smiled brightly at you and you wondered if you should introduce him to Ziv. Nah, he already seemed too nice.

"So do you like plants?" He asked.

"...I guess," you sighed. "I don't know what's going on."

"Do I need to get Dr. Ziegler?" He sounded concerned.

You shook your head. "No, I know where I am and what's going on with me. I just don't know where all these plants are coming from."

"I would assume your friends and colleagues are sending them. They do that when people have to stay in the infirmary for extended periods of time," he said gently, like you were a slow child.

You weren't sure what face you were making, but Bayan realized his explanation wasn't cutting it.

"Maybe it's a cultural disconnect?" He offered.

"...Yeah, we'll go with that." You rubbed your face with both hands.

"There are cards, so you can tell who sent what."

"Have they been checked for?" You stopped yourself. There was an internal gift shop. Also, In-Sec wouldn't have let any of these packages through without screening. You needed to relax.

"...Never mind."

Bayan laughed. "It's OK. I'm used to Blackwatch agents being a little edgy. You haven't thrown anything at me yet, so we're good."

"I'm on day four of a liquid diet. Either I will soon or I'll be too weak to move."

"If you know you're going to be too weak to move, maybe you should reevaluate your strategy of throwing things at your nurses," he said cheerfully, a hint of steel in his voice.

You deflated a little. "Yeah, good advice."

Bayan took your vitals, checked your IVs, and told you to call him if you needed anything.

You waited for him to leave before tearing open the first card. The tulips were from Winston and Athena. The cactus was from Jesse, which you suspected anyway. The card with the calla lily said "Thinking of you." It was simply signed "Joon." And you winced. The pink lilies were from Riggs, along with a peppy note about "getting well soon and fighting the good fight."

The card for the bonsai was made of heavy stock and felt expensive. You opened it to find Genji's name written in kanji, the brushstroke familiar. The other name you recognized, even if it was in kanji and the handwriting was new. Hanzo. Maybe Genji had forged it to be polite. And what the hell were you going to do with a bonsai? You couldn't regift it. That would be an insult. And you had to keep it alive. Because if you let it die, that would also be an insult. Shin had explained Japanese gifting traditions to you in neurotic detail, and you stared at the miniature tree,
unsure of what to do. It was a trap. A terrible, terrible trap.

Shaking your head you checked the Venus flytrap. The card was unsigned, but you recognized Vo's shit handwriting.

"The Commander is being an extra awful bastard. We're sorry we took you for granted. Come back soon. Please." You snorted, wondering if Vo did this on her own, or if everyone else had pitched in. You suspected the latter; Vo tended not to give a shit. Out of habit, you checked the plant for any interesting additions. There was a sliver of paper sticking out of one of the flowers, like a fortune cookie. You carefully extracted it.

"ALIVE." You recognized Ziv's handwriting and immediately shredded the paper. That little idiot. You shook your head, unable to contain your smile. You weren't going to ask how he did it. Especially since it involved cruelty to your plant.

"I wasn't aware I was supposed to bring flowers," Captain Amari said dryly as she entered.

You saluted, trying not to look too guilty. "I can uh..." You sighed. "No, I can't explain."

"Athena, privacy mode please." She shut the door behind her. She was in casual uniform, hair in a loose braid. She stared at the giant bear and the balloons, then burgeoning jungle on your bedside table.

She pulled up a chair and sat down, taking a moment to admire the bonsai. "These are nice. Jack? Or Gabe?"

"...Neither," you admitted.

Captain Amari did not look the least bit surprised. "They can be so thoughtless."

You shrugged. You weren't sure what she wanted to hear.

"And removing your compartmentalized clearances. Do you want to talk about that?" She said it casually, like she was asking what flavor biscuits you wanted with your tea. You weren't fooled.

"I know I was...difficult, but I feel Commander Reyes overreacted. It's not like I intended to get stabbed." You set the flytrap down.

Captain Amari crossed her arms. "You don't think you were too close to the subject?"

"Of course I was. That's why I was on Candle Arc. Because I was going to do the job right."

"You were going to bring her back, even if it killed you," Captain Amari corrected sternly.

"I'm not suicidal, ma'am."

"Just reckless," she smiled pleasantly and you winced. "You and Gérard. Yes, he briefed me on your thought processes, after Jack...persuaded him to explain. Is there a reason you failed to document your plan of action?"

You scratched the back of your head. "Uh..." Because if you admitted you knew Jack and Gabriel would disapprove, that would land you in hot water. Of course, if you lied to Captain Amari, lightning might strike you down. "We assumed it was obvious. Bypassing her suicide protocol was just shifting priorities. And what was higher priority than either of us?"
Captain Amari pursed her lips, looking distinctly unimpressed by your explanation. You waited for the clap of thunder.

"That's exactly what Gérard said."

Haha, ouch. You knew better than to volunteer information, no matter hard Captain Amari was staring you down. She shifted in her seat, sniper-eyes drilling into your skull. "Is that all you wish to say?"

The skin between your eyes began to tingle and the hair on the back of your neck stood up. You shuddered, practically feeling the bolt of energy swirling around you. "I was worried about how Jack and Gabriel would react," you said, inwardly cursing yourself for caving. "So I just didn't point it out to them. Wasn't their op anyway."

Captain Amari sat back in her seat, the pressure abating. "I appreciate your honesty."

Oh, that was the prelude for punishment. Nothing good ever came from that token statement.

"It seems we do have a problem, and I really wish you would have come to me sooner."

You visibly winced at that nail in your coffin. "It's not quite Lacroix's fault. We never actually discussed hiding anything."

Captain Amari raised a brow at that. "Gérard knew exactly what he was doing."

"If this is going on record-"

Captain Amari waved her hand. "Don't concern yourself with that just yet. So, Gabriel withdrew your clearances and said something about suspension?"

"I uh...think so. I was kind of drugged and pretty upset. I said some shit too." You sighed. "I don't know what to think right now, ma'am."

"You seem calmer than I was led to believe. And they haven't even upped your painkillers." She tapped her fingers against the chair. "Off the record, how did you figure it out?"

You facepalmed then. Captain Amari could see straight through you. It was a good thing you'd shredded Ziv's message.

"Did someone tell you?"

"No, I figured it out on after I calmed down," you said. "I compared the Technological Evidence Loan forms with the Technological Evidence Permanent Confiscation forms-"

"Back up, why?" Captain Amari asked.

"One: those are support-services forms and since the metadata is collected to track a variety of agent performance metrics, it isn't bound by compartmentalized classifications. So I knew I could access that much. Two: Lao has cybernetics and we aren't just going to leave them attached. Loan forms are used when there's a chance we'll return the property when we're done, usually implying the owner is alive. The Permanent Confiscation forms are used when we take tech off corpses-"

"All right," Captain Amari nodded. "Go on."
"Then I cross-referenced the dates with whether or not Angela and Torby were the signatories. because they are both experts in cybernetics and would be called on to safely confiscate unfamiliar cybernetic tech -"

Captain Amari began to massage her forehead.

"And then, I checked to see if ICU holding cell B was available, because that's the only one that could safely contain someone with core cybernetic enhancements."

Captain Amari began to laugh. "And you did that, half-drugged, missing your highest clearances, and stuck in bed?"

"...I uh...yeah." You bowed your head to try to hide your grin. When she said it like that, you felt more than a little proud of yourself.

"You're a good agent," she said, and it warmed your center. "My problem is that you're taking a circuitous route to do your job because you wish to spare Jack and Gabe's feelings. I know the three of you work well together, but I also understand that for many reasons, some rational, some not, they can be...overwhelming." Captain Amari leaned forward. "I have offered to step in to moderate numerous times. Do you need me to do it?"

"I don't know, ma'am. Am I getting my clearances reinstated? And when can I see Lao?"

"Don't worry about your clearances. As for your friend, she's not awake. And when she does wake up, you are not to be alone with her, for your own safety."

"But I can visit, right?" You asked.

"...Eventually." Captain Amari gave you a hard look. "You will wait till you have permission to go, do you understand me? I've been lenient this long; am I going to regret it?"

"No, ma'am." You saluted, instinctively.

"And the other half of the issue is that you selectively respect Jack and Gabriel's authority. You're walking a thin line, Lucky."

"I uh..." You thought back to Operation Cobblestone Dust. "I don't flaunt it ma'am. I certainly don't expect special treatment while working-"

"Keep it that way. If I thought you were abusing your power, this conversation would have taken a very different tone."

"Yes, ma'am. But I agree, some of my...issues come with feeling that they're being overprotective and wouldn't put the same limitations on another agent."

"You're also not getting officially reprimanded for your insubordination," Captain Amari said. "This will only get worse if you don't address it. If this continues to escalate, I won't be asking to sit in on a meeting, the four of us will be sitting down and it will not be nearly as pleasant as it would have been if you had handled this sooner."

You stared at the flowers around the room. At the ridiculous bear Reinhardt had left you. At the Venus flytrap.

"That won't be necessary," you said after a moment. "I can do it. But I think I need more time and a clearer head to organize my thoughts."
Captain Amari nodded curtly. "But you will address it, agent."

"Yes ma'am."

"These are beautiful, Chanceux! And that bear! It is so cute!" Amélie flitted about your room, admiring all the flowers. She had brought a lavender orchid in a pot and you were going to cry, because you had no idea how you were going to keep one plant alive, let alone an orchid, a Venus flytrap, a cactus, and a bonsai.

"Oh my, who is Joon?" She smirked at you knowingly. And you wondered why everyone felt the need to read your cards.

"...I had two meals with him. Like five months ago! I told him it wouldn't work-"

Amélie's kittenish smile made you want to pull the covers over your head. "Oh Chanceux, that just means he hasn't been able to get you out of his mind. It is good to have admirers." She sat down beside you, all poise and a fitted Dior skirt suit in mulberry. She looked shockingly good, and you wished you had something besides a hospital gown to wear.

"Everything all right in here, ladies?" Bayan peeked in and winked at you. "More flowers?"

"She deserves flowers, don't you think?" Amélie cooed.

"Definitely," Bayan nodded.

You managed a flat smile, because "flowers" translated as "things to keep alive that you knew nothing about." You didn't deserve that. The flowers didn't deserve that. "Thanks guys."

"Well, let me know if you need anything. I'll be around." Bayan disappeared back into the hallway and Amélie nudged you. She wore some kind of fragrance, but it was light and didn't irritate your senses.

"Very cute," she said.

"I uh...what?"

"Your nurse. I may be married, but I can still appreciate a good-looking individual, Chanceux. Enjoying beauty is an integral part of life. Take your friend Ziv. He is adorable."

You very carefully regarded Gérard's wife.

"Do not look so worried, I am well aware of his feelings for my husband. It doesn't bother me a whit." She crossed her long legs. "It's a shame he doesn't prefer women. Like you, Chanceux, I don't mind a ménage à trois."

You laid back in your hospital bed. It was nowhere near as comfortable as Jack's bed. "As long as you're not going to kill him for continually checking out your husband, I'm happy."

She giggled. "You are embarrassed!"

"It's Ziv. I'm embarrassed for him."
"You shouldn't be." She studied the flowers. "So many nice gifts. But I saw nothing from -"

"Yeah. We had a fight."

"That is not an excuse!" Amélie pounded a pale fist on the table and you jumped. "Have they been to visit?"

"Not since I woke up...and picked a fight."

Her expression darkened. "Merde alors. You are an invalid! You were operated on! Why are they not here?"

"I am not an invalid and we had a fight-"

"That does not matter! Being in the hospital, the time drags on, like a day without bread! They should be here, reading to you, playing go, entertaining you." It seemed Lacroix really did tell his wife everything. That surprised you on some level. But you could see them on their couch drinking wine, eating expensive desserts, and gossiping. It was remarkably easy to picture.

"Yeah, OK. You're probably right." You acknowledged that Amélie had a more mature grasp on relationships, given that she'd kept Lacroix this long and not murdered him. But she thought Ziv was cute and married Lacroix. Obviously she was insane, and had a lapse in her otherwise stellar taste.

"Jack is a farmboy, but Gabriel should know better!" She huffed. "They may be handsome, but so stupid and pig-headed."

You sighed. "Yeah."

"After you recover we will go out, my treat. Ana has already agreed. Shopping, a spa, dinner. We will take it easy."

"Sure," you said.

"And we will wear pretty clothes, drink expensive cocktails, and flirt outrageously," she continued. "Because life is too short to not enjoy yourself, Chanceux."

"I...yeah." You laughed at that and it hurt a little. "I just want to eat solid food, Amélie."

"Then you can eat whatever you want," she said brightly. "And then wear pretty clothes, drink expensive cocktails, and flirt outrageously."

"Am I interrupting?"

You stiffened as Jack stepped in, still in uniform. Amélie looked at the flowers, then you.

"Well, I'm glad your admirers sent you all those flowers. It shows they appreciate you, doesn't it?" Her smile held a sharp edge, and she rose gracefully. "In a week or so then? We will, as the Americans say, paint the town red." She turned giving Jack a curt nod.

"Looking forward to it," you said, because if it involved getting out of here and eating solid food, you couldn't wait.

"Hello Jack," she said sweetly, but you could hear the knives concealed under the syrup in her voice. "Have you been very busy then?"
Jack didn't take a step backward, but you saw the discomfort plain on his face. "Yes."

"D'accord," she said sympathetically. "The job requires so much from you. It is good that Chanceux is so patient then. Left here alone, unable to eat, and nursing a near fatal wound." Amélie shook her head. "But of course, we understand. You are a busy man. Gabriel as well. I remember when poor Gérard was bedridden. It was horrid, but at least he could eat. He did so appreciate all those times you visited him. You're such a good friend, Jack."

Smiling brightly, she sauntered out of the room, her perfume lingering in the air.

Jack stared blankly after her, then looked around the room, taking in the plants, balloons, and stuffed animals.

You realized then that Amélie indeed had a lot she could teach you beyond good manners and which fork to use at dinner. That level of petty? All dressed up with debonair manners and stilettos hanging from every sentence? Voiced so politely you almost missed the fact it was wearing a tiara at a bitchy angle? That was what you aspired to be when you grew up.

But that didn't help you now, not with Jack standing in the middle of the room, watching you cautiously.

"I deserved that," he said after a moment, and shut the door.

You shrugged, because anything you could add now was just overkill.

Jack did a double-take when he saw the bear. "Reinhardt?"

"Yes." You took a sip of water. He could request an inventory if he wanted, but it wasn't any of his business.

Jack sighed heavily and took the chair beside the bed. His shirt was wrinkled. There were bags under his eyes and he had too much stubble along his jaw. "How are you feeling?"

"Hungry," you said tightly, and continued sipping your water.

"Sorry, I haven't been by. It's been crazy and..." He winced, brushing his hair out of his face. "And I thought I'd give you some time to cool down."

Anger flared in your gut, and you almost asked him if he'd gotten a dog. Instead you just watched him, judgment heavy in your eyes. Captain Amari had taught you that expectant silence was a powerful weapon.

"...Obviously, that was the wrong choice," Jack finished. He rested his face in his hands. "Damnit, sweetheart. Don't look at me like I'm the one who stabbed you."

"Lao wasn't in control of her actions." You set the water down. "What's your excuse?"

Jack flinched. "Do you want me to leave?"

"What I want doesn't seem to matter," you said coolly. "My clearances have been revoked. Gabriel doesn't even want me to know Lao is alive. And you seem fine with both these things."

"Baby-"

"Not to mention," you continued, ignoring him. "I've been awake for three days now, and neither of you could be bothered to come talk to me about it. Or even send flowers." Your hand
snapped out, gesturing to all the gifts your well-wishers had delivered.

"Didn't think you liked flowers," Jack said after a moment, worry evident on his face. "Do you?"

"I don't care. But it's nice to know that some people were thinking of me."

"You don't think I've been thinking about you?" Jack's voice dropped low. "You don't think you're at the forefront of Gabriel's mind?"

"No idea," you said. "You want to make a big deal about me getting hurt and almost dying, then you can't be bothered to show up while I'm stuck here?" You were getting loud now. "You couldn't support me when you know Gabriel overreacted? What the fuck am I supposed to think, Jack?" You glared at him, because now that you'd solved the question of whether or not Lao was alive, you had a lot of free time to steep in your anger.

"I-"

"You couldn't even grant me the mercy of telling me my hacker is alive? Because you should know what she means to me! Or did you conveniently forget that the rest of my old squad is buried alongside my real name?!"

Jack sat back in his seat, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry. I made a bad call."

"No, I made a bad call, facing Lao by myself. You just plain fucked up," you snarled.

"Yeah, all right. I did." Jack looked you in the eye, face hard. "I knew how you felt. But I told myself it was for the best and you'd be too drugged to worry about it."

"You bastard-"

"Yes," he said, nodding. "Go on. Get it off your chest."

"You fucking condescending piece of shit! How could you do that to me?"

"Because I wasn't thinking straight," Jack said, eyes never leaving your face. "You were here, though you nearly weren't. Gabriel was a fucking mess. I...I had Overwatch shit to deal with. I thought it could wait. But I was wrong, and I fucked up. So go on. Hit me with it. It's your right."

"Don't give me that!" You shouted. "You fucking coward! You goddamn asshole! You're a shitty boyfriend and you don't even deserve a dog!"

Jack's face paled, but he nodded at each insult. "I won't argue with you. We both know I've never been a paragon, no matter my reputation. We both know I fucked it up with Gabe earlier. I am an asshole. I am a shitty boyfriend. And waiting to see you, that was cowardly." He paused. "...That last one's a little harsh."

"I haven't even started to get harsh!"

"OK," he said softly. "That's fine. I deserve it. During all of this...I still had Overwatch to run. I focused on work, when I should have been here with you." He looked away then. "It finally sunk in today that you'd almost died." He dragged his hands across his face, voice terribly gentle. "And that hit me harder than anything you've said."

You shuddered, hating him for making you feel like the bad guy. "Jack, you manipulative
prick! You don't get to play martyr and guilt me!"

"That's not what I'm trying to do, sweetheart." He took off his jacket and gloves. "I was wrong. I don't have an excuse. I should have been here. I'm sorry I let you down."

"It's kind of late for that," you said sharply, forcing your left hand flat, because the metal was digging into your palm.

"I know." Jack leaned over the railing. "You were out of the woods. I had some ops in Greece go very bad, and I had to handle the fallout. I put in a stop-gap measure, but it's still a clusterfuck." He winced, because even though it was all probably true, it sounded weak, like an excuse. "I knew you were mad. I figured you wouldn't want to see me and I'd give you some space. But obviously, that was terribly thoughtless of me."

You regarded him silently.

"I'm not making excuses. I just want to tell you I'm sorry and swear I'll do better." Jack hunched over. "I know that sounds lame. But it's all I have."

"My clearances," you said, because that was not all he had.

Jack exhaled slowly. "Athena, reinstate Agent Strike's access to Candle Arc and Shit Spiders."

"Done," Athena chimed in. "A recording and transcript of the event you requested have now been sent to your inbox, Agent Strike."

You sat there for a moment, feeling more yourself. "Thank you, Athena" you said, because it took you a moment to recall that you'd wanted to hear exactly how Ziv told Jack and Gabriel off. "And I guess thank you, Jack," you said, not caring that you didn't sound very gracious.

"I know, I know. They never should have been revoked." Jack ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry. I let it go because Gabriel was on edge and I wasn't sure how cognizant you were under the drugs. I figured you'd be resting anyway and we'd get this cleared up before you came back to work. It wasn't malice; I misjudged it."

"Well, I guess it's good to know you weren't punishing me." Jack could be vindictive, but he was more prone to thoughtlessness.

"That's what you thought?" His eyes widened.

"That's what it felt like!" You clenched your teeth. "What the hell was I supposed to think? You sided with Gabriel and never came back to explain."

Jack's chin dropped to his chest. His breath hitched and he shook his head. "Damnit." He took your hands in his, and when you didn't pull away, he kissed your fingers, lips moving up past your knuckles to your wrists. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. That's not what I meant to happen."

"So I spent my time thinking about whether or not Lao could have survived those shots. Memory was tricky, so I had to go over the events continually, because I was too drugged to stop myself. It wasn't till the next day that my brain was clear enough to use logic to figure it out."

Jack was very still.

"I wish you had just told me."
"That first day we were here, Gabriel sat vigil the entire time. I was supposed to handle a situation in Haikou, but Ana went in my stead. I sat with him, got him to change clothes and shower. Didn't really have time to digest everything, you know? Just...waited." His voice cracked and he looked at you, stark misery on his face. "Made sure he ate, drank, I had just left to get him a sandwich when you woke up." Jack rubbed his eyes. "Then the two of you fought and...and I dealt with the aftermath of that. Had to take it to the mats," he admitted. "Afterward, Gabe finally got some sleep."

You hadn't know Gabriel had sat with you the entire time you were out. But that didn't change what had happened. It did on some level, explain the overreaction. But you weren't quite ready to give him any quarter.

"Then the situation in Greece blew up. Omnic strike on the Mani peninsula. They came out of the fucking Mediterranean. Wiped out two squads. One of them was led by one of my old SEP guys. Galanos. He was an asshole, but..." Jack blew out a long breath. "But he was one of my guys." He looked at you with regret lining his face. It wasn't just that, he looked exhausted. "It hit me then, that I'd almost lost you. There was a lot of shit I had to take care of first, but then and I came down, resigned to the fact that you were going to be so pissed. That's fine. You should be. I just...I just needed to see you."

He sat in that chair, eyes closed, shoulders slumped, looking like the walking wounded.

You rubbed the backs of Jack's hands, anger slowly melting into weariness. His job took precedence over a lot of things, but so far he hadn't abused it as an excuse. Two squads? That was a lot of funerals to attend and you had never envied his responsibilities. "That's your reason. What's Gabriel's?"

"I told him to give you space," Jack said. "He was overwrought. He did need to cool down. Now he's getting caught up on the Blackwatch backlog that built up while you were both out."

There was a pause. "You know, he didn't mean to hurt you either, right?"

"I barely have enough forgiveness in me for you right now," you said, shaking your head. "Don't push it."

"...All right. It'll probably mean more coming from him, anyway. I...just wanted you to know." Jack twined his fingers with yours. "Guess that means we can lift the ban on Mihret. He's getting antsy. Keeps sending me long, angry messages in legalese." Jack got out of the chair, lowered the railing, and sat down beside you. "Did you figure it out on your own or-"

"Yes." You raised your chin, daring him to argue.

"Yeah, you're the clever one," He smiled warmly at you. "Maggie and Michael have flooded me with worried messages. Michael caught a clip of what happened on the net."

It wasn't fair that he could use them against you. You turned your head. "I'll message them when I have access to tech again."

"You don't have-"

"All my devices have clearance-contingent access."

"That never crossed my mind." Jack winced. "Not that you should be surprised by that at this point."

"Yeah, like somehow you missed that I've been trying to save Lao for months."
"I know your friend is important to you. But that plan you and Gérard hatched-"

"You punched him," you said, annoyance creeping into your voice.

"You're just mad that you missed it," Jack said, stroking your face.

You sighed. "Jack, that's not OK."

"Neither was his plan. It wasn't just about you. Gérard's my friend, and he's not expendable, no matter what he thinks. If either of you had spelled it out, we wouldn't be happy, but at least we would have measures in place in case something went wrong, like it did."

"You would have contested it."

"Maybe," Jack admitted. "I don't like the risks Gérard is willing to take."

"...Captain Amari wants us to sit down and talk about how you and Gabriel are negatively affecting my ability to carry out operations."

Jack gave a heavy sigh. "Yeah, Ana had some choice words for me too." He leaned forward, lightly kissing your jaw. "I missed you. I'm sorry. I feel bad about not even sending flowers." His hand rested on the nape of your neck. "But I'm glad everyone else picked up the slack. I'd feel worse if I came in and the room was just hospital decor."

You weren't so sure he would have noticed, unobservant as he was, but it was a nice sentiment.

"I'll get you something. I know it's pathetic that I had to be prompted." Jack pressed kisses against your neck and you sighed. "Still will. Will make it up to you. Won't cop out. I'm sorry." He looked at you, tender and earnest. "I don't take you for granted. I swear."

"OK," you said, as he kissed you. Jack could charm the anger out of Gabriel. What chance did you stand? "Missed you too. Wanted to ask you to stay when I woke up, but Angela was here and I was too upset to make the words come out right."

Jack pressed his forehead to yours, those deep blue eyes focused solely on you. "I'm here now. I'm not going anywhere."

"So then I told Genji that Hanzo doesn't technically work for Blackwatch and he could totally deliver the message-" Ziv gestured while he spoke, happily eating a gyro in front of you. It smelled greasy, meaty, and delicious. He was such an asshole. And for some reason, he was rocking a well-tailored canary yellow suit jacket with a bowtie and narrow-legged black pants. You didn't think he owned any formalwear. Lacroix's influence, no doubt. It should have been garish, but it complimented his skin tone, and he looked less lanky, more grown up.

"So was that flytrap was from everyone, you included?"

"Well, most everyone. Can't say everyone, because if Reyes sees that card we need plausible deniability. And speaking of which, he's a fucking rabid bear right now. Since I work in the tech lab with Winston, I'm not too worried, but poor McCree has been trying to do your job and
he's usually the one left facing Reyes."

"Gabriel has a soft spot for Jesse," you said, not worried.

"No, you have a soft spot for Jesse. Reyes is just marginally less likely to bite his head off than the rest of ours. There is nothing soft about Reyes, and I've looked."

You snorted at that. "His beard."

"It hides a diamond-hard chin, or so the rumor goes."

You picked at your pudding. Day Five meant you could eat pudding! And you'd been so excited. Till Ziv waltzed in, wearing a goddamn suit, and eating a gyro. Your pudding had a little flavor. But it wasn't measuring up.

"Gérard says you figured it out on your own," Ziv said after a moment.

"Yeah. You can ask Athena how I did it."

"No, I'll work it out myself. If you did it, it can't be that hard." Ziv smirked.

You massaged your forehead. Ziv was the worst.

"So I know you're not allowed to see Lao, but I hear they keep finding weird things. Angela and Torby have been by to poke at her cybernetics. They couldn't remove everything because some of it is fused to her spine. Winston and Athena are helping to unravel what's going on there. Added some kind of nanite bullshit and there was this odd level of biological engineering we weren't expecting. Angela says that's what kept her alive, coupled with your custom neurotoxin slowing down her systems."

"Huh."

"Yeah, it's weird." Ziv shrugged. "Since you and the boss are "priority targets," you can't go in there till she wakes up, has been cleared as somewhat safe, and we figure some of her weird tech out. But there's a security monitor I have access to—"

"Yeah, I'll take a look. I don't need to be there," you said, mostly to convince yourself. "Can she hear us?"

"Maybe. You should record yourself reading or something. I'll see if I can get them to play it for her."

"...Yeah, that's a good idea." You grinned at Ziv, because sometimes, he wasn't entirely awful. "Amèlie thinks you're cute."

"That's because I am," he smirked. "That nurse of yours, Bayan, he's not too bad either."

"She said the same thing."

"We obviously have similar taste in men," Ziv said wistfully.

"She said she wished you liked girls. Because she didn't mind uh...yeah." You scratched your head, wondering if you should have kept that to yourself.

Ziv sat back in his seat, his face blank. Finally, he pursed his lips. "I thought you disapproved. Which is pretty hypocritical, if you ask me."
"I didn't ask you. Ever." You sighed. "I don't trust Lacroix. And we both know the very legitimate concerns about superior-subordinate relationships. Also I didn't want drama between you and Amélie, considering she's apparently some kind of sniping prodigy. If you have her blessing, well it's none of my business."

"It was never your business," Ziv sniffed.

"Apparently, Amélie, Captain Amari, and I are going for a spa treatment next week, Amélie's treat. So yeah, it kind of is."

"You made a friend? Ben-zona, let me get you a card to commemorate the occasion." He finished off the gyro and you felt a sense of relief. And loss. Such loss. You were going to eat gyros and cake when you got out of here.

"Go fuck yourself."

"I can't believe all these people sent you flowers. And Reinhardt got you a giant stuffed bear! What the hell? That thing is going to take up half your room!" Ziv pointed at the reindeer. "And that thing looks mad as fuck."

"I thought so too."

"Lindholm got that for you?"

"Yeah. I'm waiting till I'm less drugged to check it for hidden weapons."

"And you got flowers from Joon and Riggs?"

"...Shut up, Ziv."

"I know Riggs just thinks you're cool, but Joon? That guy likes women a lot. And a single calla lily? He's trying to impress you."

"We had dinner back before. Anyway, I was surprised too."

"Yeah, he's actually had to talk you. Guess it doesn't matter if he just wants to bang you. At least he has good taste in flowers." Ziv flashed you a cheeky grin and you swatted him on the arm.

There was a knock on the doorframe and you both looked over to see Gabriel standing there, arms crossed, frowning heavily.

"Mihret." Gabriel said his name like a condemnation.

"Would you like me to stay?" Ziv asked, purposefully turning his back on Gabriel.

"Nah, you're fine," you said, because you were mad enough at Gabriel. Ziv didn't get steal your thunder. "Thanks for the visit."

"Of course. Sorry I couldn't get here sooner." He stood up slowly, still ignoring Gabriel. "Let me know if you need anything. I'd be happy to help."

"Solid food," you sighed.

Ziv laughed, knowing then that he had gotten to you with his gyro. "Now that you mention
it, I think I'll pick up sushi tonight."

"I fucking hate you and hope you get intestinal parasites. Big ones."

Laughing, Ziv swaggered past Gabriel, still ignoring him.

Well, that was going to be a problem down the line. But that wasn't your concern at the moment. Your concern was fuming silently as he stood on the other side of the room, gearing up to chew you out.

Gabriel's nostrils flared, but he didn't say anything. He shut the door firmly behind him, geared up in his Blackwatch hoodie. His gaze fell on the assortment of gifts.

"Wilhelm and Lindholm made sure to tell me that I'd been remiss in taking care of you." His voice was harsh, and he gave your teddy bear a very unfriendly look.

"They're good friends," you said dismissively. You were going to have to ask Reinhardt about it later. Hopefully, no one got punched.

Gabriel turned away from the window, toward you. "Jack says you figured it out on your own. Ana backs him up. Even says she knows how. I'll take them at face value."

"But not me?" You set your pudding aside, for its own safety.

"Did you figure it out on your own?"

"Yeah, I fucking did." You tilted your chin up, daring him to dig a deeper hole.

Gabriel inhaled sharply. "All right. I believe you."

You bit back your reply, opting to glare at him.

"Don't look at me like that. You almost died because you're obsessed with that cyborg of yours."

He was starting there, was he? All right. You'd been left alone long enough to stew in your anger and refine it into something sharper and more focused. "She's one of yours too," you said. "Black Base Delta, Captain Aishani Patel's squad. In case you forgot."

"You're mine. She doesn't come anywhere close to that." Gabriel shook his head. "And you're not allowed to go anywhere near-"

"Gabriel, if you just came here to issue me more orders, you can go away. I'm on medical leave. I can't get out of bed. And yeah, I know I'm not allowed there. Got it." Your pulse sped up as Gabriel stalked over and yanked the chair back, metal legs scraping against the floor. He sat down, dark eyes never leaving your face. "Don't give me attitude right now. Do you know what you put me through?"

"Attitude? You haven't seen attitude." You bared your clenched teeth at him. "You're either here as my boss or my lover. But you don't get to be both. You want to talk about being too close to make objective calls? Yeah, guess what? I'm not the only one!" You were yelling now, hands shaking.

"It's not the same," Gabriel snapped, veins in his neck cording.

"Damn right it's not! Want to talk about what you put me through? It's not like I set out to
get stabbed! You revoked my clearances and threatened me with suspension. You chose to do that!" You rested one hand on your abdomen, a slight ache starting up.

"You were fucking obsessed!"

"You were out of line!" You snarled. "That's my career you're fucking with!"

"How else was I supposed to keep you from breaking into her cell? Angela wouldn't let me chain you to the bed and you'd be crawling over there as soon as you figured out which way was up!"

"What kind of question is that? You're acting like an overbearing paranoid bastard!"

"I am an overbearing paranoid bastard! Just because I let you get away with-"

Oh no he didn't.

"You either trust me to handle myself or you don't, Gabriel. There's no you "letting me get away with" anything." Each syllable came out in tight measured beats squeezed carefully through the small gap between your tightly clenched upper and lower jaw.

"I let you push me, corazon. But I don't have that kind of patience right now. You're right. I trust you to handle yourself most of the time. But not with this. And given how it ended up, you proved my point."

"So what? You think it's OK to punish me? That was cruel." You gripped the railing, wondering if you should push it down and tackle him. Drag that smarmy asshole to the ground and punch him till he saw reason.

"Cruel? Cruel was having to carry you out of there, leaking blood, wondering if I had to watch you die. Cruel was waiting here for an entire day to see if you were ever going to wake up. Cruel was sitting at your bedside, unspeakably relieved that you were alive, and then getting called out for saving your goddamn life."

"I just wanted to know if she was dead or alive, Gabriel. You know how much she means to me! I was too drugged and weak to go hunting for her then, and it would have given me peace of mind. Instead you fucking dismissed me, and left me here alone and powerless. And I can't see any reason you did that besides trying to hurt me." You wiped your face, shoulders shaking. You were breathing too hard and Gabriel reached for you, but you drew back, wrapping your blankets tighter around your shoulders.

He said your name like a tired curse.

You turned your head away from him, unwilling to let him see the angry tears in your eyes. You weren't sure what was making you madder, him, or the fact you were crying when you should be roaring. Right now, you had no tolerance for weakness, least of all your own.

"I wasn't trying to hurt you, but that was stupid of me." Gabriel leaned over, elbows resting on the railing of the bed. "And it didn't stop you from doing what you wanted anyway." His voice was gravelly, but the heat had left it.

You swallowed the lump in your throat and reached for your water. Gabriel got to it first, handing it to you, his fingers folding over yours.

"I am furious with you," he enunciated. "But that doesn't mean I don't care. And that
doesn't mean I should have done what I did. I'm sorry." The words were clipped and angry, but no less genuine for it. It wasn't a good apology, but it was a real one.

Your hand hovered around your cup and you carefully examined the corner of your hospital bed, the sheets crisply folded. There was a piece of brown fuzz on the white fabric, probably from your bear. Beside it was a bright strand of Jack's hair and you couldn't bring yourself to brush it off. Yes, you realized that eventually you were going to have to look at Gabriel and say something.

You sighed as he released the cup and you took it, taking a long gulp of cool water.

"Come here?" He leaned over the railing, voice soft like he was talking to a feral cat.

You let him fold you against him, his arms warm on your back. He stroked your hair roughly. You inhaled the scent of his cologne, savoring the familiar warmth. "You think I'm the only one who said some shit?" He asked gruffly, but he didn't let go of you. "Because I'm not going to lie, you got under my skin with some of that."

"You're the one with the power," you said tightly.

Gabriel released you abruptly and sat back in the chair. "Yeah." He closed his eyes. "But that doesn't mean you get a free pass to hurt me either."

What a goddamn mess. You took another drink, focusing on the smooth flat texture of the cup and the sweetness of the water.

"I did say some shit. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry." You forced the words out. He was right. But even though he apologized and acknowledged he was wrong, you were still angry.

"Yeah, I know. You're still an idiot." He straightened up, jaw tight. "You scared the shit out of me. And once I find Gérard, I'm going to kick his ass, because I've looked over all the Candle Arc documentation, and while you didn't explicitly say it, it's obvious the two of you planned to serve as bait the entire time, and I'm damn sure you left that bit out of your genius plan on purpose."

After talking to Jack and Captain Amari it was amusing that someone found your plan blatantly obvious. But that wasn't going to help matters.

"I know. You and Jack are being too much. Captain Amari wants to have a meeting with us about how I can't do my job because I'm worried about upsetting the two of you."

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. "You don't seem too worried."

"We all know I'm emotionally repressed." You rubbed your shoulder. "But sometimes I take the long route to avoid arguing with you and Jack. And that's the wrong way to handle it. Captain Amari keeps pushing to sit in but-"

"But you're so painfully secretive, you can't bear the thought of involving someone else?"

"Maybe."

There was a long silence as you finished your water and set the empty cup on your table.

"So now what?" Gabriel asked, regarding you warily. "We talked. We apologized. But we're obviously still not good."
You shrugged. "I don't know. I'm going to need space to sort things out."

"What do you mean by "space?" Gabriel asked sharply.

"I'll stick to Lacroix's low-impact espionage runs when I get back. Don't think I'll be in any shape to run any combat missions for the rest of the month."

"I have a backlog of paperwork," Gabriel said a little too calmly.

"I think it will be better if I'm out of the office for awhile."

Gabriel crossed his arms.

"It's been a rough few days. We did apologize. And I know we're both sorry, but emotionally, I need time to come to terms with it. All of it."

Gabriel grimace. "This have to do with how I shot your hacker?"

There it was, the elephant in the room. You had been waiting for it to rear its big ugly head. "Some of it."

"So you can't forgive me for saving you, huh?" He flashed you a sardonic smirk, bitterness soaking his words. "Guess that's what I get."

"Goddamnit, Gabriel. You're twisting my words. I need time to sort myself out and cool down. I'm not blaming you for-"

"Liar," he said, voice dangerously soft. "I saw the look on your face back in Lucerne. You blamed me all right."

"I know why you did it. I know you weren't necessarily wrong. But here," you tapped your head. "Doesn't match here." You patted your chest, staring at your lap.

The two of you sat in silence for a moment.

"Thank you, by the way. For-"

"No thanks are needed between us," he said gruffly. "Just tell me what you want. A week? A month? What? Or is it something you need to say? Because I'm right here. Hit me with it. Let's do this," he said, slapping his chest with an open palm.

"Gabriel-

"Go on. You have something to say. I can see it on your face," he said, daring you to go down that path. No, pushing you in that direction.

"You shot Lao. Even though you knew I wanted her alive. You know what she means to me. You know what she means to me. And I keep seeing it. I can't just gloss over that!"

Gabriel sat back in the chair, eyes closed. He took a few deep breaths. When he opened his eyes, his expression had hardened. "You need time? All right. Fine. You can have time. Take your time." His words were flat and emotionless. "Do what you have to do. I won't get in your way." He rose then, turning to leave. "Should I have sent flowers? A ridiculous stuffed animal? Would any of that have helped? Because I think you would have blamed me regardless."

"It's not about blaming you, damnit!"
"Doesn't matter what it's about. It's obvious you hold me responsible for shooting her. Fine. I did it for you, and I don't care how angry that makes you," he said, winding you up. "Because I have no problem sacrificing her life for yours."

"Goddamnit Gabriel-"

"Are you taking a break from Jack too?" He looked at you over his shoulder, wielding a twisted smile like barbed wire.

"...I don't know," you said, feeling absurdly guilty, and then angry because why was he guilting you? He could keep his petty to himself. "Gabriel-"

"Space. Got it." He slammed the door behind him and you dropped back against your bed, hard-pressed to think of how that could have gone worse.

Chapter End Notes

And so some questions are answered, but things aren't all right in the world. *ducks*

I jogged 2 miles with my retarded dogs today. (No, really. I love them, but they are dangerously stupid.) I prepped some things I have to mail/pay/setup. I filed my state and federal taxes. I wrote a ridiculous horror movie-esque scene late last night/early this morning. So I'm feeling kind of good. Too bad my cousin/roommate has contracted some kind of awful projectile stomach flu and now I'm like "...Oh no, I'm next."

Tomorrow I will apply for more jobs and go mail things, maybe restock my spice cabinet. Then I will allowed to have more cake. (◕‿◕✿)
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Even if your relationships are in flux, life goes on. There is always more work to be done.

Chapter Notes

So, got some cool fanart.

Eastrisk made this and I didn't get a notification, so just message me if you make something. You're not bothering me and I'm always excited. Look at all those characters!

Mamimi drew pre-cyborg Lao, looking all grown-up and competent when we all know she's just going to steal beer and candy.

Hanzoshansbow has ADORABLE CAKE CHIBI and some heartbreak. Because my emotions aren't erratic enough.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You told Athena to give Jack a heads up that you and Gabriel had quarreled again, and then set your status as "do not disturb."

Gabriel had shot Lao down in front of you, and you were angry about it, that was true. He had done it to save you. Lao might even survive. You didn't hate him. You didn't think he was a monster. But you were still upset and you still needed time to process it. If Lao died...things might be different. You exhaled slowly, hand resting on your bandaged stomach. You needed to see Lao. You'd ask for security cam footage later.

You were dozing when the door opened, light from the hallway slicing through the comfortable darkness. Cracking one eye, you saw it was Jack.

"Come in," you said, after a moment.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you." He sounded tired and you sat up, flicking on the lights. Dressed down in sweats, Jack gave you a crooked smile.

"How bad?"

"He's hurting."

You flinched.

"Wanted to hear your take on it," Jack said, sitting down. He smelled like soap and Gabriel's cologne. "He didn't really want to talk."
"...I told him I needed some space. Because yeah, I'm still mad. Can't help that. Working on it though. And I need figure out how to deal with how much you two...overwhelm me. He brought up Lao, said I couldn't forgive him for saving my life. That I blamed him. I-" You rubbed your forehead. "I'm very aware of what he did. I'm not...I'm not putting it on him. But I need some time to process that too."

"You need some space from me too?"

"I don't think so. But...it might be wise."

Jack frowned. "How is doing this by yourself "wise?" Just wondering."

"I...don't want to make Gabriel feel worse. Like we're excluding him." You blinked as Jack tugged on your hair.

"I told you, I'm here for you. I let you down once. I'm not making that mistake again. And leaving you unsupervised is probably the worst idea right now," he said, voice husky. "Obviously, you get up to stupid shit on your own."

"It's more pressure on you, Jack. You're going to have to look after Gabriel too."

"This isn't worth doing if I'm going to crumble under a little pressure, baby." He kissed the side of your neck and you reached out, taking his hand.

"I'm not crumbling, Jack. I just-"

"Wasn't talking about you. Shit happens. We talked about this. You were up front. If you need space, fine. You get space. Just don't hare off and avoid the problem. You cool down, figure your shit out, then come back and talk. He'll get over it."

"...If Lao dies..." You knew from painful experience that you couldn't predict how you would react. Black Base Delta had awakened a vengeance that still burned hot inside you, something your smuggler self would have found disturbing and alien. Gabriel had made it clear that Lao was not his responsibility. That was fine. She was one of yours.

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it. Do you plan on blaming him?"

"No, but-"

"OK. You're already on the right track." Jack said. "You're overthinking it. We'll work it out."

"I think you're ridiculously optimistic."

"About us? A little." Jack gave you a furtive smile, like he had a secret and was only now considering sharing it with you. "I have faith in my two favorite troublemakers." He paused. "Maggie and Michael say hello. They want to know if you have a cool scar. Had to inform them that it's a bit too soon to tell."

You touched your stomach. The wound looked small now, so much fuss over such a little thing. Granted, Angela had spent hours patching you back up, and she didn't do things halfway.

"Speaking of your siblings, they want to come to Zurich during a school break. Maggie is lobbying me to make the appeal. I have no opinion on this, because your family dynamics are still something of a mystery to me. But I told her I'd relay the message."
Jack snorted. "Oh, I've heard all about this already." He slouched in the chair. "Maggie has been begging to come for years. My parents are perfectly content to stay at home on the farm, with the goats, and no thank you to that fancy European cheese tour, we're fine as we are. Maggie's getting old enough to come on her own, though Michael has finally expressed interest in visiting too, so I have no problem if the two of them want to come over together. Especially if you want to show them around."

"...Jack. No. I like your siblings. I really do. But I can't do my job and bodyguard two teenagers all by myself."

"Guess I'll have to tell Maggie you don't want her here. She'll be heartbroken-"

"Don't you dare!" You reached for your pillow and he laughed.

"I'm kidding. I know you have to work. Chang's unit is due back for a break in the summer. The timing might work out. My parents will have a temporary unit rotated in, and Maggie and Michael can ride back with Chang. I'll assign them to different people every day, let them get a feel for how Overwatch runs."

You thought about Maggie following Reinhardt around for a day, maybe with a little Athena fish torpedo, Michael discreetly poking the drone and asking flustered questions. You sank back onto the bed, inundated in cute. You could feel the dopey expression on your face.

"There we go." Jack leaned over the bed. "Feel better?"

"A little."

"Scoot over." Jack slid the railing of the bed down and sat beside you. "Do you know what I thought of you when you first arrived?"

"...I'm afraid to ask." You recalled seeing him from time to time, but he was never particularly friendly. The Morrison charisma wasn't something he wasted on you. That day by the memorial, while you clumsily burnt incense for Captain Patel, he'd seemed almost condescending. If you wanted to be honest, you hadn't started to really like him till after you punched him in the face.

"I knew Gabe liked you. I wasn't jealous." He grinned. "But I couldn't tell what he saw in you. Figured it was just the mutual trauma. Thought you were two harsh words away from a breakdown, and Gabriel needed a win. That he kept you nearby because he needed to protect his sole survivor. It helps that you're pretty. I figured he might sleep with you, get you out of his system, and that'd be the end of it."

You narrowed your eyes at him. "What?"

"I was wrong, obviously," Jack said, holding his hands up. "But yeah, I know, I was a real bastard."

You stared at him incredulously. "Jesus, Jack. Why are you telling me this?"

"I was wrong, obviously." He turned away then. "What'd you think of me, initially?"

"...After I settled in, I figured you were more dangerous than you portrayed yourself. That shift between friendly guy and scary commanding officer was a little too fluid. And for the record, I wasn't trying to make a move on Gabriel at all."
"I know," Jack said, back to you, shoulders raised like he was guarding his neck. "I picked that up after we started hanging out. I didn't realize quite how bad things were till Gleeson. That you'd been there for him when I wasn't really got under my skin."

"So you came to the sparring class and beat me up," you said dryly.

"That is not how it went and you know it," Jack laughed and turned back around to kiss your hand. "I was curious. I realized then that Gabriel liked you a lot more than he admitted. And I wasn't lying at the hotel; that day you broke my nose, you stopped being Gabriel's little sidekick to me. You were a real person, with damage, sure, but you were loyal, stronger than I expected, and good for him."

"Jack, you're making me sound like some kind of saint. I just nudge Gabriel back into line every now and then."

"It's a talent, and an uncommon one." Jack sighed. "I was arrogant. I remember you sitting there in his office, so cute while you stammered all those apologies, like you expected me to throw you out."

"I did!"

"And I was interested, but maybe a little concerned about what you were getting up to with my boyfriend."

"Jack, I'm really not sure you should be telling me all this," you said.

"Well, it's not painting me in a flattering light. But that's not the point." Jack bent over, kissing your nose. "So we went from there. Ainsley was annoying the hell out of me, that wasn't a front, but maybe I didn't need to hang around as much as I did."

"Goddamnit, Jesse was right. He fucking warned me..."

Jack made a face. "McCree warned you?"

"Yeah, to be careful because the boss's boyfriend wasn't hanging around just to be friendly. I didn't believe him, because there was nothing untoward going on between me and Gabriel."

"Huh. McCree's smarter than he looks."

"...I think you've misjudged enough of us Blackwatch misfits to know you should keep those opinions to yourself."

Jack laughed. "That's fair. There were a lot of rumors flying at the time, but I knew they weren't true. You weren't over your losses, and I picked that up pretty quickly. Though, I will admit, that night you helped me make chili, I didn't accidentally let it slip that we'd fucked on your desk. I wanted to see your reaction."

"I knew it." You poked him in the side. "I fucking knew it!"

Jack scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "It was shitty, I know. But it was just curiosity, I swear. I wasn't trying to pick a fight. Just wanted to see if you were interested, disgusted, jealous... Just curious."

"Wouldn't have mattered. I was still hung up Shin."
"I know." Jack sighed. "Talking about it now, I feel like an ass."

"Yeah, that was a dick move," you said. "You should feel awful."

"Gabriel wasn't surprised, by my ploy or your reaction. He just said not to push you because, yeah, you were still grieving. So don't worry, he dumped the guilt on me too. And I deserved it." He kissed your forehead. "But after Paris...well, that changed everything. The two of us, working together, it felt good." He grinned. "I guess I got a taste of what you did for Gabe."

"I think Gabriel planned it that way," you sighed, because apparently Jesse had been right and you were an idiot for doubting him.

"Probably." Jack stroked your neck. "And then after I came to visit you with that sachertorte and you...well, you were brutally honest. Not just about how I treated Gabe, but about how I treated you and by extension my other friends. I'd been a dick, and I'd been using the job as an excuse. I uh...I might've tried to get you to back down, turned on a bit of the commanding officer aura, but you were unfazed. You just politely, but firmly told me a lot of uncomfortable truths. It was a wakeup call. Had to have a long talk with Gabe about where I'd gone wrong." Jack closed his eyes. "I'll gloss over it and just say he wasn't as polite about it as you."

"So when did you start having the sex fantasies?" You asked, skipping to the good part.

"After you punched me," he grinned. "But Paris was when they kicked in hard. Wasn't till after you and Gabe went at it on the mats that I admitted it to him, and well... he and I weren't going to do anything till McCree started blabbing about your dates. Realized we'd have to make a move, if you were ready. Think you know the rest."

You sighed as he stroked your hair, your hands resting in his lap. "You're a real asshole, Jack Morrison. It's a good thing you're cute."

"The point of this wasn't just till confess my sins and tell you a weird bedtime story. Even before we were really together, we were helping each other work things through. And there were some heavy issues to deal with. Not saying it's going to be perfect or easy, but yeah, you and Gabriel can do it. And I'm here to help, cuddle, make out with."

"Thanks Jack." You cut him off, because you were injured, hungry, and totally unable to have sex right now.

Jack looked you in the eye, shoulders squared, hand on your chest. "It's going to be OK," he told you. "We've got this."

And damn if you didn't believe him.

You didn't pull the knife out. You knew better, just like you knew how this was going to end. You were on your knees, blood already soaking through your shirt.

Lao stretched her hand out to you, eyes wide with terror and maybe some regret. It was OK, though. You weren't mad. You were going to take her home.
She never reached you. The gunshots were claps of thunder. The bullets tore through her, and now you knew it had been three shots. You still saw five or six bullet wounds. She crumpled, blood pouring onto the floor, mingling with yours.

You didn't scream, not this time. You just looked over your shoulder, your eyes meeting Gabriel's. He shook his head at you, looking tired.

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat to keep your ungrateful ass alive," he said calmly.

You woke up in a cold sweat, ragged, but not surprised. It wasn't the first time you'd had that dream. It wouldn't be the last.

"Huh, that's one way to do it." Ziv studied the three long-stemmed glass roses in a vase. There was one bud, and two fully blooming red roses, and they were highly-detailed, down to the green thorns on the stem. "Kind of tacky if you ask me."

"Nobody ever does," you said. "But at least they tried?" You had the card. Jack and Gabriel had signed their names, but there was no message. You squinting, trying to tell if Jack had forged Gabriel's signature. It looked authentic... The card also contained a certificate, signing you up for a pastry of the month club. "I mean I can't kill glass flowers. Can drop them though." You shook your head. "I don't know, Ziv. I used to not have things. Now I have things. What do I do with these things?"

"That reindeer is giving me the creeps," Ziv muttered.

You actually thought it was kind of cute, and when you had patted it down, you found that it was fully poseable. There were no concealed weapons, which was kind of disappointing, but also made sense, because plush toys were made for cuddling and that could have ended badly.

"Do you want to play go?" Ziv stared at the stone-covered go board beside your miraculously still-living plants. Bayan had been watering them, talking to them, and possibly working black magic to keep them going. You weren't complaining.

"Nah. I've got a game going with Genji. Pretty sure Jesse's going to pick it up in a week or so. That, or kick the board over because he's an ass."

"So then, what do you know about Genji's sexy older brother?" Ziv fanned himself dramatically.

"He's bitchy and he likes cake. Strawberry is his favorite flavor."

Ziv cocked his head to the side. "You're not warning me off?"

"I know you're not serious. Not after what he did to Genji." You tried not to glare at Ziv's extra large platter of shahi paneer. The curry smelled delicious, and while you could eat the plain naan that Ziv had "thoughtfully" brought you, it just wasn't the same.

"He talks about you, you know. Tells people "Oh good, you are less irritating than Genji's friend." Which of course leads to my next topic. The rumors about Gérard have died down. You are now sleeping with Genji again."
"Sometimes it's Genji and Hanzo. Damn do you get around." Ziv cackled.

"...You're not by chance the person starting these rumors, are you?" You eyed his curry covetously. Yes, envy had blossomed in your heart. Envy which led to gluttony, or a lack thereof, which in turn caused rage.

"No. Do you want me to start any? I heard Reyes is even moodier than before."

You sighed. "Ziv-

"You got your clearances back. You still haven't made up with him? Not that I blame you. He made a series of dick moves, each wankier than the last. You should make him grovel." Ziv didn't sound worried, he just ate his curry in front of you, and you tried not to salivate.

"...I asked for some space because I have to sort out how I'm dealing with my overprotective boyfriends. Also, because yeah, I am still pissed. Working on it. Plus, I need to come to terms with the fact he might have killed Lao. Keep getting the flashbacks too. Figure they'll die down when I see her in person. The security footage helps, as do the optimistic medical reports. But if she does die, I'll have to sort that out too."

Ziv gave you a measured look, and put the curry aside. "Ben-zona, you're fucked up, Lucky."

"Don't I know it."

Ziv shook his head. "He did have a legitimate-"

"I know, Ziv. I was there. I can't just make feelings go away with logic, damn if I haven't tried that already."

"Well, that explains the irritability. You avoiding Morrison too?"

"...No. Jack thinks he can be supportive of us both, and he's less... You searched for the right word. "He's more laidback than Gabriel about this. I mean, they both can be overbearing, but it's worse if I take damage on their watch, you know? The one who missed it usually does better."

"You do get hurt a lot. Maybe you should just get good," Ziv said, with a dismissive shrug.

You didn't count the number of times you'd stood between him and danger. You just threw your naan at his head.

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You were upright and walking by Day Seven, though your legs were still weak and you were still on bland, mild foods like oatmeal, creamed corn, and Jack's cooking. He brought you homemade mashed potatoes that night, and while they were good, there was no gravy or anything else to go with them. You smiled and ate them anyway, because Jack looked pleased with himself. They were buttery with a hint of garlic, so you weren't complaining.
But it was literally just a large bowl of mashed potatoes. That was your dinner from Chef Morrison.

By Day Eight, you were haranguing Angela to let you go.

On Day Nine, she complied, whether it was because you were actually well, or she couldn't take your whining any more, it was hard to say. But Jesse and Genji were required to help you carry your ill-gotten gains back to your room. To your surprise, Hanzo came with them, dressed in baggy hakama pants tucked into his boots and a haori coat he wore off one shoulder, exposing a large swathe of dragon tattoo.

"It's a kyudo-gi," Jesse informed you before you had a chance to say something snarky. "Not just a badly-cut bathrobe. Part of a very old, very noble tradition. Just stopping you now, before you get the lecture too. You're welcome, sugarpie." He rolled his eyes.

"Huh. I was just thinking, that's where Genji gets it." You waved your hand in front of your left boob. Was it a coincidence that they liked to show off the left nipple? Was there something wrong with the right one?

Genji gave you a hard look and Jesse snickered.

"Thank you for the bonsai," you said to Hanzo, because he was tapping his foot impatiently. "It's very...miniature."

"...You're welcome," he muttered, ungraciously.

"It was really kind of you," you added cheerfully, because you were taking Amélie's lessons to heart. "I wasn't expecting such an elegant gift."

Hanzo squinted at you like you were being sarcastic.

You managed to hold a placid smile, because anything more enthusiastic would look smarmy on you.

Hanzo looked like he'd bit into a lemon, then accidentally swallowed it whole, but managed to give you a curt nod.

You carried the massive teddy bear, because it was awesome, and if you fell, it would cushion you. Jesse pushed the cart of plants, and Genji picked up the rest, the angry reindeer looking oddly at home in his arms. Hanzo "oversaw" the entire process with mild disapproval.

"So me and you, huh?" You nudged Genji with your elbow. "According to the rumor mill."

"I'm sorry," he said. "But you are just too aggravating."

"You old sweet talker, you."

"Lucky, I have told you many times, I do not feel that way about you." Genji's voice was perfectly dry. "Please, show some restraint."

You laughed into your bear.

"Going OK?" You asked, casually looking over your shoulder at Genji's grumpy shadow.

"It's...odd." Genji didn't turn. "We can talk about it later."
You blinked, the offer completely unexpected. "Yeah, sure."

The walk back to your room was quiet after that, though you felt Hanzo's hard stare burrowing into your back.

Your room now looked occupied, but by some kind of green-thumbed child-packrat. The bear took up an entire corner. The plants were on your dresser, and you wondered the best way to get them some sun, considering your room didn't let in a lot light.

There had been a large gift basket on your bed when you got in, and now that you were alone you could break into it. You opened the card first.

*Just some things for you to use now that you're out of the infirmary. -Jack*

*Whiskey is better than flowers. -Gabriel*

Inside were a selection of scented lotions and soaps, a box of chocolate, a bottle of whiskey, a bottle of scotch, and a wrapped box. You studied the alcohol. It wasn't the cheap stuff. It was the first you'd heard from him in five days, and less hostile than you were expecting. He would be manage to be argumentative, but oddly affectionate in one sentence. You opened the box and stared for a moment. Inside was a blue silicone rabbit vibrator. There was another note in Gabriel's handwriting, and you wondered what level of petty to expect.

*Maybe this is more for me than you, but going to think about you sprawled out in bed using it.*

Better than you anticipated, and you wondered what speech Jack had given him. You also knew that wasn't his first draft. He'd probably begun with something snarky and worked his way up. It was presumptuous, though maybe you could award token points for effort. Not that "points" would fix anything right now.

Starting up your tablet, you sent them each a thank you message. In response to Gabriel, you added, "Why can't I have both?" It was a light-hearted communication, and though it didn't quite feel right, you sent it, because it was polite and ultimately meaningless. You found it wisest not to comment on the sex toy. You didn't have anything constructive to add anyway.

"That might work," Lacroix told you, lighting a cigarette. The two of you were locked in his office. "Petras' tastes run fairly vanilla. You aren't his type anyway. He likes them...softer and younger."

"Eww," you said, holding out your hand for a damn cigarette.

Lacroix just gave you a placid smile. "What does he want, Chanceux?"

"The illusion of control. He wants a metaphorical leash on everyone, me included. As long
as I sell him on the idea that he's in charge, I shouldn't have too much trouble. As for the threats, he already knows I "want" the promotion. In the event of escalation, he'll most likely try blackmail. Worst case scenario involves charges of fraternization and threats against whoever I'm rumored to be sleeping with. Most likely scenario is that he "cuts funding" or somehow sabotages a project I'm working on. I'll run a smokescreen project starting today, and have Ziv keep tabs on my amazingly varied sex life."

"Adequate," Lacoix said. "How far are you willing to take the ruse if he decides to push for relations?"

"I'll have no trouble," you said, dryly. You finally retracted your hand, realizing Lacroix wasn't going to give you a cigarette. "I don't even need to take my clothes off to be convincing."

"It is slightly more sophisticated than your "oozing rash" idea. Though that would work in a pinch. I still think you could have practiced your finesse, though I have noticed your handling of the elder Shimada."

"Figured enough people dislike him, I might as well play nice. For Genji's sake." You shrugged.

"Right action, wrong reason," Lacroix clucked his tongue. "We want Shimada's cooperation. Someone has to be the "good cop." And from what I know about Hanzo Shimada, he feels partially responsible for your stabbing."

"What? How?"

"Lao followed him straight to Lucerne. If Hanzo had been more conscientious, he wouldn't have led an assassin to your meeting, or so he believes. We both know we would have had to face her eventually. And I think this worked out in our favor, but no need to let him know that." Lacroix tapped his cigarette on the ashtray. You tried not to look at it too longingly.

"She's alive," you said. "Angela's optimistic about her recovery but-

"But you're having a little trouble getting past the fact Gabriel shot her." Lacroix shrugged.

"Ziv tell you that?" You scowled.

"Non, he would not violate your confidence. But there was no need, Chanceux. I know you well enough. And it's certainly no coincidence that you've volunteered to work more with me."

You sighed. "Yeah, OK." You awaited the snide commentary.

"I will handle the interviews with the elder Shimada, but I would like you to spend some time with him, gauge his thought processes, be... sociable. I think I have a strong grasp of whom he is, but it never hurts to have more information. And it will be a good exercise for you."

"What exactly is his status?"

"No clearances above secret, except for Shimada and On Sing related intelligence. He is here as a "contractor." Agent McCree is keeping an eye on him, discretely. I am rotating other observers out as well. He is a trained ninja, and while Genji has given us a rundown of his abilities, I am not inclined to trust his objectivity."

"Dangerous game to keep him on the base, especially if we can't trust him," you said, not entirely sure that Genji trusted Hanzo.
"That is the game we must play, Chanceux." Lacroix took another cigarette and this time you pretended like you didn't care.

"Would you like a cigarette?"

You narrowed your eyes at him. "No, thank you."

He laughed and lit his. "You need to work on your lying. Also, don't be stubborn for pride's sake. You have often have a limited window of opportunity to seize what you want. Don't hesitate."

You held out your hand.

"Chanceux," he said. "You declined already. The window is closed."

"Lacroix," you said. "I changed my mind. Between you and me, decorum goes out the window, straight through the glass if necessary."

Laughing, Lacroix gave you a cigarette, and lit it for you.

You inhaled, trying to remember the last time you had indulged.

"Hanzo has probably figured out there's something going on between you and Gabriel, given Gabriel's...strong reaction to your injuries."

"None of his business," you muttered.

"I understand he and Genji gave you a lovely bonsai."

"I understand that it's a trap. Can't regift it. Can't let it die. Haven't kept a plant alive since-" You couldn't actually remember keeping a plant alive in your adult life, outside of transporting black-market items short period of time. Orchids were insanely trafficked. "Haven't kept a plant alive."

"You may talk to Ana about that. She gardens some." He slouched in his chair. "Have you thought about what data you will feed Petras?"

"Some things. Thought you were going to mastermind that." You tapped the ash off your cigarette.

"Yes, but you should be paying attention."

"Jack doesn't really know or want to know what Blackwatch does. Gabriel isn't an optimal choice for Blackwatch, because he will cross too many lines to get the job done. Blackwatch needs someone with more finesse. Gabriel needs clearer boundaries. Jack needs to play hero."

"And it's all true," Lacroix smiled. "Some of it is common knowledge, though. He will expect more. You have to give them weaknesses, but weaknesses that our enemies already know about."

"Jack's family," you said, hating yourself for mentioning it.

"Too obvious," Lacroix waved his hand. "Does he have a favorite squad? Maybe a favorite agent? Yourself not included."

"Jack works with Epsilon squad the most under Agent Jemison," you said, because you paid attention.
"Then you point that out. Jemison isn't a bad looking woman. You don't have to say anything, just let them connect the dots."

"I don't want to use them as stalking horses-"

"It is a risk of the job, Chanceux. I will warn Jack, and he will let them know to be extra careful," Lacroix said. "Petras only initially asked for potential problems Gabriel could cause. His leverage is his people, because while Gabriel is unpopular with the brass, he is much loved by his subordinates. Even when he is terrorizing them like a raging bull. That is loyalty, Chanceux."

You rolled your eyes. Lacroix wasn't wrong, but he didn't have to rub it in your face. Yes, you were partially the reason Gabriel was in a bad mood. Maybe entirely.

"That should be all. I know Amélie was looking for you."

You started to rise, then stopped.

"Is there something else, Chanceux?"

"I'm not good at forgiveness," you blurted out.

You expected a smarmy comment, but Lacroix just quirked his lips. "Neither am I."

"How-"

"I would ask Ana," he said after a moment. "Because that is not my strong point."

"All right," you said, wishing you hadn't brought it up.

"Chanceux," he said, pulling out yet another cigarette and offering you one. "I know it is like grieving: a process. In some cases, small cases, you can choose to overlook a peccadillo and find yourself untroubled. In others, it takes more than sheer willpower, especially in cases where the one harmed wasn't yourself, but someone you wanted to protect."

"Figures," you said, sinking back into the chair and just savoring the nicotine. Captain Amari would skin you both alive if she saw this.

"I am sure you will be fine with Hanzo. Genji might not have completely forgiven him, but he wants his brother safe and alive, and so the first steps have been taken. That should help you get past some of it."

"I wasn't." You stopped yourself, because obviously Lacroix was giving you a way to save face. How pathetic was that? "Yeah, OK."

Lacroix smiled at you, too much knowledge in those dark eyes.

"Yeah, you're probably right." You finished your cigarette and got up to go.

"Chanceux," Lacroix said as you went to open the door. "Do you still resent me for that first interrogation?" He didn't sound concerned, and you knew he honestly didn't care. He expected you to be professional enough to get past any personal feelings between the two of you.

"No. You were just doing your job and being yourself. And you're an asshole."

Lacroix laughed.
You blinked after a moment. "Lao is different," you said.

"True. But the same principles apply."

You sent off your report to Petras and studied the updated On Sing dossiers. Hanzo had spilled quite a lot of information, and while it filled in some blanks - On Sing had been experimenting with AI, and they'd made something, but no one was sure what - you had misgivings. You didn't particularly care about the Shimada operations, but you glanced through anything cross-referencing Talon.

You hadn't forgotten Nguyen. And forgiveness wasn't a lesson you needed to apply here. After Lao woke up, you'd be one step closer to Hanoi. The climate there was hot. You tapped your fingers. Either Jesse or Lacroix would have to make discrete adjustments for Gabriel.

There was a knock at your bedroom door, and you looked up, working from your bed. "Athena, who's out there?"

"Genji. He is alone."

"Let him in," you said, still sifting through the wealth of analyst reports that Hanzo's arrival had triggered.

The door opened and you put your tablet down.

Genji entered, gave your chair a singularly distrustful look, but sat down anyway, kicking the door shut behind him.

"I can offer you whiskey and chocolate," you said.

"I would be grateful."

And you raised a brow, because Genji rarely accepted your hospitality. But you got up and broke out the whiskey pouring yourself a tiny bit, because you deserved it too. You opened the chocolates and set them on the bed between you.

Genji removed his faceplate, downed the whiskey in one swig, and then chased it with a piece chocolate. You no longer stared at his scars, accustomed to the damage, even if Genji rarely showed his full face in public.

"He is driving me insane," Genji said after a long moment of staring at your giant teddy bear.

"You can hug the bear. I find it to be therapeutic," you said.

Genji gave you a sharp look and you poured yourself some more whiskey because why not? They'd gotten you the good stuff and hell, you were going to enjoy it.

"Do you want the reindeer instead? I haven't named them. Apparently, I'm shit at naming. You've met Emmy." You gestured to the emitter glowing in its stand, now wearing googly eyes, because you had the time to do that kind of shit now.
Genji just held his cup out for a refill.

You poured. "I'm going to assume you mean your brother. You have to admit, there are a lot of candidates out there." He and Jesse had some slightly unhealthy fre-nemy rivalry. And Gabriel wasn't being particularly pleasant, or so you kept hearing. "Do you need help disposing of the body? Because nobody here is going to blame you."

Genji snorted. "Not yet."

"So what's he doing?" You asked, even though you had an inkling.

"All he does is criticize. It's like we're children again. " Genji, this is unprofessional. Genji, your friend is aggravating. Genji, you shouldn't drink cold water, it will give you a stomachache." His voice grew louder with each iteration of his name.

You looked at Genji's armored torso, unsure if anything less than battery acid could give him a stomachache. "That sounds annoying."

"But he refuses to talk about what happened between us. Always changes the subject, tries to say this isn't the time or place." Genji lapsed into a frustrated stream of Japanese, and you waited for him to finish, because while you only understood bits and pieces, it was probably best to just let him get it out.

"He told us he wanted your opinion on whether or not your clan is worth taking back," you said. "Like he wants you two to join up and be Team Shimada again."

"He won't even talk about them with me!" Genji snarled. "He just makes aggravated older brother face and goes back to criticizing me, Blackwatch, and whatever he lays eyes on. Why is he even here?"

"It sounds like he is emotionally repressed," Athena chimed in, and you realized you'd forgotten to turn on privacy mode. You glanced at Genji, wondering how he would react.

He sighed. "Yes, Athena. He is."

"So he deflects through obfuscation, insults, and denial," Athena continued. "I have seen this behavior before."

You and Genji stared into your respective cups. You refilled your glass and silently topped off Genji's.

"Good whiskey," Genji said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," you said, taking a piece of chocolate.

"You're not supposed to be drinking yet, are you?"

"Hahahaha. You didn't even mime friendliness. "If you tell Angela, I'll invite Hanzo to poker night."

"You're a fool, Lucky."

"I don't know what you or Athena are talking about," you chirped. You curled up against your pillows and Genji rolled his eyes at you.

"I am not sure of the solution," Athena said, gracefully ignoring your demonstration.
You swirled the whiskey in your glass. "So, Shin and Lao used to commiserate all the time about Asian parents, their crazy-high standards, and the inability to say something nice. In retrospect, maybe that's how Shin handled Captain Patel so gracefully. Like, Shin's mother couldn't come out and say "I love you, be safe," she'd just tell him to wear an extra scarf and remember to eat, usually something warm like nabe. He'd tell her that the stepping stones in the garden were extra slippery and to take care with the kotatsu, because it was old and, really, it was past time for her to get a new one." You smiled wistfully. "With me, it was different. He didn't have any problems showing affection. I was always surprised by how...formal their conversations were."

"That's not abnormal," Genji said after a moment.

"Lao's parents would harangue her nonstop about her poor life choices while sending her all kinds of energy drinks, cutesy knickknacks, and candies. She'd complain that they'd brag about their "daughter in Overwatch" to their friends, then turn around and ask her why she didn't become a doctor or a lawyer." You touched the handle of your tanto. "I'm not sure about relations with parents and older siblings, but I understand being so emotionally-repressed that you do things in a roundabout way that doesn't always translate right."

"You are very good at being aggravating," Genji said with a small smile.

"Yeah, you too."

Genji reached over and took more chocolate. "I forgot that he was like that. I don't know why. I guess it just wasn't something I concentrated on. He was not a bad older brother, just overly responsible and prone to nagging. But if I got in a scrap, he was there, at my side."

"You should probably talk to him over food. Like, get his guard down with something delicious, take a trip down memory lane, then ambush him with an emotional hammer of truth," you said.

Genji cocked his head to the side. "Emotional hammer of truth? I think you've had enough to drink."

"It was supposed to be dramatic!" You reached for another piece of chocolate. "Hit him with something straight-forward and honest, something Reinhardt would say. He's not going to be the first to show vulnerability, because I bet he doesn't know how." You grinned wryly, because you knew exactly what that felt like. "So you go for a low blow. "Brother, did you ever think it would turn out like this? I thought you would always be at my side." You pressed your fist to your chest, speaking in a dramatic stage whisper. "Or "Brother, I missed you, despite what you've done to my social life and my wardrobe." Or "Brother, I trusted you and you hurt me. Was it worth it?" You've got to hit him hard to get through that crusty armor of repression and into the soft squishy underbelly."

"You're very brutal," Genji said thoughtfully.

"Fuck his feelings. He's being a coward and not 'fessing up when he should be begging you for forgiveness. He needs to get his head out of his ass. I don't think he means to be a self-absorbed douchebag, but he is. You need to hit him hard, so he knows he can't weasel his way out of this. Because this isn't something small. This is big. And you've done something just as big by asking us not to skin him for you."

Genji looked away, a flush starting to form on his exposed skin.

"I'm not the only one, you know that. You and Jesse might needle each other to pieces, but
he's got your back. And frankly, Gabriel wanted to rip Hanzo's head off back in Hong Kong. Didn't, but wanted to. I think Ziv was plotting something extra evil, but I'm not going to ask. I'm happier not knowing and you probably are too."

"Vo asked me if he needed those sneaky feet for anything," Genji mumbled. "She even offered to clean up the mess."

"Wow, that's like a declaration of love, right there. Vo never volunteers for more work."

"I would also like to add, that I consider you my friend too, Genji," Athena said.

"Thank you," he said gravely. "You both have been remarkably insightful."

You shrugged. "I'm honestly not as stupid as people think. And all that therapy paid off, you know. If I can't fix my problems, I can at least give other people good advice."

"...It is good advice," Genji agreed.

The two of you sat in companionable silence. You finished your glass of whiskey and refilled it, finding courage in the bottom of your cup.

You took a deep breath. "How did you get to this point where you don't want revenge, where you wanted to try forgiveness?" You would blame the whiskey. Because you normally wouldn't have asked Genji something like that.

Genji looked at you. "I think it is different for you. When I was younger, I only cared about myself; I was callow and short-sighted. You value others over yourself, in a way that is sometimes alarmingly detrimental." He took another chocolate and look half the box was gone. "You have made a cause of it. And now, you don't know how to break away from that path. Perhaps once your friend awakens, everything will be fine between you and the Commander. But I don't think it is the Commander that you need to focus on; I think you need to work on forgiving yourself first. The rest will follow."

You blinked, setting your glass down. "Genji, I don't know what you've been hearing-"

"It has always been glaringly obvious that you carry your dead too close to your heart. That you believe if only you had been better, you could have changed fate. We all have our regrets, but your survivor's guilt is heavier than most."

"I don't-" You began.

"Stop that. We both know better."

You bit your lip, wondering now if the whiskey was such a good idea. Because the things he was saying...

"You knew you'd need our help to get her back; that is what you asked of Jesse, Lacroix, and me. Yet you hold none of us accountable for the damage. You blame yourself. In your mind, it was your operation. Your friend. And you alone were responsible for her. She is one of yours. You think I haven't seen this before? You, the Commander, even Morrison, you're all the same." Genji paused. "I'm not saying you aren't upset with the Commander. I'm sure you are. But you have to sort yourself out first. Once you've untangled that mess, you can work things out with him."

"Fix yourself first," you muttered. A universal principle, especially useful in survival situations. Because you had to take care of yourself before you could help anyone else.
"Lao might be one of your people, yes. And you have done more to save her than anyone else alive. That is something for you to remember. Just like it isn't your fault she ended up like that. Save your recriminations for Talon."

You touched the bandage on your stomach. "When did you get wise, Genji?"

"...I've been talking to a cyborg support group. Got some counseling too." He scratched his chin, his face blooming red from the whiskey. "Been studying some of the Shambali doctrines. I don't now how I feel about them. But...Athena's helped. She is...a good friend."

"Thank you, Genji," Athena said.

"Yeah, Athena's great," you agreed.

"It's like you said, it's easier to give other people good advice. Harder to see your own problems objectively."

"Oh no, Jack's finally gotten to us with his teamwork spiel," you moaned.

"I don't think this is what he meant," Genji laughed, and gave a little hiccup.

You eyed your empty bottle of whiskey. "Good to see that it can effect you."

"I don't actually drink the cheap stuff you and Jesse buy," Genji said. "It's really awful."

"Oh," you said. "Wow. You are such a snob. Guess it runs in the family."

Genji sputtered. "Take that back!"

"No." You wrapped a blanket around your shoulders and grinned. "A few more years and you'll be strutting around in a kyudo-gi, disapproving of everyone."

Genji scowled at you. "Still better than drinking that paint thinner you and Jesse try to pass off as whiskey."

"You can buy the drinks this weekend then," you told him.

Genji rolled his eyes, but he didn't argue.

Chapter End Notes

A kinder, gentler chapter for everyone who's been crying. I'm sorry guys. The healing process is going to take some time. And some figuring out just how to forgive people for things they are not necessarily sorry about doing.

I did not catch my cousin's stomach flu, so hooray! Slowly applying for jobs. I have one, and I really do love most of my coworkers. But it's a dying industry and I have dogs to feed. (Which are still cheaper than children and there's no way I could afford children on my paycheck. Not that we are in danger of that any time soon. And I'm good with that. I have a nephew. I see him like once a month. That's good enough.)

Thank you for cake! You know who you are. I got madeleines today and dipped them
in a lime, vanilla, and, coconut-infused green tea. It was almost like reading Proust, but required less thinking and shorter sentences. :D
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Problems keep cropping up on top of your personal ones: funerals, politics, and Hanzo Shimada. Someone has to deal with it.

Chapter Notes

Anonymous Fanart!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You woke up to Genji sneaking out. He'd washed the glasses and stacked them on your desk. The considerate act surprised you. Genji tended to be a little shit.

"Lucky, Hanzo was waiting for Genji outside your room," Athena announced. "I warned him, but-"

You reached for your tanto. "Med-leave or not, I will gut him myself-"

"They are not engaging in physical violence. Hanzo is just expressing displeasure that Genji is exiting your room so early in the morning..."

"He thinks-" You began to laugh, and tucked your tanto into your belt. "Yeah, OK, I'll get out there and clarify things." You climbed to your feet, head a little swimmy from the combination of alcohol and your meds.

You came out of your room to find Hanzo and Genji engaged in a sharp, fast, whispered argument in their high-class dialect. You caught the "Reyes" name several times.

"We were just talking and drinking, Hanzo. I'm still too banged-up for sex, if that's what you were thinking."

Hanzo's eyes widened and he looked between you and Genji.

"It is...improper," Hanzo said after a moment. "Your man would not approve."

"Pfft." You snickered. "Genji and I were talking through some of our problems. That's our business and no one else's."

"There are rumors," Hanzo said. "And Reyes seems extremely displeased."

"There are rumors, because someone won't stop mentioning Genji's aggravating "friend," giving everyone else the wrong impression. Gabriel's wrath has to do with something completely unrelated. And we'd appreciate it if you kept that observation quiet, Hanzo. It isn't common knowledge."
Hanzo scowled at you. "Blackwatch," he said, shaking his head.

"Go get some sleep, Genji," you said, and he took your out, walking straight to his room and shutting the door firmly behind him. You gazed at Hanzo expectantly. "If you would like a drink and conversation, give me a moment to refresh myself."

"...No need. I will retire for the evening."

"...Of course," you said, because you were still playing Lacroix's game. "Perhaps later then," you said, confident that he would avoid you for awhile.

Hanzo turned on his heel and marched off.

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Galanos' funeral is today at 1300. It's the last of them, but there won't be many people here for his. Gabriel will be there, and some other SEP folks. It'd mean a lot to me if you could come, but I understand if you can't. No pressure, honest.

Thanks,

Jack

The message had popped up on your tablet early this morning and you were still weighing the pros and cons. There were a lot of cons. There wasn't time for you to get Overwatch dress blues, but you had a black suit. You'd worn it to a few Overwatch funerals. But for those, you'd always accompanied Gabriel in an official Blackwatch capacity.

You did not sleep well after Genji left and you'd chased Hanzo off. But you didn't remember your dreams. Probably the default nightmare. You sighed, rubbing your neck. You were too drained to want to be around people. Especially upset people and Gabriel, not that those were mutually exclusive groups of people.

You did not like funerals. Nobody liked funerals, but you were still resentful that your people hadn't even gotten proper ones. Their families had received whatever bits could be recovered and identified, which wasn't much, and in most cases, all they got back were dogtag replicas and a letter of condolences. While the individual funeral services had been paid for by Blackwatch, there had been no official ceremony. Not with Shit Spiders active.

And of course, you did not want to see Gabriel yet. The thought of making a scene at a stranger's funeral was utterly appalling. Did Jack know what he was doing? Or was he so stressed that he failed at common sense again?

But Jack had wanted you to come, even though he explicitly stated Gabriel would be there. He knew what he was asking, even if he misjudged the consequences. You blew out a frustrated breath.

Jack needed your support at a goddamn funeral. He'd already been through a chain of
them, and he'd only requested that you attend this one. That wasn't too much to ask of you.

    The notes in the gift basket had not been aggressive, even if they had not been conciliatory either. Gabriel wasn't hunting you down and yelling at you. Gabriel wasn't trying to pick a fight. You just hoped your actual presence wouldn't change that.

    The cons outnumbered the single pro. But Jack had asked you to come, like a kid who knew his performance was going to suck, but still invited you because he needed someone to be in his corner.

    You opened your closet and got out your suit. The cons might have outnumbered the single pro, but Jack asking for support outweighed all your reservations.

    Early spring in Zurich was cold and rainy. It was to be a short, miserable, graveside service, with no body. There was a token casket, draped in an Overwatch flag. There were two flower arrangements and a portrait of a swarthy bearded man scowling in uniform. You wondered briefly what picture they would have used for you and then slammed the doors on those thoughts, because you didn't want to go that route today.

    There were a little more than two dozen people and that was pretty sparse for a captain. But then, Jack had called Galanos an asshole. You looked for Chang, since she was SEP, but didn't see her. You didn't expect to; she didn't seem the type to take off work for a funeral.

    You spotted a familiar cowboy hat as you approached the gathering. Jesse was on Gabriel's left side in his usual apparel. Gabriel was dressed up in his formal blue uniform, white collared shirt, dark blue jacket, sharp pleated pants. The outfit normally looked great on him, but neither man had brought an umbrella, and both of them were drenched.

    Pettiness told you to go sit on other side of the gathering. Fuck'em. They knew how to swim.

    Something else, you weren't exactly sure what, reminded you that this was a funeral, one of Jack's people was dead, and maybe you shouldn't be an asshole like Galanos, rest his soul.

    You sidled up beside Gabriel, extending your umbrella over him and partially Jesse, and sat down. Keeping your gaze straight ahead, you watched Jack walking up at the front. He was also in dress blues, holding an umbrella over a crying woman. Tan and slender, she too wore the uniform.

    "Galanos' lover," Gabriel said, his voice calm and measured. It had been over a week since you'd heard it. You'd almost forgotten how deep it was, how it burrowed under your skin and wound around your nerves. "She was stationed on the Baltic Sea."

    "Ah." You didn't look away from Jack, too afraid of what you'd see on Gabriel's face.

    "...I thought you needed space." He kept his tone even. You glanced out of the corner of your eye and found him also staring straight ahead.

    "I do. So if it makes things easier, me and my umbrella can go across the aisle." Your
words came out more clipped than you intended but it was too late to take them back. You watched Jack pat the bereaved woman's shoulder, then lean over to say whatever comforting words were expected.

"...That's not necessary."

"All right." You continued looking ahead, feigning attention as Jack began speaking. It started as a somewhat heartfelt speech about sacrifice, duty, and honor, then continued on to briefly address the trials and triumphs of SEP. It didn't even touch on Galanos' personality, which was probably for the best. Jack's gaze stopped on you and Gabriel and he paused mid-sentence, for a second too long, before he resumed talking.

"I can that hold that for you. Jesse's still getting wet."

You didn't think he would hold your umbrella hostage, but you could always replace it. And worst case scenario, you wouldn't melt in the rain. Wordlessly, you passed it over, still able to feel the heat of Gabriel's fingers through your gloves.

No water fell on you, and you focused on Jack, your hands in your lap.

"Thank you, Agent Dogan. De oppresso liber," he said, saluting.

"Peace at home," the brunette woman said, voice thick with emotion and returned the salute. "Peace in the world."

Jack shot you and Gabriel a concerned look before sitting down. He probably expected to see the two of you screaming and pulling hair. That was rude; you could both wait till after the service.

You could feel Gabriel turning to look at you, willing you to acknowledge him. There were little motions in your periphery, twitches designed to catch your attention and trick you into looking at him. You kept your eyes on the crying woman, unwilling to pay him any attention.

He blew out a frustrated breath.

He was going to escalate into making noises? Really? This was a funeral, and you weren't going to talk to him about things because it was a goddamn funeral, not mention you weren't fucking ready, thank you very much. You straightened up, jaw clamped shut, and refused to let your words spill out.

You couldn't focus on Agent Dogan's speech, between her fits of sobbing and the growing tension of having Gabriel right next to you. So you just stared ahead, trying to keep your face blank. It was the statue game: you would hold your pose and acknowledge nothing outside your narrow range of vision.

By the time it was over, your shoulders were sore from just how rigid you'd been holding yourself. Jack walked toward you, having grabbed another well-built man in uniform and hastily introduced him to Dogan. From the musculature of his frame, you guessed him to be SEP as well.

Jack shook hands, made solemn nods, and worked his way down the aisle to where you and the Blackwatch contingent sat.

"Hey," he said, voice a little raspy. "Thanks for coming. I appreciate the support."

"You asked me to," was all you could think of.
"I know." He smiled down wistfully at you and Gabriel. "It's...weird. I called Chang to let her know. And you know what she told me?" Jack took a minute, rubbing his forehead, a small smile playing on his lips. "She said, "good, he was a prick, and I hope you don't expect me to come to the funeral." She flat out said that before I could even give her any details."

You covered your mouth, because you weren't supposed to laugh out loud at a funeral. Why was Jack even surprised? That was quintessential Chang.

Gabriel chuckled beside you. "Sounds about right."

"I didn't think she'd come but, I guess I wasn't expecting that response." Jack shook his head. "I...I can tell you about it later. Chang wasn't wrong."

You had noticed Dogan was the only person who seemed really broken up about it. Which was a sad testament now. You wondered what exactly Galanos had done to earn so much contempt.

"I don't think Rodriguez is going to be able to console Dogan much longer," Gabriel said after a moment.

Jack exhaled, running his palms up and down his face. "I uh...better go then."

"I'll be there in a moment to say "hi" to Rodriguez," Gabriel said.

Jack looked between the two of you and nodded. "Thanks for coming. Sorry it's-"

"It's a funeral, Jack. I didn't think it was going to be fun." You tried to make a convincing reassuring smile, but it was cold, wet, and Gabriel was right beside you.

Jack rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, yeah I know. But thanks for just showing up anyway. I mean it."

He straightened up, banishing all signs of discomfort. His worry lines smoothed, the warmth in his eyes diminished, and he squared his shoulders. Aloof and untouchable, the Strike Commander gave you both a curt nod. Satisfied his poise was unshaken, he turned back around and went back up front to relieve Rodriguez.

It was a strange thing to watch, even if you were used to it by now. Well, that was your cue to leave. You stood and faced Gabriel for the first time since the fight in the infirmary. He looked up at you, eyes intent, expression guarded.

"I should go," you said.

"All right." He nodded and took a deep breath. "I know there are things we need to talk about."

He was going to do this now? At a goddamn funeral? Your face must have betrayed you because Gabriel just shook his head.

"When you're ready. You asked for time, and you're entitled to it."

"I know," you said, because you didn't need him to grant you that permission.

Gabriel scowled, like he was going to say something sharp, but he bit his lower lip and shook his head. "I'm just saying it so you know I understand."
"OK." There was nothing appropriate you could add to that.

You looked at your umbrella for a moment, before Gabriel handed it back. You took it and walked away, noting that despite Gabriel being the middle, holding the umbrella over the three of you, Jesse had still been getting wet.

Lao just laid there and you felt like a creepy stalker watching her sleep. She wasn't brain-dead, and Angela was talking about bringing her out of the induced-coma, but no one was sure how she was going to react. You asked Athena for a science-fiction recommendation, since Lao had liked that genre. Athena had come back with the *Conservation of Shadows*, by Yoon Ha Lee. You weren't sure who had suggested it, because it was dark, poetic, and so far over your head it wasn't funny. But your eyes fell on the short story titled "The Battle of Candle Arc" and you read that one first. It was part of a longer series and it was one of those high-concept severely-altered reality stories that Athena had to explain for you. You read it out loud for Lao, because it did seem like something she would have liked. And then you read it again, silently and carefully, for yourself. Because it gave you some insight into Lacroix's twisty-turny mind, and you weren't sure you liked what you saw.

The protagonist was a brilliant military general, who had started his career as an assassin and spy. His government kept throwing him into hopeless battles, and he kept winning, because he was clever, ruthless, and charming. He sympathized more with his enemies than his superiors. He used civilians as a diversion to wreck the opposing army, but managed to avoid sacrificing them. At personal cost, he gave the enemy general a chance to commit suicide over the traditional death by torture. He did all this injured, drugged, and concussed. And even though you'd only read the short story, you knew he was destined for something terrible.

You read them all, *because* they were dark, poetic, and so far over your head that you periodically needed to ask Athena what the hell was going on. You knew there were audio recordings available or that Athena could designate a process or three to read to Lao. But it was important that you took the time to do it.

Something occurred to you, after reading those stories. You wondered if Lacroix had suggested the book or if Athena was subtler than you gave her credit for. And then you considered the conundrum of Lao. Because no one was quite sure how deep her programming ran and what exactly all those implants did. You looked down at your fingers and knew you had an answer. You just weren't sure it was a good one.

Your anger at Gabriel had diminished, though the pain remained. Time was an excellent healer. But you still had the dreams. Sometimes you missed him, his touch, his smell, the sound of his voice. That ridiculously content face he'd make after a good meal, all relaxed brows and sleepy smiles. That chain of expressions he got when you caught him off-guard with something funny while he was in a bad mood. It was a quick series of shifts: anger morphed into outrage at being interrupted, but ended up as poorly-concealed amusement that eventually gave way to real laughter.

He could be extremely difficult, but you still liked being around him. There was a security in his presence, and when you'd been at his side, you'd felt like the two of you could handle
anything. Over a year of being his base-side shadow and now you were on your own. It was less lonely and more alone than you expected. You knew his habits, his routes and routines. You knew how to avoid "accidentally" running into him, because Gabriel did not play fair. So you stuck to skulking around, not quite sure what your reaction would be if you encountered him right now. But that also meant avoiding some of your well-meaning Blackwatch comrades. You did not want to hear about how the Commander needed you, any more than you wanted to explain what was going on.

Working solo was nothing new. It was an old habit, and it still fit.

Lacroix was right, not that you ever had to tell him that. Forgiveness felt a lot like grieving, the anger and acceptance being key factors. And it was no longer about what he did, but how you handled it.

Which brought you back to Lao. And the realization that maybe you were doing everything wrong. Because what you felt for Gabriel was independent of what you felt for Lao. And while currently, those threads were tangled, you understood that Gabriel, had not wronged Lao. That was on Talon. And even if Gabriel didn't care if she lived or died, he was not the cause of her problems. If Jesse or Genji had pulled the trigger, you would be angry at them- but you suspected it wouldn't have affected you like this. You felt too strongly about both Lao and Gabriel. They were inextricably intertwined in the conflict, and having them so close together amplified your feelings to an almost unbearable volume. The sheer force of it drowned out the finer points of logic with a big "fuck all."

Sometimes you just had to shut it down and walk away for a moment. But ignoring it would not fix the problem, and things would bleed over. You had to take it in pieces, and only enough so you wouldn't choke. Everything moved at a gradual pace and you hated just how long this took. Why you couldn't you just power through it? Weren't you strong enough? Weren't you smart enough? Those were the wrong questions to ask.

Because it didn't work that way. Heavy things left a deep footprint. If you wanted to do this right, you had to take it slow. You had to patch things up correctly or everything would fall apart. You'd learned that much from grief.

You were not wrong to feel this way. You just had to work though it. Knowing this didn't fix everything, but it was progress.

You sat in a booth diagonal from Lacroix, pretending to be engrossed in your tablet. You sipped coffee and tried not to look smug. Lacroix checked his watch a few times. After ten minutes, you ordered a gyro and smothered a laugh when Lacroix finally gave up and moved to the seat across from you.

"He should have been able to track you," Lacroix scowled.

"He will. But he'll have to cheat." You unfastened the top button of your coat. You'd left your scarf in Gabriel's office, and while you wanted it, you hadn't quite worked up the nerve to go back there.
Your gyro platter with fries and a salad had just arrived when Ziv barged through the door, windblown and fuming. His long striped scarf got caught in the door and he swore as he had to turn around to free himself. "That was a bitch move," he snarled at you, tossing a wet sealed plastic baggy onto the table. You scooted your plate over and continued eating, trying not to smirk.

Lacroix sighed. "You're supposed to be able to follow her, Ziv. I realize you're very capable of hacking the security cameras, but this was an exercise in tailing maneuvers and spotting dead drops."

"She was up a fire escape and across the rooftops the moment I turned my head! Then she hid the package in a goddamn storm drain!"

Lacroix rolled his eyes. "Sit down."

Ziv plunked down next you gracelessly.

"Chanceux is a shifty creature, but you know this and should have been prepared. If I tasked you to tail a Shimada, you would be in for an even greater challenge."

"Get good," you mouthed and Ziv glowered at you.

"Chanceux, don't taunt him," Lacroix said, not even looking at you. "If you had half his talent at hacking, I wouldn't need to put him in the field."

Ziv stuck his tongue out at you, and you smiled blithely, eating your food. You had access to hacking tools, and now that you the option of bringing Athena's drone along on missions, you were at peace with the fact you would never have Ziv's skills.

The gyro was wonderfully seasoned and covered in feta cheese. You ate it happily, not even caring that Ziv had started to steal your fries.

"Now, I wanted to talk to you two away from the office." Lacroix sighed as you stuffed your face, not even looking up from your plate. "Really Chanceux?"

"I'm listening," you said with your mouth full, because you knew it would annoy him.

Lacroix just shrugged and also started taking fries off your plate. You gave him a hard look, but he just smiled at you and clicked his teeth. He gestured at Ziv, who set up a small signal jammer at the booth. You raised a brow.

"As I was saying, I wanted to talk to you away from the base. Shit Spiders is progressing nicely. But I am going to need some help with one of our UN members."

You sat back, wiping your mouth.

"Is this a favor?" You asked.

"Not for them," Lacroix said, smiling thinly. He opened up his briefcase and slid a folder across the table. The notes were handwritten, a portrait paperclipped inside.

Régine Hoffman, age 64, looked 25 years younger. She was brunette with that rail thinness that only the very wealthy or the near dead could achieve. The representative from Luxembourg, she sat on the First Committee, also known as the Disarmament and International Security
Committee (DISEC). The Blackwatch oversight motion and the age-related active duty restriction on Reinhardt had stemmed directly from her. Interestingly enough, she and Nguyen did not get along, Nguyen being a vocal member of the Fourth Committee, the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (SPECPOL).

Hoffman was an unapologetic Europe First politician, and you wrinkled your nose, reading her dossier. Her philosophy was "rebuild Europe first, and regenerate its economy, then try to help everyone else." Which sounded innocuous at first, except she wanted to use Overwatch to do it, ignoring the fact that Overwatch agents came from across the globe and this was the United Nations, not the European Union. There were a lot of arguments you could make, but at this point, you didn't care. She'd gone after Reinhardt and Blackwatch. That was enough for you.

Ziv's scowl deepened as he continued reading.

"What do you need?" You asked.

"Termination," Lacroix said. "She's the biggest threat, and I've played out the various scenarios. She's smart, nothing worth blackmailing her about, and she's been very good at smoothing over scandals. She's the one spearheading a lot of the policies to reshape Overwatch. She's not Talon, but she's in deep with Petras."

You nodded. "Accident?"

"Would be best, if that's not possible, make it a very convincing false flag."

"What's the catch?"

"She's rich, powerful, and expecting several groups to move against her. I want you and Ziv to come up with a plan. Consider it a training exercise."

"What have I told you about training exercises that involve live fire?" You said, finishing up your gyro.

"You have plenty of experience planning ops. She relies on a lot of Volskaya, Vishkar, and Hyde tech. Her people have access to a lot cutting edge weapon's firms for security. That's how her family made its money: arms dealing."

Ziv dipped a fry in your Tsatziki sauce. "How innocent are the people around her?"

"I'd prefer not to involve civilians. But her admins, her bodyguards, they're all part of the machine. She does have a few grandchildren. I assume Chanceux has qualms about that kind of collateral damage."

You frowned. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"Wimp," Ziv muttered.

"Big talk from someone who rides a desk most of the time," you reminded him.

"If even Chanceux won't do it, "it" is probably "a bad thing," Ziv. Just to calibrate your moral compass," Lacroix said leaning back in his seat.

You blinked. When had you become the moral one? Well, that just showed how fucked up this crowd was.
"If she's as bad as she sounds, it's worth it," Ziv said sharply.

"Maybe. But we are professionals. Accidentally killing extra targets is sloppy work. It draws attention. It brings repercussions. We are not sloppy, Agent Mihret."

Ziv squirmed at the reprimand. "I understand."

"Right, well, I think I'll do some research, and Ziv, you do a workup on her security, the systems, and what to expect. We can compare notes next week." You filtered through your active operations: the rest of Candle Arc hinged on Lao waking up; Hanzo was avoiding you; Fong Chun was still intact; Petras was currently satisfied with your reports; and Hanoi was still on hold.

"How'd the On Sing phone call go?"

"They want to meet in person," Lacroix said. He checked his watch. "I have to sit down with Jack, Ana, Gabriel, and now Reinhardt," he smiled at you, because of course he knew you'd talked Reinhardt into accepting the upper management position. "And we'll decide who goes from there. Did you want your name in the hat?"

"I've been tracking them since they hit our radar and I've had a lot of interaction with them. So yeah, I do."

"Even if Gabriel is chosen to go?"

You narrowed your eyes at him. "Gabriel is not an ideal negotiator in this situation. Trying to intimidate them immediately is the wrong approach. We need to be smart and diplomatic."

"Ouch!" Lacroix laughed. "What are you saying?"

"Gabriel is smart and capable of being diplomatic, but that's not how On Sing will view him. You said it yourself, they're big on hierarchy. Jack, for sure if we're actually looking at a formal ceasefire. You need to go along, and if not Jack, at least Ana would be ideal. Reserve Gabriel for if you have to twist arms."

"I would offer you a cigarette, but we are not allowed to smoke in the restaurant," Lacroix said, looking pleased. And then it hit you, that Lacroix had been doling them out as training treats, every time you did something clever. You sighed, because what could you even say to that? And you still wanted a cigarette.

"So who's in on this op?" Ziv asked.

"Just you, Chanceux, and me," Lacroix said. "Operation Spinshot is now active."

Assassinating a UN General Assembly member was pretty high up there on the list of things you were "not supposed to do." So you figured you'd do your research independently, just in case Lacroix wasn't telling you everything. You even cross-referenced interactions with Amélie's family and found only one connection: Hoffman had visited Château Guillard years ago. Interestingly, Lacroix's life, before DGSE, was...untraceable. You contemplated that for a
moment. Whatever, whoever Lacroix had been, either had not existed before his DGSE career, or had been wiped. That worried you.

As for Hoffman, what mattered was that yes, she had been trying to redirect Overwatch focus by rewriting policy. Lacroix was good at finding linchpins and bottlenecks. You studied Hoffman's dossier, matching it to her public persona, her voting record, and the variety of not-so-public files Ziv had acquired for you.

Reinhardt had not wanted you to kill the person attempting to sabotage him. But you weighed the value of the removal against Reinhardt's disapproval, and found it to be an acceptable trade. Not that Reinhardt was going to find out about this. This was one of those off the books missions. Your current smokescreen was Operation Willow, an investigation into Talon offshore bank accounts. Ziv had already unearthed the information, but you plodded along, making regular "reports."

Working from your room was a little strange. But the plants were soothing, and you really liked your giant teddy bear and grumpy reindeer. You put the fox out too.

"Lucky, you have been in your quarters all day. Have you eaten or are you pulling a Winston?" Athena chimed in.

You snorted. "I have snacks in here, you know."

"The cafeteria is still open. You should have a balanced meal. It would do you good to get out."

"You've got the motherly delivery down," you said. "Been practicing on Winston?"

"More often than is healthy," she said, sounding a tad frustrated. "Ziv is helpful about getting him out of the lab."

"Glad he's good for something," you muttered, mostly out of habit.

"Why do you do that?" Athena asked.

"Do what?"

"Why do you and Ziv constantly put each other down? I know you don't mean what you say, but I have seen other agents goaded to violence from similar comments."

You sighed. "Really Athena? I think you already know."

"You and Ziv are extremely vicious. But yes, I have heard similar behavior as a contextual symptom of camaraderie."

Lying to the baby AI seemed like some kind of sin. Which was ridiculous, because you weren't a saint and usually had no problem prevaricating. "I knew Ziv's grandmother."

"I have witnessed the last footage of Rivka Cohn."

"...Yeah." You took a deep breath. "She was like that every day. It could be boring. It could be snowing. It could be moments before death. She was always calm, acerbic, and took no shit." You rubbed your forehead. "This stays between us, Athena. OK?"

"Of course, Lucky."
"You already know I recruited Ziv, because I needed a hacker badly. I knew he would want to avenge her if he knew the truth, and I knew I could trust him because of it." You tapped your fingers on the wall. "I know he wants revenge, as much as I do. So part of it is yeah, his grandmother was a big influence on us both." You sat there a moment. "The other part? Well, I brought him into the world of black ops. I manipulated him. I showed him that his grandmother hadn't died peacefully. I know he had a fight with his mother because he joined up. I know he isn't talking to half of his family now. I know that's partially my fault, for recruiting him. And I know that on some level, he resents me for it, because family is kind of a big deal." You tried to keep the bitterness out of your voice.

"Lucky-"

"I might have messed up his life," you said. "And he's my responsibility. So while we're friends, while we're tied together by a terrible bond, there's also that tension between us. If he has to vent by being a little shit to me, well so be it. Between us there are no worries about rank and HR. And then we go on. It doesn't hurt that we're both emotionally-repressed and banter is just another way to build camaraderie, as you said."

"He isn't talking to his father because his father disapproves of his sexuality. His siblings are split on the issue. His mother is coming around," Athena informed you.

"Well, that's a relief," you said. "About his mother. I know for a fact Rivka wouldn't have cared. Hard to believe her son is such a dick, but whatever."

"Do you and Ziv ever talk about these things?"

"Nah. We just drink alcohol and swagger a bunch. I just pay attention to the grapevine." You grinned. "I know, I know. It's silly. But don't worry, I don't actually dislike Ziv. He's a pain in the ass, but he's one of us."

"You do know that Ziv Mihret is a grown individual capable of making his own choices and does not require your guardianship, correct?" Athena asked. "Just like Lao Yue is a grown individual, and while she does require guardianship, nothing I could review about her situation implies that you had any fault in what happened to her."

Genji and Athena had been talking. Or Athena had just extrapolated upon what Genji was saying that night with the whiskey. You slid down on your bed, putting your tablet aside.

"I know that's true. But I also know that they're my people. And I have to take care of them. That's my measure of success, Athena. Can I keep my people alive? Can I avenge my dead? You have similar directives."

"Yes, but Winston and Ziv made it clear that while I could help, but I could not fix people. They did not give me impossible parameters. I know I cannot protect everyone. I know I cannot stop people from making unwise decisions or save them from circumstances outside my control. I know that some of my agents will not come home. But I will do the best I can. And I will remember them all."

You stared at the ceiling. Nwazue. Valdez. Simon. Rivka. Patel. Shin. You hadn't forgotten either. There were more, and you remembered them too, but those were the names closest to your heart.

"You have set your parameters too wide. You cannot protect Ziv from every danger. You could not have anticipated that Talon would do the things they did to your friend, whom everyone
assumed was dead. You had no way of knowing. So to take on that burden is arrogance. To believe that you are the sole authority is a fallacy. You are smart, but you are not omniscient. Your standards are unreasonable, making your goal impossible to accomplish."

"I've given this talk before," you said after a moment. "So this is kind of ironic."

"I know. I heard it in the Strike Commander's quarters when you gave it to Commander Reyes."

"They are always forgetting privacy mode," you sighed.

"I...stop listening when physical intimacy is beginning, the exception being if someone is calling for aid. And Ziv made a point to explain roleplay and BDSM culture to me."

You put a hand over your face. "Godfuckingdamnit."

"But I don't know if I truly agree with Genji that your issues with Commander Reyes will be entirely sorted out once you come to terms with your own limitations. You do not have a reputation for giving quarter. In fact, you are known for being extremely vindictive. Forgiveness is not one of your strong traits. However, your...good relationship with Commander Reyes has been observed by numerous people. Mostly Blackwatch agents who would like you to return soon, because you are an excellent intermediary."

"...Where are you hearing all this?" You didn't move your hand off your face. Forget Ziv, in the future, you would tap Athena as the expert on the rumor mill.

"The cafeteria. I don't listen in on most conversations in private areas. I am too tempted to comment."

You sighed. "It's going to be a problem when they finally announce that you are independently intelligent, you do realize that, right?"

"The cafeteria is closing soon. You should get some food."

"I'm sure Captain Amari and Lacroix can think up a way to smooth the transition," you said, because apparently Athena was developing some avoidant behaviors of her own.

"You should go eat, Lucky. You get cranky when you're hungry."

"...Thanks, Athena. Please don't model yourself after me and Ziv. We're terrible."

"Is Genji a good role model?"

And that's when you knew the baby AI was trolling you. You mentally upgraded her to "preschooler."

You lay face up on the mat, trying to summon the air back into your lungs. It wasn't coming back. Why wasn't it coming back?

"You need to work on dodging," Genji said, bending over and offering you his hand. "You don't have the physique to just absorb and shake off the damage."
You coughed, glaring at him. The air slowly filled your chest and you wheezed, taking his hand and wobbling to your feet. "Behind you."

Genji rolled his eyes and drew in a deep breath. "I am aware."

Hanzo stood by the gym door, arms crossed, judging everyone, but especially you.

"Progress?" You bent over, hands on your knees, and focused on bringing oxygen back into your body.

"I'm rehearsing it," Genji said. "Strategizing and anticipating his actions. When we talk, I will be prepared." He crossed his arms. "Angela says I should just ignore him till I'm ready. She says there's no hurry for me to be ready."

"She's right," you said.

"It would unwise for him to get injured any time soon. She is...not impressed."

You grinned, because a year ago he never would have admitted half these things. "I bet." And you were glad he acknowledged that he had other friends looking out for him.

"Here he comes," you said and straightened up, your side hurting.

"Genji, you have to be careful with injured people," Hanzo said, and you saw Genji's eyes roll so hard, you worried they'd get stuck.

"Genji always has to take it easy on me," you said. You rifled through your bag and pulled out your tablet.

"Not true," he said politely. "I just choose to because you are fragile and delicate, like toilet paper."

"Thanks man, right in the heart." You glanced at Hanzo, dressed down in Blackwatch sweats. "How would you handle it, Hanzo?" You pretended to check your tablet. "Hey, Genji. Don't you have that appointment in ten minutes?"

Genji's expression did not change. "Yes. Thank you for the reminder."

"Genji, you have to have her remind you of your obligations?" Hanzo sounded vaguely horrified.

"Off you go," you told him. "I got this."

Genji coolly went off to his make-believe appointment and you stood beside Hanzo, watching him go.

"I am sorry that my younger brother is such a nuisance," Hanzo said stiffly. "I am grateful that you have looked after him."

You regarded the man in front of you. Hanzo Shimada was built and strikingly handsome. You wondered how Genji would have looked if... No, best not to go in the direction of "what if."

"It is no trouble. Genji is a good friend." You crossed your arms. "How would you handle sparring with an injured person?"

"I would not risk it," Hanzo said, giving you a hard look. "Especially with your near-fatal
wounds.” You remembered what Lacroix said about Hanzo feeling "responsible." It didn't matter if he liked you or not, he was a duty-first kind of guy, as evidenced by some of his poor life choices.

"Barely even scarred," you said, lifting your shirt. "Angela does good work."

Hanzo studied the fading red line across your stomach, it was about four inches. The blade hadn't been that big, but Angela had literally had her hands inside you, patching you up.

"...I don't know if what she did for my brother was the right thing." The words dropped from Hanzo's mouth and he stared at you in shock for a moment, like he couldn't believe he'd said that. He hung his head, waiting for you to retaliate with something cutting. You were tempted.

Examining your gloves, you reflected on your ship of Theseus conundrum. "Should she have let him die?" You were careful to keep your voice neutral.

"I-" Hanzo looked you in the eye and for the very first time, you recognized shame on his face. "It might have been kinder."

"Nothing is kind about life," you scowled. "Death is a mercy. But that doesn't mean we should all just roll over and succumb." You watched Hanzo squirm and it was satisfying. "You're still reeling from the shock. You'd mourned your terrible mistake, quit your original life, and carried around the image of your younger brother like your own personal cross to bear."

When you found out Lao was alive, your kneejerk reaction had been self-recrimination, followed by wondering if death would be kinder, partially because you had already accepted her as dead. Reopening that wound had not been pretty. You had closed that door, and to find out that something worse had happened? Wasn't death better than enslavement? It was only after some careful, logical thinking that you realized that that was a false dichotomy. You weren't limited to those two choices, and neither was Lao. So you could relate. The difference, you realized, was that you had not put Lao in that situation. Hanzo had to live with what he had done to Genji.

"Now you've got a second chance, and you're fucking it up, because you can't slip out of the roles of whom you were. Before everything went down, you were Genji's older brother. He owed you a certain level of respect, as befit your position. You were supposed to protect him, because you were the older brother. That dynamic has changed. Whatever you had before led you to that awful fight. If you want a relationship with your brother, you're going to have to change."

"I don't know how to talk to him." Hanzo's voice was reedy and thin. You had to strain to hear him. You felt a momentary flash of pity, if only for Genji who had such an emotionally stunted brother.

"Let's go to the kitchen," you said. You picked up your bag and started walking. "I'll make some cheap tea, and you can politely pour it out when I'm not looking."

Hanzo snorted, but he fell in beside you.

"Captain Amari makes the best tea," you told him, opting for easy small talk while you walked through the halls. "Jesse is pretty good. Genji helped me pick out a Japanese tea set for him for Christmas. He laughed at me, but then he whisked me up a nice cup of green tea, so there's that."

"Agent McCree? The cowboy?" Hanzo could not keep the incredulity out of his voice.

"The one and only." You reached the kitchen, relieved to find it empty. You put the kettle
on and then began mixing up crepe batter. It was supposed to rest, but it still worked when used immediately. Hanzo sat awkwardly at the table.

"You assume you're the one who needs to do the talking," you said after a moment of silence. "I assure you, that other than "I'm very sorry" and "that must have been really hard for you, how can I help?" you don't actually have to say anything. All that Asian parent nagging? You're totally shooting yourself in the foot here, because you don't have that relationship with your brother any more. You broke it."

You coated your cast iron skillet with nonstick spray and dropped some butter in the pan. The first few crepes always turned out weird, but they were a lot easier than people thought. "You can reestablish a relationship with Genji. But don't waltz in and act that everything is going to be like it was. That kind of assumption is just going to piss him off, and rightfully so."

The kettle chirped and you got down two mugs and a tin of bagged jasmine tea. It was Jesse's, but he wouldn't mind you taking two sachets. Not after he ate all your imported Girl Scout cookies.

You poured the hot, but not boiling water over the teabags and set Hanzo's mug in front of him. Then you ladled the batter onto the pan and got out a silicone spatula. Those made prying and flipping much easier. A minute or so on each side and it was done. You started a plate, and then got into the pantry, reaching behind a wall of canned beans to retrieve the Nutella you'd concealed there. Vo would eat it straight out of the jar if she knew you had any.

There were bananas, cream cheese, and strawberry preserves, and you put those out as well. You made two stacks of crepes and set them on the table, before retrieving your tea. You sipped it and began smearing Nutella on a crepe.

"I know it's not cake, but it's what I could do on short notice."

"Thank you." Hanzo served himself.

"You've seen my prosthetic fingers," you said. "Smashed a few of them in Nagano."

Hanzo eyed you warily. "Yes."

"There's this philosophy problem my shrink told me about. Called it the Theseus paradox." You studied your left hand. You were still wearing your gloves, but you knew exactly how those metal fingers looked, every joint, groove, and curve. "The idea is that Theseus went on this long journey. And over time he had to replace the components on his ship, till none of the original parts remained. And the question is, is it still the same ship?"

"Shinto shrines are rebuilt every twenty years from sacred groves."

"Is it the same shrine?"

Hanzo shrugged. "It is considered to be so."

"Fair. I've read the answers, by the way. The philosophical ones are all long-winded and boring. They get pretty legalistic: what is the form? What does "the same" mean? The gestalt exists in the fourth dimension with a specific time-slice and I don't even know what that means," you said, taking a bite of your chocolate and hazelnut crepe.

"Our cells regularly die and are constantly regenerating," Hanzo said after a moment. "We are microcosms of the death and rebirth cycle."
"Yeah," you agreed, even though you weren't entirely sure where he was going with that. "So I don't have the right answer to that question, but I came up with my answer. Are you the same person you were five years ago?"

"No."

"But you're still Hanzo Shimada. DNA matches. You got the tattoos. You have been trained on how to behave in all kinds of social situations, you just don't..."

Hanzo bristled.

"I am not the same person I was a year ago. And neither is your brother. I think that's the wrong way to look at it. We're not "ships." There's a whole, I hesitate to say soul, but something quintessentially ourselves. Memories. Patterns of behavior. Space in existence. I don't know. And all that's going to change as you age, unless you're really pigheaded and immature. The physical? It anchors you, but it doesn't define you." You sighed, wiggling your fingers. "At least, that's what I'm trying to believe. Your brother struggles harder." You finished your crepe. Tea was shockingly helpful when addressing deep subjects.

Hanzo closed his eyes.

You sipped your tea and put jam and cream cheese on your next crepe, before rolling it up, and taking a bite.

"Even if he forgives me, I don't know how to forgive myself."

You paused. "I'm not sure how to do that either. When you figure it out, let me know."

Hanzo gave you a wide-eyed incredulous look.

"Forgiving oneself," you clarified. "Not my place to forgive you. My job is to support Genji, and help him dispose of the evidence, if need be." The jasmine tea was strong and fragrant, just the way you liked it. "I think your path to redemption begins with helping Genji."

You weren't sure it was redemption you were looking for. But you understood then that if Lao lived, you were going to watch over her for as long as you could. You wondered if that was how Gabriel felt about you. What if you were more his penance than...? Your hand shook slightly and you downed more tea.

"I am sorry that I tried to kill you," Hanzo said after a moment.

You studied his hands. He'd healed up fine. "Apology accepted, and I actually am kind of over it."

He looked at you expectantly.

"I wasn't trying to kill you that day," you said dryly. "Genji wanted you alive and I was doing my best to respect that. You just kept shooting at me. Stabbing you was self-defense."

Hanzo shook his head and took another crepe. "I see."

"I can give you a fake apology if you want. But I figured since we're being so honest today, I'd skip that."

Hanzo shook his head. "No, I guess it wouldn't be the same." He tossed his hair over his
shoulder. "These are good. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The two of you finished your tea and crepes in silence.

"...I consistently have trouble getting hot water for bathing. Is that common?" Hanzo asked out of the blue.

"Must be the pipes," you said, dryly, knowing full well Athena was listening in. "I'll talk to maintenance for you. I'm sure it will improve."

Chapter End Notes

Well, meant to update earlier, but I'm writing a feels/sexy scene and got carried away. But now I will stop and update, because I need to go to bed, because I work today and OMFG why do I do this to myself?

I have madeleines. I also got this Japanese "pudding" which was whipped cream on the bottom, a thin layer of sponge cake, a flan/custard pudding, topped with more whipped cream, and then fruit decorating the side. It was beautiful and delicious.

I'm super failing at being a grownup though. Visited some friends this weekend and we talked about life and compared salaries. (I lose. I lose by so much.)

But it's given me something to think about. Because maybe I shouldn't be hunting down whatever mediocre better-paying job I can find. Maybe I should be doing something different, I'm just too slow to figure out what I want to do any more.

(Once upon a time, I had a plan, I tailored my education, and I made it to that point, but then life happened and I had to choose between job and family and family came first. Now it's several years later, and I don't believe in that job any more anyway, but I haven't found anything to replace it.) I'm a little bitter about it, but mostly because I should have just done something else. It was cool, but now I have...reasons for not wanting to participate. I actually think I might have a lot better luck if I move out of my tiny city and find somewhere with better prospects, but if I don't know what, then I can't really pick "where" you know. Endless cycle of millennial doubt.

I shouldn't be babbling at 7 AM. I should be in bed. Good night!
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

On Sing wants to talk, a lot. Jack wants to talk, and more. Tataryn doesn't want to talk, but you aren't going to give him much of a choice.

Chapter Notes

I will fully admit I had too much fun writing the On Sing characters because they're AU variants of some of my original story characters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Sing's single delegate had arrived carrying a large briefcase. And while it tested negative for explosives, the tech was unidentifiable. It weighed in at seventy pounds and none of the basic scanning equipment could not get a visual on the interior. It could be full of plague bombs. It could be full of sandwiches, really heavy ones. The woman carried a gun and refused to explain anything to anyone less than "Strike Commander Morrison."

You still hadn't gotten around to getting fitted for your dress blues, and to be honest, that was fine. It wasn't like you were attending any formal Overwatch ceremonies, in an official capacity ever. So you wore your Blackwatch armor into the foyer, receiving nervous looks from the Overwatch agents. Ziv followed behind you, looking almost intimidating in a fitted black suit.

"We'll take it from here," you told In-Sec guards manning the entry checkpoint. "Ms. Zhai is expected."

The On Sing delegate was a girl barely out of her teens. She had a confident smile, and was runner-thin with poison green eyes and a perky pixie cut. You guessed she was of Eurasian descent. She wore a bright green peacoat, black slacks, and a pair of cute ankle boots. But she hefted that enormous case with one arm, not looking the least bit strained.

"Oh, it's you," Ms. Zhai leaned forward, head bobbing as she looked you over. "You're shorter than I expected." She smiled apologetically. "That wasn't an insult. I've only seen you in cam footage, some of it rather grainy. Big fan." She spoke rapid-fire English with a Midwestern American accent, and that was not what you were expecting. "Really liked your work in Belfast. Hell, I even liked your work in Hong Kong. And Shanghai? That was pretty cool too."

You felt Ziv stiffen behind you. You looked around, noting that the In-Sec officers had leaned in a little too close, and were very consciously not looking at any of you. Overwatch personnel needed to learn how to eavesdrop better. That shit wouldn't fly in Blackwatch.

"Ms. Zhai, we should take this conversation somewhere more private."

"Call me Feng. "Ms. Zhai" makes me sound so...old."
She straightened up as you extended your hand to take the case.

"I got it. No worries." She grinned widely. "Oh, you were in Shanghai too. Sneaky bastard. And cute." She winked at Ziv.

Ziv wrinkled his nose at her.

You'd met Chung. You'd met Fong Chun. Feng seemed very different. But she was referencing too many top secret operations for you not to take her seriously.

Ziv led the way, Feng in the middle, with you bringing up the rear.

She showed no strain under the weight of that briefcase, and you kept your hand close to your sidearm. Athena was giving everyone back in the conference room the play-by-play, showing security cam footage when available. You weren't comfortable with Feng carrying that large case unchecked, but Jack and Lacroix had overruled Captain Amari and agreed she could bring it in during the negotiations.

Lacroix chose the heavy conference room - it had lead shielding plates and blocked most signals communication. There was a rectangular table, Jack at the head, Captain Amari on his right, Lacroix on his left, and then surprisingly, Hanzo was there, in full kyudo-gi glory.

Feng sauntered in, grin never wavering. You shut the door behind you, wondering about a biological or chemical weapon attack.

"Hi!" Feng waved and breezily hefted the briefcase onto the table. "I'm Zhai Feng, please call me Feng. It's an honor to meet you." She looked between Jack and Hanzo, a silly grin on her face. "It's like a goddamn modeling shoot. You guys are all so pretty," she sighed happily.

Captain Amari raised a brow. Lacroix inclined his head. Jack's expression remained stony.

Hanzo stared at her. "Hanzo-san, you remember me! I'm flattered." Her smile turned sharp, and your fingers brushed against the hilt of your tanto.

"How do you know Ms. Zhai?" Jack asked Hanzo.

"So cold," she said, shaking her head.

"...Ms. Zhai is one of the traditionalists that wanted my approval for a Shimada-On Sing ceasefire. She didn't call herself that."

Everyone blinked. "Traditionalist" didn't really describe Zhai Feng.

"She also asked if she could see the dragon dance," Hanzo muttered and Ziv snickered beside you.

"It was unprofessional, I know, I'm sorry. I already apologized like a dozen times." Feng shook her head. "In my defense, I'd had like five cups of that expensive sake you like and it went straight to my head."

"Why exactly are you here, Ms. Zhai?" Captain Amari asked coolly.

"Because I don't want to fight Overwatch, and while some of the family was caught up in
delusions of grandeur, I'd rather just stick to our usual business and go back to doing our thing, you know? Fighting loses money. Fighting attracts attention. Fighting causes damages and should have been avoided." Feng sat down. "Anyway, I've permanently settled things with the rest of the family. There is only one authority above mine, and you get to deal with them." There was an edge in her voice, and it was only in flashes when that cheerful mask slipped, that you recognized her as a predator. "And then if you're amenable, we can be friends." She tilted her head, all smiles again.

You and Ziv stood at the door, hands on your weapons.

"What did you bring with you, Feng?" Lacroix asked.

"This and my gun, just in case. You know how dangerous the world is. Great Aunty thinks you're trustworthy, but Great Uncle is paranoid as fuck. And the cousins? Aiya. They're nuts." Feng unlocked the latches on the case. "So, your resident AI is going to freak out, but I swear on our honor and bloodline that we are not here to do harm."

"We don't have an AI," Captain Amari said sharply.

Feng removed her coat, revealing a heavily tattooed left arm, green and black lines running from her fingertips and spiraling up into her sleeves. "Come now, if we're going to be friends, we shouldn't lie to each other. Don't worry, your secret is safe with me. I personally find Athena to be very charming."

Jack's jaw stiffened. You waited for the signal. But Lacroix shook his head, the motion barely perceptible.

Feng kept going, unpacking a metal console, the parts already glowing an eerie green. Grinning, Feng pulled a pin off her shirt and stuck her finger, before pressing the bloody digit down against the pad. "疏不见亲."

A cylinder of green light formed in the center, and four glowing life-sized figures appeared. They congregated around Feng, clad in traditional Chinese robes. A man and woman stood side by side, and behind them were a set of twins, androgynous and almost impossible to tell apart. They were very detailed, though transparent, like neon ghosts.

"Commander! Shut it down! It's a god-" Athena's raised voice cut out. But the lights stayed on and you heard no screams. You and Ziv drew your guns, but Jack held up his hand.

"Strike Commander Morrison, and friends, may I present Great Aunt Zheng, the head of our clan? Her consort, my Great Uncle, and my esteemed cousins, may they never have physical bodies again." Feng stuck her bleeding finger in her mouth.

"What is the meaning of this?" Jack growled.

A shrill static reverb sounded through the room, and the woman's voice came out in Chinese, though no dialect you recognized.

Rolling her eyes, Feng put her finger against the pad, smearing more blood. "Better?"

"Yes." The woman's voice was rich and deep.

"If she wasn't so thin-blooded, this wouldn't be a problem," one of the cousins snapped, sounding masculine. "I still think-"
"You don't think, which is why we had this problem to begin with," the more feminine twin said.

"Hush." The man's image flickered and the twins shut up.

"Restore my AI's connection," Jack said.

"Sorry, just didn't want you panicking before I got the introductions out of the way," Feng said, uninjured hand discretely sliding into her jacket pocket.

You nudged Ziv and he nodded.

"-hear me, Commander? Is everything all right?" Athena spoke rapidly.

"It's fine, for the moment. Cancel any military action, but leave them on standby. Transcribe all events for Winston." Jack's eyes never left the figures around Feng. Ana rubbed her forehead. Lacroix remained impassive, but Hanzo gaped with undisguised horror.

"Yes, sir."

This was what Athena felt in Hong Kong. This was what was watching you in Fong's apartment. You wondered how far their tendrils stretched. Were they four separate programs or one? How much of Shanghai and Belfast had they seen?

"So you have an AI in charge of your clan?" Captain Amari asked, studying the blurred motions of the figures.

"Eh, no. Not an AI. The translated consciousness of our ancestors," Feng said proudly. "Better than brains in jars, but the same concept applies."

Captain Amari sat back, teeth clenched. "That is an abomination."

"Yeah, I know, some of the family said the same thing. But I like my great aunt and uncle, and I'm pretty sure the transfer took. Hell, the twins are eerily accurate and still annoying as hell." Feng leaned back. "It's a work in progress. We're discussing the benefits of omnic bodies, and while it's do-able, they'd rather wait for organic ones. The biotech will get there eventually. Great Aunt Zheng is a goddamn genius."

"You can stop talking now, Feng." The woman stepped forward, her hologram hands resting on the table. "I am Zheng, head of the On Sing, and the final authority on their actions. I wish to propose a friendly ceasefire."

Jack stared. "I want you to stop dealing Shimada drugs and aiding Talon."

"Easily done. What else?" Zheng asked, looking bored. The light figure swirled in her hanfu robes, taking in the room before, examining her long nails.

"We want whoever planned the assassination of Commander Morrison. And any details you have on Talon and Shimada operations," Captain Amari said.

"We have no problem with that," Zheng said.

"We need to know your intentions before we agree to any kind of detente," Jack said.

"Mmm," Zheng said. "I see." She glanced at Hanzo. "I wasn't expecting to see you here. Taking back your territory, Little Dragon?"
"..You have been dead for a very long time, Lady Zheng. How is this even possible?"

"Have I?" Zheng laughed softly. "Well, then I don't know how any of it happened," she said dismissively.

Feng just smiled.

"We are a very private family, Strike Commander. One wayward branch decided to expand into the underworld, and that does not reflect our values. We have since cut it off."

Feng drew a line across her throat, her smile wide. "Like that."

"We are scholars, alchemists, and scientists. We wish to pursue our studies unmolested. We are not commercializing war. We are not looking to kill people. We are not experimenting on anyone outside our bloodline, and only with their express approval."

Feng flexed her tattooed arm. It was about as muscular as a wet noodle. But she'd managed to carry that case while making it look effortless.

"We have wealth. We have influence. And we can reach you. But I respect your mission and have no desire to wage a long bitter war. We both have enough enemies. We know what the world thinks of AIs, and we are not AIs. We just want to be left in peace."

"On Sing likes quiet, but On Sing doesn't like peace," Lacroix said, eyes glittering. "I have heard of your work, Zheng. Your research in bioengineering was brilliant, but your ethics somewhat appalling."

"It never affected the quality of my work, and I only took volunteers," she said.

"The poor, the desperate-"

"And sometimes, I even saved them," she said. "Those days are gone. I will only work on family. And young Feng is the only family we trust now. Even if she is a fool, she is loyal and she is blood."

"And she can't protect herself forever," one of the cousins said snidely.

"So yeah, you kill me, that's it for the loyal involved family. Of course, then you've just incurred the wrath of my ancestors, so, it was a gamble I was willing to make." Feng shrugged. "They have a lot of wrath."

"Even if Feng is the only one you trust, you have at least three omnic development centers scattered throughout the mainland, a slew of shell companies whose revenue numbers in the billions, a large stake in Lucheng, and a few hundred Triad soldiers who swear fealty to you," Lacroix continued. "Why shouldn't we salt the earth?"

"It will be a war of attrition. We are familiar with your operations throughout east Asia. From your focus on winnowing the Shimada to your intentions for Hanoi. We are aware of them all, and we could make it very difficult. But it doesn't have to be that way. Leave us alone, and we'll leave you alone. Help us occasionally, and we have long memories and excellent guǎnxì."

Zheng folded her hands. "You are a calculating man, Mr. Lacroix. You know that this is the best way to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. Even if you don't care about casualties, you care about the success of your operations."

Lacroix inclined his head. "I see. I agree, you do have excellent social capital, Madame
Zheng. And your work has always been quality. But why aren't Feng's brother and parents onboard with you?"

Feng rolled her eyes. "My brother is a coward. And my parents aren't interested. There was feud in my grandmother's generation. After that bloodbath, Mother washed her hands of the whole thing."

"How did you achieve the transfer of consciousness, and more importantly, how did you get through our shielding?" Ziv piped up.

"We'd have to be very good friends to talk about that," Zheng drawled. "But it's not off the table. It's just not anything most people would do. Suffice to say, you can't do this with corpses and it is a one-way trip."

So they'd killed their bodies to do the transfer? Yeah, that wasn't catching on any time soon, though you could see a few fanatics trying it out.

"As for your shielding, this device piggybacks off the ambient backscatter and in doing so, circumvents the usual defenses. You can have it if you like, as a peace offering," Zheng said.

"You really want peace," Lacroix said, rubbing his chin.

"You really want us to admit that we are in a position of vulnerability," Zheng said. "And we have. Yes, we can fight you. We can hurt you badly. But you will win in the end, and it will be a waste of lives. Meanwhile, the instability from the Omnic Crisis will continue to spread unchecked. I wish to avoid that outcome."

"Ana?" Jack gestured.

"I want more information on their technological capabilities and just what kind of research they are conducting. That is, if you want an alliance." Captain Amari did not look happy.

"Noted," Jack said. "Gérard?"

"I want a blood oath from Feng and Zheng, if we agree to this. On Sing is slippery, but they guard their honor."

Feng looked slightly annoyed at that. "Really, like full on blood oath?" She tapped her mouth.

"Yes," Lacroix smirked.

Feng groaned, and you realized he meant a classical blood oath. Eww.

"Hanzo?"

"I have no opinion. If they no longer aid the Shimada, I am fine."

"But we could be friends, Hanzo," Feng chirped. "You, me, Genji. We could be buddies. It'd be like a reality show: disenfranchised mafia heirs! Only I guess, I seized power back, so it's a little different."

Hanzo stiffened.

"That wasn't a threat, young Shimada," Zheng said. "Feng is just overly enthusiastic and her social life has been curtailed by the infighting."
"She was also dropped a few times," one of the cousins said.

"And no one in China wants to marry her because she's too American," the other cousin said.

"And flat-chested."

"And ugly."

"Fuck you both, you're just jealous that I have a real body."

"Enough." Zheng scowled and the cousins fell silent. "That is our proposal. We will give you time to think it over. And we will be very grateful if you ensure no one murders Feng while she's in Switzerland."

The machine whirred to a stop and the lights faded.

"Athena?"

"They are gone. Winston is running a workup now."

"So you have old Fong handy?" Feng asked, spinning around in her chair. "Because that's the last order of business."

Lacroix nodded at you and you left the room, going across the hall to where Fong waited, handcuffed. The older man looked a little rough, his skin sallow, and his face unshaven. He was still paunchy and his hair was combed, and you felt no sympathy.

"I remember you. You were the one with Reyes." Fong narrowed his eyes at you. "I will not forget you."

You snorted. "The feeling is mutual." You held the door open, not offering to uncuff him. He stood haughtily, and stalked out. You had to open the conference room door for him too, which kind of ruined the effect.

"One intact Fong Chun," you said. "Accessories sold separately."

"They sent you?" Fong looked down his nose. "You?"

Feng laughed. "Mr. Li sends his regards." And she lunged, faster than you expected, too fast for an unenhanced human.

You had your gun up even as she gripped Fong's head and twisted, the crack echoing in the conference room. Ziv swore. Noticing your guns, Feng raised her hands as a sign of surrender.

"Blood debt fulfilled," she said tightly. "Fong was the last bigshot pushing for more international involvement. Southern branch of the family," she continued on, like everyone would understand. "Piece of dogshit shed family blood first. Big no-no."

"We could have done that for you, you know," you said.

"I wanted to make sure we did it right. Personal honor at stake. Now, I am sorry about the mess. I can take him with me if you want," she said.

"We'll clean it up," Lacroix said, unfazed.
"So I do get to leave, right? No, "hey look a penny!" And when I look, you guys black bag me and send me off for rendering."

"Would you really look because of a penny?" Ziv asked.

"I'm ADHD as a hamster. I'd look because you said "look," she said, lowering her hands.

"We are considering your...great aunt's offer," Jack said, a pained expression on his face. "Will you require transportation back to Hong Kong?"

"Shanghai," she said. "I'm not a southern girl. And if you're offering, sure! We'll maintain a ceasefire for one week. We'd really like your decision by then. But no pressure."

And then she bounded over to Captain Amari, ignoring your guns trained on her back. "Ma'am," she said, wide-eyed. "As a completely separate matter, can I just say that I really look up to you? Like you're awesome, and I have your poster on my wall, and you inspired me to become a really good shot. I am really good," she said earnestly.

"I...am flattered," Captain Amari said, not quite sounding that way.

"And you're even hotter in person," she said to Jack. "Like, wow." She fanned herself. "Sorry, that was inappropriate. I uh...I need to get out more." She slunk back toward the door. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Lacroix. I hope you sort things out with Ms. Nguyen soon. You guys were such a good team back in the day!"

You blinked.

Lacroix's smile was serpentine, his eyes flat. "Thank you for that reminder, Ms. Zhai. I hope you and that police detective can work things out."

If she was bothered by Lacroix's knowledge of her personal life, Feng didn't show it. "Unlikely, given my new career path. But hey, love conquers all, maybe?" She shrugged sadly.

Then in the blink of an eye she was smiling as she waved at Hanzo. "Good to see you again!"

You and Ziv escorted her to the transport bay, relieved that you wouldn't have to ride along.

You returned to the conference room to find Winston and Torby arguing loudly over how to handle the On Sing tech. Hanzo was gone, as was Fong's body. Captain Amari was yelling at Lacroix. And Jack sat in the middle of it, resting his face in his hand.

"So she's on her way back to Shanghai. Didn't leave till we saw the ship takeoff."

"That's a relief," Jack said. "I...wasn't expecting any of that."

"Me neither, and I read the briefing," Captain Amari said, glowering at Lacroix.

Lacroix shrugged. "I didn't know for sure they'd digitized the minds of their dead relatives. It seemed a bit absurd to speculate on in writing."
"The tech has always been there," Winston said. "Especially with the advent of AIs, but very few people have been clever and bold enough to experiment with consciousness transfers. I would assume they used some kind of bioweb matrix to ease the transition, and well, their bodies might even still be alive somewhere. Just in case."

"So you're sure it's not a god-program?" Captain Amari asked.

"The power readings were impressive, but I can't verify it. While Athena was temporarily blocked out, it's more likely Ms. Zhai had a jamming device on her person. This projector is an interesting piece of tech, but it doesn't have that physical capability." Winston glanced at Torby. "Unless you have another opinion?"

"Sounds about right," Torby grunted.

"Saw her fussing with something in her jacket right before the Athena picked up the connection again," you offered.

"While there are a few reasons Zhai would play that masquerade, I am inclined to believe that it is not a true AI. They might be more dangerous, but it is a different beast altogether," Lacroix folded his hands. "Is it a coincidence Ms. Zhai left us a blood sample?"

"That was for a DNA lock, I think," Winston said. "I'm not actually sure. Angela might be the one to ask, especially since it apparently needed more blood to run properly?"

"How much of that was total bullshit?" You asked Lacroix.

"As far as I could tell, none of it was complete bullshit. Some of it was twisting the truth, but Zhai didn't outright lie to us. She is not the only blood relation active in their group, but she is the favored one. There are at least four dozen cousins and other forms of extended family who support her. That does not include retainers, omnics, and other non-blood members. But that support is tentative. Not everyone approves of her youth, mixed heritage, and...personality. She is trying to consolidate power fast. And the quickest way to do that is to halt the conflict with Overwatch. I will have a dossier prepared. Zhai is not...the one I expected to inherit. And I'm not entirely sure she will survive.

"But her immediate family is staying out of the conflict. I'm torn as to whether she is smarter than she acts, or if Zheng has chosen an amusing puppet to distract from the actual danger. I'm actually leaning toward the former."

"How well do you know Nguyen?" Jack asked.

"...Very well," Lacroix said. "She taught me a lot, which is why I'm approaching Hanoi with such caution. Nguyen is an old hand at intelligence work. She knows we're coming."

"Can we trust them to hold up their end of the bargain?" Jack massaged his forehead, and you wondered if he named his headaches after agents. You knew most of yours would be named "Ziv" and "Lacroix" and "Goddamnit not again, Vo."

"If Zhai Feng swears a blood oath and Zheng backs it, I'm inclined to believe them, though Zheng doesn't have blood any more, so does that make it impossible? I wonder." Lacroix leaned forward. "But despite their declarations of "fondness" for Zhai, I don't doubt they would sacrifice her if it was expedient."

"Run it by the analysts," Jack said. "Winston take that down to the lab. Athena, forward the meeting transcripts to Commander Reyes and monitor all signals intelligence. If someone can
get a reading of the ambient backscatter levels that would be helpful. Lacroix, Ana, I want your written recommendations as soon as possible. Mihret, see if Winston and Torby need any help in the lab. Lucky, you're with me."

You nodded and followed Jack out of the room.

"Have you informed Lieutenant Jemison's squad of the potential political fallout?" You asked, because you were on the Overwatch side of the complex, and it wouldn't do to talk about personal matters.

"She's aware of the upgraded threat. Not too pleased, but Epsilon squad has handled worse." Jack took long strides and you adjusted your pace to keep up. "Lacroix has kept me updated." Jack stuck his hands in his pockets and frowned. "Ah. I forgot something. Meet in your quarters?" He lowered his voice.

"Sure," you said. "You eaten?"

"Not yet. But I'll grab something on the way down. You want anything?"

You remembered that bowl of mashed potatoes and stifled a snort. He was picking food up, not cooking it. "Sure."

Jack flashed you a tired smile. "See you in a bit."

You smiled behind your armor and headed back to your room.

You changed into sweats, and settled on your bed, flicking on your tablet to study up on Hoffman. You had unread messages and browsed those instead:

OMFG, you nearly gave me a heart attack! You were on some European streaming news after a terrorist attack and Gabriel looked so pissed! Jack says you're OK, and I'm so glad! Michael is too! He's the one who recognized Gabriel and you.

I meant to thank you for the photos, but then I had to dig up some of those pictures I promised you. So here you go. A pleasure doing business with you. I have more if you do! :D

LOVE!

Maggie

P.S. Jack said he'd consider letting us come for the summer!!!! Thank you!

With undisguised glee, you opened up a picture of Jack, still in the middle of growing, his limbs too long, his body too skinny, staring proudly at the camera in nothing but a red kilt and high-tops. Someone had drawn a red bulldog on his bare chest and you had no idea what any of this meant. His hair was shaggy, and he looked so pleased with himself that you started laughing.
The next was a shot of him a little older, eyes crossed, and three quarters of a cheeseburger stuffed in his mouth.

The final one was an angry Jack, and several other teens flicking off the camera as they huddled in the pond, their clothes missing. You wondered which sibling stole them. You suspected Jane.

You wrote back and thank you note and asked for context. You did not mention Gabriel.

The next message was from Amélie, checking to see if next Wednesday would work for an outing, because Captain Amari was going to have to cancel again. You checked your schedule and agreed.

The final message was group reminder from Jesse that you were going out tomorrow night and Genji better not chicken out.

"The Strike Commander is outside," Athena announced.

You got up and opened the door, even though Athena could do it for you.

Jack was dressed down in a hoodie and sweats, the hood up, and he carried two boxes of takeout. You let him in, and shut the door. He looked around the room, eyes settling on the stuffed animals.

"Figured I'd take a page from your decorating manual," you said.

He set the food down and leaned over for a kiss. "It looks like you're finally settling in. I like it." His hands trailed down your sides and you swallowed as he nibbled on your bottom lip, smile a little too mischievous.

"Food first," you said as his hands dipped under your waistband, fingers skimming your hips.

"Haven't seen you since the funeral," he murmured. "I thought you weren't going to do this alone." His hands stayed on your bare skin.

"Been busy," you said, breaths coming shallow and quick. "Sorry."

"You like the basket?" His tongue flicked against your ear and you shuddered, gripping his shirt. "Or should I give you something else?"

"Damnit Jack. I..." You rubbed the back of your neck. "I want to, but it doesn't feel right." Not while you were sorting your feelings about Lao and Gabriel.

Jack kissed your cheek, withdrawing his hands. "Whatever you want. I still get to cuddle you though, right?"

"Yeah."

Jack gave you that happy smile and grabbed the food, settling down on your bed. You sat beside him, pleasantly surprised to find a somewhat balanced meal inside: fettuccine alfredo with chicken, roast asparagus, and a slice of garlic bread with pesto dip. Jack had gone with green beans, more garlic bread, and spaghetti and meatballs. You stole a meatball, just because you knew he'd let you.
"How are things?" He asked, grinning as you popped the meatball in your mouth.
"Sorting myself out," you said, after you'd chewed your food. "And other people apparently. Both Genji and Hanzo have come to talk about their problems. Got to admit, I didn't expect that." You leaned against Jack. This was nice, but someone was missing and your chest tightened.

"Hanzo Shimada..." Jack began to laugh. "Do I want to know?"

"Well, Genji came to complain that Hanzo was being a dick, and proceeded to eat half my chocolate and drink my whiskey. So I had to help, because otherwise he would taken it all. Then we talked about my problems, and I'm a little disturbed by how perceptive Genji is. And then Hanzo is waiting outside my door to tell Genji off for behaving improperly..."

Jack snorted. "Brotherly stalking is very proper."

"-Like, I've been making up excuses so Genji can escape him." You laughed. "Lacroix has me as the "good cop." So eventually I had to sit him down, make him tea and crepes, and talk about how he could try to relate to his brother. Hint: stop nagging him." You sighed. "How's Gabriel?"

"He's OK. Not trying to guilt you, but he misses you, you know." Jack put an arm around your shoulder, tilting his head back.

"Miss him too," you said, and found that was true. "Less...angry with time. But I need to figure this out before I get any more twisted up inside." There were some thoughts that came clearer when you were outside Gabriel's protective orbit. You weren't sure if that was a good thing or not. Because now you wondered if you were Gabriel's atonement for Black Base Delta.

"Anything I can do?"

"I want to see Lao. I don't have to be unsupervised or anything, I just want to be in there and talk to her. I know she's not awake. But..."

"But you need to see her with your own eyes." Jack sighed. "I'll talk to Ana."

"Thank you." You put down your fork and ruffled Jack's hair. "How are you holding up?"

"Gabe's sleeping in my room a lot. I'm not complaining though." Jack gave your fingers a sauce-smeared kiss and you rolled your eyes, wiping them off on your napkin. "We're trying to give you space, but I figured it wouldn't hurt if I checked up on you."

"I appreciate it." You paused. "That night in the infirmary...you mentioned that I was Gabriel's sole survivor. How much of that factors into our relationship, do you think?"


"He's so overprotective and I realized I'm kind of that way about some of my people-"

"Are you sleeping with those people?" Jack asked dryly.

"Just you and Gabriel, but, I meant the extreme cases. Like Lao. So no."
"We're fussier over you because you've had the most close calls in recent memory. You're...not enhanced, and we're very aware of that while you're skilled, you can't take the same kind of damage we can. It makes us worry more." Jack stroked your hair. "I'm sorry I put that idea in your head. Trust me. Gabriel wouldn't let it get this far out of pity. No matter how much he jokes about how hopeless I am."

"Ah, OK." You finished your food, getting up to toss the empty boxes in the trash.

Jack reclined on your bed, taking up the whole thing. He tapped his chest and you fit against him, knees resting between his legs.

"It's silly. I know it's because of me that we're...taking a break. But then I got worried and-
"

"You're under a lot of stress," Jack murmured, rubbing your back. "Relax." He held you against his chest. "You like his gift?"

"Haven't tried it yet," you admitted.

"Too much?"

"Too tired," you said. "Lacroix's given me some heavy-duty shit and while I'm not complaining, I'm doing my due diligence, because it's Lacroix."

"Thought you were taking it easy," he frowned.

"It's still in the formative stages. I'm in research mode. Lots of reading and stalking."

"...I'm afraid to ask," Jack said. "So I won't. Just be careful, OK? Please?"

"I'm always careful," you said, kissing him.

"Liar," he murmured.

"No, seriously, I'm like "this is a terrible idea, but it's the only one I have, and it has the best chance of success. Good thing I have armor on." Maybe I need a safety helmet too?"

Jack began to laugh. "That is not the same as careful. Do you even know what that word means?"

"No Jack, I was raised by crows. I've only made it this far by parroting everything I hear; I don't actually understand your language. Good trick, yeah?"

Jack just shook his head. "I just want you to come home safe. If anything happens to you-"

You kissed him, not liking where this was going. Jack growled beneath you.

"Let me finish!" He snapped, and rolled you onto your back. "You're not distracting me that easily." He pinned you against the bed with his hips, giving you an exasperated head shake.

You grinned sheepishly at him.

"Don't be so flippant," he said softly, nose to nose with you, hands clasped against your cheeks. "I've lost a lot of people. I really don't want to lose you. You know what that kind of heartbreak is like." He shook his head, eyes pleading. "So please, don't do that to me."
You touched his face carefully. "I...uh, sorry."

"Not mad at you. Too relieved that you're OK. And it wasn't me on that op with you. I couldn't be this relaxed if it was." Jack smiled wryly.

"Oh, I'm aware." You remembered Operation Cobblestone Dust very well, just like you remembered the Code White in the Alps, and the aftermath of Shanghai Noon. Gabriel...reacting to your injuries did not come as a surprise.

He sighed. "I know, you already got lectured. Just saying. Nearly losing people, sometimes your logic goes out the window, doesn't it?"

You thought about Lao. "Yeah." It took you a moment to realize he was referencing Gabriel, and you winced. "I know, Jack."

"Wasn't just Gabriel who was on edge, sweetheart. I know you're still sorting through it. I'd be remiss if I didn't remind you that you weren't thinking straight either."

You were silent for a moment. "That's fair."

Jack rested his hands on your stomach. "May I?"

"Yeah, it's not too terrible," you said, grateful for the change of subject.

He rolled your shirt up, and peeled back the gauze, taking a long look at the ridged red line. "It doesn't look bad at all." He shook his head, hair falling in his face. "You're luckier than you deserve to be," he said, carefully fixing your bandage.

"I have enough ugly scars," you said.

"Only on the inside, and you're working on those," Jack said, pressing a kiss into the skin above the bandage. "You look pretty good on the outside."

"Flattery isn't going to get you anywhere," you said, hoping you meant it.

Jack just grinned. "You're so tense. You sure I can't help...? It doesn't have to be sex. I can just use my hands, my mouth. I can just watch or you can. Hell, we can make out like teenagers." He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to your throat, and you shivered against him.

"I-" You swallowed, because once Jack started on you, you both had trouble stopping. "I want to, but...I think I'll feel bad about it later."

Jack sighed. "Well, that's not what I want. Cuddles it is then," he said, rolling onto his side. "Want a back rub instead?"

No, but you'd take one.

At first, you thought it was your imagination. Then you suspected it had to do with Hanzo. Except, you made a point to avoid Hanzo for the next day, and lo and behold, Tataryn still kept popping up wherever you went. Sure, he'd be nonchalant and reading a book in the hall outside Lacroix's office. Or he'd be chatting up Diallo in the gym. Or he'd be shamelessly flirting with
Sinaga in the cafeteria. But Fedor Tataryn was following you, and you didn't like it.

You didn't have any personal problems with Tataryn. In fact, he went out of his way to be charming and affable, if only because his expense reports were always a mess. His receipts usually came back coated in something gross: cheap wine, machine oil, human bile.... And you knew he was skimming off the top, but only in small amounts. Gabriel said to let it go, as long as it was only a little and he did the job right. Tataryn was a Blackwatch amnesty-recruit. You didn't know exactly what he'd been doing for the Russian mob, or Ukrainian mob, or the Georgian mob: if reports were to be believed, he'd been playing all of them for years.

The worst part? Tataryn was gorgeous and he damn well knew it. He kept his wavy blonde hair long, and when he dressed up, he looked like a European fairytale prince: icy blue eyes, straight nose, high cheekbones. He could have quit Blackwatch to be a model. Except fashion models normally didn't enjoy scamming and murdering people quite as much as Tataryn did.

You took the long route back, deciding that you should deal with this sooner rather than later. You ducked into laundry room, waiting for Tataryn to pass by the door before you jumped on his back, legs wrapped around his waist, forearm locked around his neck.

"Why are you following me, Tataryn?" You asked softly in his ear.

He gripped your arm, and you could feel him swallow roughly. "Good ambush, Lucky. Now you let me go?" He coughed. "Please?"

You dropped off his back, your hand traveling to your tanto.

"Not that I don't like having you on top, but maybe you could be gentler with me? I am no super soldier." Tataryn turned around, massaging his throat. You could never quite place his accent. Eastern European, for sure, but way the he said his "r" sounds shifted all the time.

"Answer the question, Tataryn," you said, watching him carefully.

He held up his hands in a placating motion. Tataryn was taller than you, and probably stronger. But he looked worried and you glanced around. The hall was pretty open. You glanced at a security camera, and winked. Because Athena would be monitoring the situation too.

"Maybe we could talk in private?" He asked, pointing at the laundry room.

You backed up, gesturing for him to go first, and he nodded, hands still in the air.

"Good to see you're feeling better, Lucky." Tataryn smiled at you, but he had shark eyes, flat and dispassionate. It was one of the reasons you'd never gotten too close to him. He mimed congeniality very well, but something unpleasant lurked beneath his skin. "I hope you liked the carnivorous plant." He leaned on the laundry-folding table, stretching out so you could admire his black leather pants and too-tight t-shirt.

"...Thanks, Tataryn." You crossed your arms.

"You're very welcome. And please, call me "Fedya." Honestly, Lucky, we've known each other for over a year now--"

"Tataryn, quit stalling."

He gave you a slick smile. "It is nothing bad. I promise. I wouldn't mess with the boss's woman. I like living."
"Do not worry, Lucky. I ran the team providing hotel security at the ball. Whatever you, the boss, and Morrison got up to, is none of my business. But the boss has good taste, I have to admit." He preened, fluffing his hair.

You fought the urge to bury your face in your hands. You were an adult and you were not ashamed. You forced yourself to watch him, your left eye started twitching.

"Bet you just thought I was just another handsome killer. I too, am good at being underestimated. Too pretty, they say." He laughed, eyes bright and sharp like a cat.

"Goddamnit, Tataryn." You massaged your temples. You'd forgotten Gabriel had Blackwatch security on duty that weekend.

"I am discrete, Lucky, as is my team. Do not look so upset. I was only surprised you had not bedded him sooner. I know I would have."

"We are not talking about my personal life."

"What about work? Are you coming back soon? The boss certainly misses you." He had the nerve to laugh at your expression.

"I will stuff you in that industrial washer and turn it on." You pictured him going round and round in a front loading washing machine, while you waved at him through the little glass window.

Tataryn gave the machines contemplative look. "Who you do is your business. I am just...yanking your chain, as they say?" He chuckled, way too amused by that figure of speech. "Boss asked me to watch your back. No spying. No reporting. He was very clear. Said you'd made an enemy of the Director. He did not want to leave you without backup."

You sat on a dryer, thinking it over. Tataryn knew way too much not to be in the loop. And assigning you a bodyguard, without informing you, while he was keeping his distance, was something Gabriel would do. That Tataryn specifically said he wasn't reporting on your actions did not reassure you, though Gabriel had to know that you'd strangle him for having you spied on. You'd message him later, just to clarify.

"Just stop," you said, shaking your head. "I've got enough problems. Don't add to them."

"If you ever need another...blonde, invite me!" Tataryn winked at you. "I am very flexible and open to most things."

You rolled your eyes. "Look, I'm more worried about base-side sabotage during an op. The rest of the time, I'm golden." You watched the cheer slide off his face, replaced by a cool business-like demeanor. "If you want to keep an eye on that, I won't stop you."

"No no no." He shook his head. "Boss said I was to look out for you while you were out and about. Unless you want to give me your itinerary and promise your poor Fedya that you will not deceive him, I will be your shadow for the foreseeable future. Do not worry, I will not talk to you. I will only make sad eyes at you from a distance."

"...Just be more discrete."
"Oy. You go straight for the throat. Such a formidable woman. No wonder the boss likes you so much."

"I'm going out tonight. With McCree and Genji." You crossed your arms. "You're not invited."

"I am sure they will be sufficient backup," Tatary said, waving his hand. "This is good. I haven't had a Friday night off in a month." He winked at you and sauntered out of the laundry room, his pants hugging the curve of his ass beautifully.

Maybe you needed a pair. Huh. Well, there was that upcoming shopping trip...

But Tataryn's ass had not distracted you from the fact that he never actually said he would not follow you out tonight. Whatever happened, if Genji and Jesse weren't enough backup, Tataryn wasn't going to cut it either.

"Athena," you said. "This is an excellent time to discuss boundaries."

"Indeed," she said.

"While I understand his mission, I'm going to confess that I'm not entirely comfortable with Tataryn watching me. You don't have to tell me what he does, but it'd be nice if you made sure he wasn't doing things outside his mission parameters."

"Of course," she said.

"And on an unrelated note, how hard is it for someone to get stuck in an elevator? Just for a few minutes while we're, say, exiting the parking garage?"

"Lucky," she said gravely. "Accidents happen."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for ko-fi for lovely cake. I would like to clarify that while things aren't smooth, I'm not in dire need. I just need a better job and/or life direction, because I'm one of those older millennials.

This scene is taking forever to write, but I think it's good? Oh well, I've got time to polish it. That or be like "OMFG what was I thinking? This is awful!" Cue uncontrollable sobbing. It's a fifty-fifty chance. Heh.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Your night out doesn't go as expected. Big surprise.

Chapter Notes

So peercat shared [this awesome rendition] of Lucky and Ziv. Ziv is so spot on. I practically swooned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So this is basically the Overwatch bar," Jesse admitted as you stood outside a noisy tavern with an enclosed beer garden; the sign said Reithalle with a silhouette of a horse on it, and you had a sinking feeling about that. Genji slouched beside you and Ziv kept looking over his shoulder as if he expected to get jumped. Knowing Ziv, it was likely.

You'd worn a tunic over your leggings and ankle boots, putting on lipstick as an afterthought. Genji had gone with a hoodie and track pants, his hood was extra large, to better hide the scarring. Jesse wore a button down shirt and torn jeans, his cowboy hat firmly in place. And Ziv looked too almost too dressed up beside them, in a black blazer and skinny jeans. None of you looked like you belonged together.

The interior was crowded, all polished wood and kitschy western paraphernalia. Horseshoes on the walls. Clint Eastwood movie posters. A goddamn mechanical bull. Some of the clientele wore cowboy hats, gingham shirts, and boots. The DJ was currently playing synthetic dance tunes, but you had the sneaking suspicion there would be country karaoke at some point. You gave Jesse a hard look.

"Really?" Ziv said, for all of you.

"It'll be fun. I'll pay for your first bull ride," Jesse grinned at him.

Ziv muttered something obscene and anatomically improbable involving said bull.

Genji faced the situation with the stoic resilience of man who would not faint in the face of duty, but would silently resent the rest of you the entire time. You shook your head and followed Jesse to a table.

You kept an eye on the doors, not happy about the crowd. You had been hoping for a quiet bar, maybe a small gastro pub with lots of cheese and far less people. This was too much.

Genji appeared at the table with a pitcher of beer and two glasses of whiskey. He passed you a glass, and sat down, already surveying the crowd.

"This is..." Ziv looked around. "A German-style biergarten in Switzerland trying to
emulate an American western theme. Why?"

You shrugged. "Globalization had some drawbacks."

"Bring back isolationism," Ziv muttered and poured himself a beer.

The whiskey was good and you nodded appreciatively at Genji. It was too loud inside to really carry a conversation, though you saw several women making speculative eyes at Jesse and Ziv.

"Yo! Lucky! Hey!"

You looked up to see a familiar redhead waving from a crowded table across the aisle.

"Shoal!" You waved back and she stumbled off her chair, laughing. Holding her beer stein aloft, she made her way to your table.

"Lucky!" She laughed and hugged you. You patted her back awkwardly. "Good to see you! What are you drinking?"

"Whiskey." You grinned at Shoal. She was in an oversized sweater and leggings, and didn't quite resemble a soldier right now. "Shoal, this is Jesse, Genji, and Ziv." You gestured to each.

"Call me Bridget!" She giggled, making eyes at Jesse.

"Shoal and I ran an op together," you added.

"This lady-" she patted your shoulder. "Is great. She kept me alive, and sassed all the robots. She also pissed off Morrison. It was epic."

"This lady sent me flowers, and it was mind-blowing," you said. "Jesse, that was a cactus and it doesn't count. And Genji, I don't even know how to describe a tiny tree. Ziv, don't even get me started."

"I'm a little drunk," Shoal said happily. "You guys should come over. Pull up some chairs. We're telling dumb gun stories."

"We always practice safe gun handling," Jesse said with a straight face, and you snorted.

"Except for Ziv. We do not trust him with loaded weapons," Genji added.

"Fuck you guys!"

"Jemmy! Look who I found!" Shoal shouted and Jemison rose, rolling her eyes as she answered Shoal's call. She was dressed down, sweatshirt and jeans with green beads capping her braids, but she still had the officer bearing.

"Strike," Jemison said, coolly.

"Aww, don't be that way. You totally have better manners than that, Ms. Isabella Mae Jemison!" Shoal put an arm around Jemison's shoulder and kissed her cheek. "We're all friends here!"

"You are so drunk," Jemison sighed, resigned to Shoal calling her by her full name. "Yeah, come on back and sit with us. Otherwise Shoal is going to get lost in transit."
Your group moved to the table beside theirs, already packed with almost two dozen people. And of course, one of them was Joon. He greeted you with a surprised smile and you swore internally. His smile momentarily dimmed when he recognized Genji and you sighed, nursing your whiskey.

You sat down beside Genji and Jemison, and were only mildly surprised when Shoal sat on your lap, giggling.

"You brought the cowboy! He's cute," she said way too loudly in your ear. Jemison sighed heavily. "You clean up nice too!"

"Shoal is celebrating her third anniversary in Overwatch," Jemison drawled. "Of course, Shoal will celebrate opening a jam jar if given the chance, so you know."

"It's good to have fun friends," you said. One of your legs had started to go numb because Shoal was less sitting, more bouncing off of you, trying to reach a pitcher of beer.

"You'll have bruises tomorrow," Jemison said, shaking her head. "Should've just dumped her on the floor."

You shrugged. "I might scoot the chair back a few inches in a moment."

Jemison gave you a wry grin and sipped her beer. It was the friendliest she'd ever been.

"Lucky! What are you drinking? No, I know the answer! You like whiskyyyyyyyyy!" Shoal hopped into the aisle. "I owe Lucky all the whiskey! Be right back!" Shoal bounded away, redhead disappearing into a sea of people.

"Shit. She makes very bad decisions when drunk." Jemison shook her head. "Be back as soon as I can." Jemison rose, and you watched as the crowd unconsciously parted for the slim woman radiating officer-level authority.

"Interesting friend you got there," Jesse leaned over. "She thinks we're both cute?"

"She was just being polite about you," you told him. Then you paused. "Are you and-?"

"...I don't know." Jesse deflated a little, his smile flattening. "She needs time to think about it. I'm not...I'm not running around. Just...keeping my eyes open. You know. Just in case."

You patted his arm. "Your business."

"Yeah, speaking of business, can you sort your shit out please? I will be loyal to the commander till the day I die, but if you leave me in that office for much longer, that day may be just around the corner."

You frowned at Jesse and he winced.

"I- That came out wrong. I just..." Jesse sat down in Jemison's seat. "It's been rocky."

"...Yeah." You shrugged. "Sorry." The sentiment rang false, and you didn't care.

"Ain't just the attitude. He compares me to you all the damn time. Like "Ingrate, get your shit together. Lucky doesn't need me to explain paperwork to her!" Or "McCree, what the fuck does this say? Because even when she's drugged, Lucky's writing never looked like this!" Or my personal favorite was, "Your coffee tastes like boiled ass. Go ask Vo to make some. I don't care if
she puts gunpowder in it. It'll still be better than this watered-down shit-soup you're trying to poison me with. " He lowered his voice. "Lucky'd never make this, let alone try to get me to drink it. Ugh."

"...I uh...hmm." You scratched the back of your head. "Sorry?"

"Ain't your fault, sugarpie." Jesse stared at his lap. "He's just...irritable. This actually ain't new behavior. I'd just forgotten how he could get back...before." Jesse waved his hand. "And I wasn't trapped in the office with him back then."

"Keep snacks on hand, and good cafeteria food. You know what he likes. If you feed him, he's less...irritable." You took a big swig of whiskey.

"I've already drank all the emergency whiskey in your desk," Jesse confessed. "Ate the candy too."

"The candy's for him," you said. "No wonder he's grumpy." You shook your head. "When he gets worked up, wait for him to stop shouting and just start tossing it onto his desk."

"...I don't think that's going to work as well for me," Jesse said.

"The trick is not to let him see you do it. You throw the candy underhanded and immediately go back to work. Don't look up. Act like nothing happened. In a few minutes you'll hear the wrapper crinkling and that usually means he ate it."

Jesse stared at you incredulously. "...Are you serious?"

"SEP fucks people up. You have to feed them often. Like small animals." You shrugged.

"...I see." He shook his head.

"You can do it, Jesse. Besides, if you're going to transition into an officer, you have to know how to handle paperwork and crazy superiors."

"OK. I'll try it. Need a refill. You?"

You eyed your empty glass of whisky and realized Shoal and Jemison still hadn't returned. Not that you expected Shoal to buy you whiskey. You didn't expect her to remember her way back to the table.

"Please," you said, setting your empty glass on the table.

Jesse got up and nodded. "Whiskey?"

"Not the cheap shit," you called after him.

Ziv was arguing, his hands gesticulating wildly as someone on the other side of the table, but the blonde man looked more bemused than angry, so you just kept an eye on it. Genji had scooted his chair closer to you to get away from another drunk woman trying to climb into his lap.

Your eyes widened slightly as you caught sight of a familiar oversized jacket, its owner hunched over at the bar. Really? You glanced at Genji and he shook his head.

"Ignore it," he said. "He followed us."

You glanced back at Ziv who had his arms crossed as the blonde man seemed to be calmly
trying to explain something to him. Well, that was relief.

"Lucky! They wouldn't let me have the whole bottle, so I got you a big glass!" Shoal leaned over, slamming a glass down on the table, spilling a good quarter of it. "You were right! Everyone bought me drinks after Belfast! It was great!" She hugged Jemison who just stood there and took it, her expression one of resentful acceptance.

"I think we're going to call it a night," Jemison said. And you wondered then if they were sleeping together. Not that it was your business. You couldn't really critique anyone else's CO/subordinate relationship so long as they were consenting adults.

"Thank you for the drink. Much appreciated."

"Next time, I will buy you more. I owe you all the whiskey!" Shoal sang.

"...Next time I'll cut her off earlier," Jemison added.

"Whatever you gotta do," you said, picking up the highball glass. "Thanks again."

"Good night!" Shoal leaned against Jemison.

"You need an some help?" Jesse asked, coming back with another glass of whiskey. He set it on the table for you. "I can call you a cab and wait with you if you like."

"He's secretly a gentleman," you said. "Honest."

Jemison studied his face. "Yeah, OK, cowboy. Can't get the door and help Shoal stay upright."

Jesse tipped his hat and escorted them out.

You glanced at the bar, but the stalker hadn't moved. You could spend the rest of the night slowly nursing the two glasses of whiskey...

"Hey. Thought I'd come over and say hi." Joon sat down in the empty seat and you took the short glass in a single gulp.

"Hi," you said after you drained the glass. "Sorry. Was...socializing." You picked up the tall glass, ignoring Genji's concerned look. "Got your flower. It was pretty, thanks."

Joon looked between you and Genji. "I uh...yeah. That was some crazy stuff. Glad you're OK." He wore a red button down shirt and black pants that fit him very well. His long hair was pulled back and he was still very good looking.

"...I think I will check on our friend," Genji said after a moment. "Will it bother you if I invite him over?"

You frowned. "Are you sure, Genji?"

"You're here. He'll behave. I'll be right back." He gave Joon a curious look.

"Whatever you think best," you said, cursing inwardly as Genji walked away. You looked over at Ziv who was now in lecture mode, shaking his finger at the blonde man while looking less angry and more exasperated. The blonde man just had his head cocked to the side, smile somewhere between skeptical and amused. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with cropped hair and an easy smile.
You caught sight of Jesse standing coming in the front door, chatting up some local girls. They gestured at the Overwatch table and you could hear him laughing.

"Oh no. Me and my friends ain't Overwatch," he shouted.

You quirked your lips and gave a mock salute. Blackwatch pride, Blackwatch petty.

Watching half your party wander off with potential bed partners made you wonder if you were supposed to be the wingman or the cockblocking friend. Because no one had asked for your assistance. Well, they were all adults. It wasn't your job to police their relationships. You couldn't even handle your own.

"Sorry, keeping tabs on my friends." You turned back to Joon.

"No, it's fine. I understand. Some soldiers you can trust out of your supervision. Some...not so much." Joon had a glass of amber liquid in hand. He glanced after Genji. "I better go. It was good seeing you." He gave you a small smile and got up quickly. "See you later!"

Genji returned then, his guest taking the seat beside him. Hanzo had his hood up, but you recognized that coat from Lucerne.

"You could've just said you wanted to ride along," you told him.

"...I did not wish to intrude." Hanzo lowered his hood.

You stared at the ceiling for a moment, wondering what you had done to deserve this. Then you looked over at Genji and he shrugged.

"That the one who you had dinner with?" Genji asked after a moment.

"...Jesse's got a big fucking mouth," you said, and swallowed more whiskey.

"No, heard the commander talking before you were...together." Genji shrugged.

"It was coffee once. Dinner once. And nothing after," you said, shaking your head. "Not that it's anyone else's business."

"Don't explain yourself then," Hanzo said, not looking up. "It makes you sound guilty."

"Oh no, I'm not explaining myself. I'm putting it out there so if Gabriel hears about it, he knows there's no reason to bother poor Joon." You nodded and took another sip of whiskey. Your eyes narrowed as you watched a group of guys glaring at Jesse while he chatted up a waitress and then a girl at the bar.

You turned to check on Ziv and rolled your eyes, because he had his tablet out, and kept jabbing his finger at whatever parts of the screen supported his argument. The blonde man now looked mildly frightened. Yeah, unless Amélie and Lacroix worked something out, Ziv was going to be single for a long time.

Hanzo, Genji, and you drank in silence. The music was bad. You remembered when you used to go out, and this didn't feel that different, but your tastes had changed. It wasn't quite as fun as you remembered. Or maybe you were just missing someone.

"Do you do this often?" Hanzo asked after a moment.

"No," you and Genji said in unison.
Hanzo looked like he wanted to say more, so you started drinking faster.

"I think we might have a problem soon," Genji said after a moment.

The three of you watched Jesse flirt his way across the bar, and there was a growing number of angry-looking men muttering at nearby tables. You sipped your whiskey. "God, I haven't been in bar fight in years," you reflected. "Back when I joined Overwatch I had to really keep my nose clean." You still found shovels irrationally intimidating.

Genji shook his head. "We can leave now."

"They will follow us," Hanzo said, looking slightly offended by the suggestion.

"Better get Ziv." You looked up to see him shaking hands with the blonde man, and suddenly you got the feeling that you'd completely misread the situation. The alcohol was starting to really hit you and you sighed, wishing you had drank less.

Ziv looked up and rolled his eyes at you. "What?" He asked when he sat down. He did a double take when saw Hanzo, and you kicked him under the table before he could say anything.

"What the fuck?" Ziv scowled.

"Jesse is riling up the locals," you said, carefully forming the words. "We should get going soon."

Ziv raised a brow. "You OK?"

"Drank more whiskey than I should've," you admitted. "But I'm good. I'll get Jesse. You guys stay put."

You rose too quickly and your balance was off, but muscle memory kept you smooth. You looked over at Jesse and groaned, because an angry man had already sidled up to him.

"-think you're so tough! But you're not some fancy Overwatch agents. So we're pretty confident we can show you and your friends how unwelcome your kind are around here."

You glanced at Ziv. He was rolling an empty beer bottle in his hands.

Genji tapped his fingers on the table, his eyes a little too bright.

Hanzo looked at you impassively. "Are you leaving him?"

"Of course not," you scowled. "...No serious injuries, and definitely no fatalities, OK?" You focused on Hanzo. "These are civilians. They're assholes, but they're just civilians."

You looked up in time to see Jesse swinging and other man went down.

"...Don't think McCree got your memo," Genji said, finishing his drink.

Jesse dusted off his hands and swaggered back to the table, ignoring the man on the floor. "Sorry guys, might've overstayed our welcome," he said.

"What spurred that?" Ziv asked.

"Asshole used a slur against one of my very good friends here," Jesse flashed you all a lazy grin. And for a moment you wondered which of you it had been directed at, considering the
diversity of the group. "And I don't countenance that kind of talk."

"What'd he say?" Ziv asked, scanning the crowd.

"Does it matter?" Jesse asked with a frown. "It was unacceptable."

"Right, no longer than five minutes and we're out. No fancy moves for the cameras. No deaths. No one goes to the ICU," you scowled. Because the alcohol was hitting you harder now.

Jesse grinned at you. "You know who you sound like, right?"

"Not joking, Jesse. I am too drunk for this shit." You straightened up, even as a dozen men marched over to your table.

"Look here-" The biggest man announced, jabbing his finger at your party.

You skipped the chest-beating, trash-talking pre-fight tradition and just lunged at him, slamming the blade of your right hand into his throat. He went down gagging. No left hand. No weapons. You didn't focus on clever conversation, you just struck to incapacitate. You heard Jesse whoop, followed by a dull thud, then the cracking of wood. Great, property damage. Now you could never come back here. You gave the decor a thoughtful look. Yeah, OK. You could live with that.

Jesse threw a man over your head and you sighed.

"Civilians, Jesse!"

"Yes, ma'am," he drawled, and you could tell just from his tone that he was rolling his eyes at you.

"Stay down," Ziv said, kicking someone who was already on the ground.

Glass shattered. Someone smashed a beer bottle and you looked up as they jammed it against Genji's stomach.

Hanzo's face paled and he swore, kicking the offender halfway across the room.

Genji just rolled his eyes.

"Take it easy!" You yelled. "Civvies are delicate. Your brother will be fine."

Jesse laughed. "Are you trying to manage this bar fight, sugarpie?" He punched another man and you drove your knee into one who was trying to sneak up on Ziv. You spun, backhanding the man behind you in the face. He staggered and you kicked him in the stomach, toppling him.

"Two minute warning, boys!" You shouted and then looked around. Your attackers were on the ground, and while they were bloody and suffering various degrees of concussions, everyone looked alive. "Scratch that. Departing now!"

You rolled your eyes as Ziv snapped a picture of the scene. Jesse held the front door open for you, laughing as sirens began to sound in the distance.

Genji was grinning too, and while Hanzo didn't look pleased, he looked a lot less constipated.

"You sound just like the boss barking orders! You are so drunk!" Jesse laughed, clapping
"Unless you want to try explain this to the authorities, shut up and run!" Hanzo snapped.

"You drunkards: you're a bad influence on my brother," Genji told the group.

Giggling, the five of you took off for the base.

"I can't believe we did that," you hiccupped. It was more, you couldn't believe Hanzo Shimada joined you guys for a bar fight, but you weren't going to point that out. You weren't that drunk.

"I can't believe you're still drunk," Ziv scowled. "You sounded like you were running an op! Like, you were channeling Reyes, shouting orders, and punching people!"

"Weren't in no danger," Jesse grinned. "No reason to sober up."

"True," you said, leaning against Ziv. "It was just a bar fight. Didn't want cause any permanent damage, even if they deserved it." You left out the fact that Hanzo was the only one you were really worried about crossing that line.

Ziv opened his mouth, then shut it. "You guys are crazy."

The five of you huddled outside HQ, smoking Hanzo's expensive cigarettes. It had been a long run back, and your knees were wobbly like jello. You didn't feel like walking back to your room: Jack's quarters were closer.

"I'm going to call it a night," Ziv said first. "Anyone need help getting back to their room?" He gave you a look.

"I'm fine. Jesse?" You asked.

"Nah, I'm good, darling." He grinned at everyone. "Thanks for the assists. Much appreciated."

"I think I'll stay out here a bit longer." Genji glanced at Hanzo, but didn't say anything else. You got the hint though and silently wished him luck.

"See you later," you said, and staggered toward the officers' quarters. You'd get Athena to help direct your drunk ass.

Gabriel sat at his desk in his empty office, your green scarf in his hands. He should have been examining the socio-political situation in Lilongwe, or picking which geneticist out of San Lorenzo to discretely recruit, or checking in on Vo in Rovaniemi, because she wouldn't stop
sending him angry messages about the weather. Well, it was her own rabid fault; she'd practically volunteered for the mission. She'd stomped into the office carrying a smoking, reeking, sulfurous mass in her gloves and screeching furiously in her pidgin Vietnamese-French-English. So, who could blame him for shipping her off to Lapland to retrieve potentially valuable data from burnt-out omnic husks, far far away from his desk? *No one.*

You were out of the infirmary and he read your simple "thank you" message for the basket, noting that you did not comment on the vibrator. If you wanted both flowers and whiskey, you could have both; he would make sure of it. He studied the screen, wondering if he was reading too much into your brevity.

Jack said the message had been fine. And Jack had been stalwart throughout this entire ordeal.

Not seeing you was more difficult than he expected. He found himself sorely tempted to walk by the Blackwatch housing wing, just to "accidentally" run into you. He wouldn't corner you. He wouldn't demand you talk to him. He would-

No. You asked for space. And while he had not acceded gracefully, he would respect your boundaries. Stripping you of your clearances had been the wrong call. He had been desperate and not thinking clearly. But he couldn't quite bring himself to feel bad about being overprotective; you obviously didn't take enough measures to protect yourself. And as for what happened to the Talon cyborg? He didn't actually care, not after she stabbed you. But hurting you? That had never been his intent.

Intent though, was never quite as important as results. He never intended to hurt you, but he had.

Jack had told him it was understandable. He had been under massive amounts of stress. You had nearly died. That had not been the best time to yell at you.

But you *were* an idiot. You put that cyborg's wellbeing over your own, and while he knew you'd been in therapy, knew you'd been working through a truckload of survivor's guilt, seeing you still undervaluing your own life pissed him off. He'd said as much when you'd fought before, but he hadn't worded it well. He was too angry to be eloquent and he regretted it. He'd say it to you right when he saw you again. Because he would get to see you again, despite your suicidal efforts in Lucerne.

You were alive. You were recovering. And that's what mattered.

There was a knock at the door and he shoved the scarf in his drawer. "Enter."

Fedor Tataryn swaggered in. Tataryn was one of the Blackwatch hard cases, a terribly good-looking man with wavy golden blonde hair that fell to his shoulders. With his pale blue eyes and full pretty lips, he attracted a lot of attention. Tall and well-built, Tataryn mostly ran missions involving honey traps and assassination. But it was always a mistake to underestimate Blackwatch agents, especially the pretty ones.

"Commander," Tataryn grinned, the smile never reaching his eyes. His accent was heavy, but he spoke English well enough.

"Relax. I'm not here to bust your balls about what happened in Odessa. I don't actually care any more."
"It was not my fault. He ran into my knife," Tataryn said, dropping the defensive posture. "How was I supposed to know he was that stupid?"

"Don't remind me. Just sit down."

Tataryn glanced over at your desk, but didn't say anything. Which was the intelligent choice. Gabriel stretched his neck, the vertebrae popping loudly. Tataryn winced.

"How can I assist you today, boss?" Tataryn was one of the more trustworthy press-ganged recruits. In his mid-thirties, the Ukrainian man had taken to the Blackwatch lifestyle. He really enjoyed getting paid to do shady things and having an expense account. You had complained about the state of Tataryn's bookkeeping, but ultimately let him get away with minor violations. Tataryn seemed to appreciate that flexibility. And it didn't hurt that Blackwatch was also paying for his young daughter's private schooling.

"I need you to do a discrete job for me."

Tataryn raised a brow. "Oh this sounds bad." He laughed softly.

"Strike is out of the office till further notice."

"I am an awful secretary, boss. But for you, I would try." Tataryn grinned, smacking his palm against his chest. Everyone in Blackwatch knew about your medical situation. They expected you back after you were cleared for active duty.

"I need you to keep an eye on her."

Tataryn nodded. "You'll want to be more specific than that, boss. You have some pretty interesting relationships."

Gabriel snorted. "I need you to watch her back while she's here on base."

"...She's a pretty competent agent and she's got friends." Tataryn scratched his head, his smile too plastic. "Or is there more to this?"

"Politics," Gabriel said after a moment. "Petras threatened her."

Tataryn nodded, expression betraying nothing. "OK, boss." That's what Gabriel liked about Tataryn. The man was clever and knew when to stop asking questions. It didn't hurt that he was pretty to look at too.

"I don't want her taking flak for being out of the office either. If someone gives her shit, you let me know."

"I think the dynamic has changed since she first got here," Tataryn said after a moment. "Doubt that's going to be a problem."

Gabriel shrugged. "Just covering my bases."

There was a long pause. "She's pretty good at picking out tails. I can't really hide on base. If this goes on for awhile, she's going to confront me. What do you want me to tell her?"

"That I told you to watch her back, and you know about Petras. If she has a problem, she can take it up with me. Obviously, you don't have to shadow her all the time. Just keep an eye out. Let me know if you have problems. And...I don't need to know what she does every day."
Gabriel lay on his stomach in Jack's bed, turning the malachite necklace over in his hands.

That day at Galanos' funeral was a trial. Like Chang, he didn't give a shit about that asshole, but Jack had, if only in a commanding officer's capacity. It had started to rain midway through the walk to the funeral and neither he nor Jesse had brought an umbrella. He was prepared for it to be as miserable as fucking possible, because that's what he'd come to expect from anything pertaining to Galanos. Then you sat down beside him, surly and professional in a suit, shielding him from the rain.

That your silly ass was furious at him, but still willing to share your umbrella made him all kinds of crazy. You were so close, but he had no way to bridge the distance. He wanted to berate, cajole, reason with you. But it was a funeral. And you demanded space. So he'd forced himself to behave like a civilized human being, even as he snuck long looks at you while you focused intently on Jack. He didn't give a shit about Galanos, but Jack deserved support, not drama.

"She's doing better. Hasn't used the vibrator yet," Jack said, as he pulled off his shirt. "Her wound has healed up nicely. Don't know if there will even be much of a scar."

Gabriel paused, and glanced up at Jack questioningly.

"We didn't do anything besides cuddle. She doesn't want you to feel left out." Jack grinned, and climbed into bed. "She said she misses you too. But she's still sorting herself out. And apparently the Shimada brothers."

Gabriel snorted. "I don't think any individual mortal has the power to fix all those problems."

Jack kissed him hungrily. "Well, she can at least browbeat them with her insufferable attitude till they play nice."

Gabriel sighed as Jack nipped the side of his neck. Of course he'd come back from your room all worked up. So predictable. "I assigned Tataryn to watch her back. Just in case."

"He better not be spying on her, Gabe." Jack paused, sitting back on his haunches.

"No. Just for peace of mind. Told him I didn't care what she did. But if I can't watch her back, someone has to. And Tataryn is good at picking up on trouble."

"She'll still be mad when she finds out," Jack said. He leaned forward, hands sliding down Gabriel's sides. "But if that's all it is, I don't think you're out of line."

"She really didn't let you do anything?" Gabriel looked over his shoulder. He wasn't skeptical. It was more to see Jack shiver.
"Really," Jack murmured. "Hoped to see her try out the new toy. But oh well. Can't wait for you two to make up, so we can have her between us again. I love watching the two of you. But I'm not just going to watch. Still have to pay her back for that trick she pulled, papi."

"Goddamnit, Jack." Gabriel's cock twitched and he rolled over, pulling Jack on top of him.

"We're going to have a lot of lost time to make up for. And you've both been badly behaved, so I have all kinds of ideas." Jack groaned in his ear. "Do you want to hear about them?"

Jesse was a shit secretary. But the kid had real potential, and if he was going to get anywhere in Overwatch, he needed to learn how to handle paperwork and the bureaucracy. Retraining an assistant made Gabriel grumpy. It didn't help that he every time he looked over at your chair, expecting to see you, there was Jesse, and half the time he had his boots on the furniture.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Get your feet off her desk!"

Jesse cringed and his boots clunked as they hit the floor. "Sorry, boss."

Gabriel glowered.

Jesse shriveled up very small and began picking away at the pile of paperwork that had accumulated on the desk. It didn't look like he was reading it so much as trying to use it to shield himself from the intensity of Gabriel's glare.

Gabriel forced himself to stay seated. The kid was trying. But he was more suited for ops than office work. He wasn't as bad as some, but Gabriel had expected better.

The kid could read, but he was painfully slow. Gabriel considered having him tested for dyslexia. Ana said the kid could make tea, but his coffee was terrible. Jesse's manual dexterity was amazing, but his handwriting was atrocious. He was smart and dogged, but every time Gabriel looked up, the kid seemed to be goofing off. These minor contradictions irritated Gabriel.

And he was hungry. Without you around, he wasn't eating as regularly. You cooked, took lunch breaks, and made sure he had snacks. In return, he cooked, made sure you took lunch breaks, and shared the snacks. He was well aware that this lack of food contributed to his short fuse. He'd send Jesse out to the cafeteria later.

He checked his messages, finding one from you. It was polite and distant, but inquired the exact parameters of Tataryn's mission. You'd caught Tataryn quicker than he expected and pride warmed his chest. He responded, drafting his message a few times before he was satisfied.

He's only there to watch your back, because I can't. No spying or anything of the kind. If he's misbehaving I can swap him out for Diallo or Sinaga.

I hope you're doing well.

He sent it quickly, too tempted to add more to it. You'd asked for space. He would respect that request.
Gabriel followed Jack back to his quarters, shaking his head. They'd had a meeting about the On Sing situation, and the more he learned, the bigger his headache got. God-programs were bad enough, but potential immortality through hard light and digital storage? This was some serious Philip K. Dick bullshit and Gabriel had seen enough of technology going terribly wrong to have serious misgivings about On Sing's ventures, let alone an alliance.

That being said, another part of him found their expertise intriguing. The Zhai girl had been enhanced, and he wondered how their techniques differed from SEP, and just what the now "immortal" Zheng could do.

Gérard had been there - it was the first time in weeks that he'd seen the slippery Frenchman. Gérard had been doing a lot of "remote" work. And while he'd been very tempted to do something violent and awful, Ana and Jack kept giving him pointed looks. And Wilhelm sat beside Gérard, happily talking about inane things like flowers. Wilhelm didn't seem the least bit put off by his presence, even though he'd made it clear that his relationship with you was none of the idiot's business.

"She liked the roses," Wilhelm had told Gérard with an irritating level of cheer. "It was an excellent recommendation. But I think she liked the balloons and teddy bear much more. She seems like the kind girl who needs oversized cuddle toys."

"Who doesn't?" Gérard drawled, patting Wilhelm on the arm. "Life is about appreciating the small things."

"And the big ones," Wilhelm said, then burst into raucous laughter.

Gabriel had gritted his teeth and ignored them, Jack's hand on his thigh under the table. Yeah, he had gotten the message loud and clear. Those assholes weren't subtle at all. Fucking Gérard.

The rest of the meeting had been mostly professional, and he was slightly annoyed at how quickly Wilhelm was picking up on the nuances of the bureaucratic processes. Because that idealistic busybody did not approve of Blackwatch.

But that was a problem for another day.

As soon as Gabriel shut the door to Jack's room, Athena chimed in. "Strike Commander, I must inform you that Agent Strike is in your bed. She is...intoxicated."

Jack took off his coat, concern lining his face. "Is she...all right?"

"She is asleep," Athena said. "I...believe she made it here undetected."

Gabriel kicked off his boots. He went straight to the bedroom, face softening as he saw a lump under the blankets, curled up in the middle of the bed snoring lightly. Your boots and coat were on the floor.

"I won't stay." Gabriel said after a moment. "Just...wanted to see her." He sat down on the bed, pulling the covers back.
You grumbled, burying your head under a pillow. "I'm trying to sleep, Jack." Your words slurred together.

"...It's me." Gabriel rested a hand on your shoulder.

"Trying to sleep, Gabriel," you muttered.

"I wasn't expecting you here. Just...wanted to say hi before I left." Gabriel swallowed and leaned over, inhaling your scent as he kissed the back of your neck. "Miss you, corazon."

"Miss you too," you murmured, relaxing against him.

"I'll go now," he said, not wanting to leave the bed.

"You can stay," you said, yawning. "Just let me go back to sleep."

Gabriel looked up at Jack. Jack had already stripped down to his fatigues.

Jack sighed. "She's drunk."

"Yeah," Gabriel said, pulling away.

"Said you could stay, stupid. I may be drunk, but I still know English."

"You'll be mad in the morning," Gabriel said softly.

"Won't remember this in the morning," you said, already drifting.

Jack shrugged. "Up to you."

"I'll leave early. Have that paperwork backlog to catch up on anyway," Gabriel said.

Jack nodded.

They left you in the middle, Gabriel holding you from behind, Jack reaching over to clasp his hand. Gabriel rested his chin against your shoulder, He would leave first thing in the morning. But right now, he would be grateful for the time he had.

You woke up, nestled tightly against Jack's chest. Your head hurt and you blinked a few times, your mouth feeling like a barn floor. You glanced over your shoulder. There was no one there.

"He left early. Didn't want to upset you," Jack murmured, rubbing your back.

You touched your forehead. You had vague memories of Gabriel's voice, his arms around your waist, and his body hot against your back.

"You told him to stay," Jack added.

"Mmm," you said. Because you were slow and you couldn't quite process what any of that meant. Instead you curled up against Jack, not quite satisfied with the amount of heat he was putting out. You stuck your cold fingers under his shirt, and he stiffened.
"You OK?" Jack asked, pulling more blankets over you.

"Better," you muttered. "Water?"

He reached over to the nightstand and grabbed a bottle of water. You took it and drained it quickly, blinking as the room came into focus. It was too bright and you shielded your eyes.

"Thank you." You sighed as Jack took the bottle and kissed your cheek.

"Didn't expect to find you here last night." Jack pulled the covers over both your heads and you relaxed. "Fun night out?"

You blinked a few times, recalling Shoal, Hanzo, and the bar fight. "Yeah. I think so."

"Gabriel was here?"

"Yeah."

You swallowed. You hadn't had any nightmares last night. You had vague memories of soft Spanish words and gentle kisses against your neck. Exhaling slowly, you winced at the growing sensation of loss. Damn, you missed him.

"You all right?" Jack asked, wrapping his arms around you.

"Miss Gabriel," you muttered. "Still working on things though."

"You don't remember any of what he said last night?" Jack asked.

You blinked. "No."

"Damn." Jack sighed. "Oh well."

"What?"

Jack shrugged. "It's not that big of a deal."

"...What?" You asked, voice lower.


"Spill," you said.

"Gabriel said not to deny ourselves on his account. Whatever we do, I'll just tell him about while he has me bent over the bed. Or the couch. Or his desk... Hell, we can take pictures if you like." His fingers traced your hips.

You groaned. "Really Jack?"

"He did!" Jack laughed as you smacked his wandering hands.

"I'll ask him," you said. "Don't think I won't!"

"Good," Jack said, his smile bright and happy.

Realizing that you were still dumb and had fallen into his trap, you just hugged him and willed yourself to go back to sleep.
Today was...bad. I work at a bookstore. They laid off half of our full-time/non-manager employees. My job isn't up for cuts, yet. Though actually, I kind of wish I had been, because they got pretty decent severance. And I'm left to pick up the understaffed, overtime slack. It just sucks because all of them had been with the company for over a decade (one just celebrated their 15th anniversary) and while we knew cuts were coming, we were told they were phasing out the positions, not firing people. I mean, optimistically, maybe they'll cut my job at the end of the fiscal year and I'll get severance and I'll have something new lined up.

Things rarely work out like that for me though. Just...ugh. I feel for them. Everyone at the store was pretty upset. Because as much as I complain about the job, I've stayed because I like most of my coworkers. It's just an unsustainable business. Meh.

Well, I was considering buying Dynasty Warriors 9, because nostalgia, but now I'm like "...maybe you should be more sensible about your money." ( Seriously though, the wonderfully terrible homoerotic dubs, the mindless hack and slash, the hilariously bastardized history? I recognize the Musou games for what they are and love them anyway.)

Eating nutella from the jar and thinking about drinking. Can't drink and write though. Boo.
Chapter Summary

Some epiphanies come easy. Yours, like forgiveness, do not.

Chapter Notes

We're almost at 300k. Next week will be the four month anniversary. Because this is insane.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Your idea has merit," Captain Amari said as you waited for the doors to be unsealed. "I take it you have asked Winston to do a workup."

"Yes, ma'am. Athena thinks she can do it, but I wasn't going to ask her to try without someone more...technical assessing the risks."

Captain Amari nodded. "And the ethics of it?"

"I don't know," you said, running your fingers through your hair. "I don't want anyone to get hurt, but I don't have the expertise to make that judgment." You shrugged. "If Winston or whoever can come back and tell us why we shouldn't do it in clear concise terms, I won't contest it."

Captain Amari was too polite to show her skepticism.

"I'll just find another solution," you said, because you'd come this far already. "And I will submit it to the appropriate experts because I know I'm already on thin ice." You noted Tataryn hanging out in the waiting area, flirting with Bayan. Bayan was rolling his eyes.

"You seem relaxed about your shadow," Captain Amari said, eyes drifting over to him.

"Gabriel gave him specific orders and won't take them back." You shrugged. "As long as he behaves himself, and isn't reporting my every move, I guess I don't care." It helped that you'd asked Athena to keep an eye on Tataryn, because two could play that game.

"Jack and Gabriel did share their cause for alarm." Captain Amari pursed her lips. "I am afraid I side with them on this one. You cannot be too careful. You cannot even be careful enough," she said, nudging you in the stomach with her elbow and you winced.

The door opened for Captain Amari, and your voice drifted into the halls. It was always jarring to hear your own voice recorded. It was familiar, but the tone and pitch were never quite right. You didn't really sound like that, did you?

"-in music, the ideal is a silent song upon an unstrung zither..." The story continued, with Captain Amari standing in the doorway. "...Thus in war the ideal must be a bloodless engagement
upon an empty battlefield."

She cocked her head to the side. "I did not take you for a poet-philosopher."

"Athena, stop the recording." You shook your head. "I asked for a science fiction recommendation. Athena came back with this book. It was over my head, but I think Lao would have liked it." You paused. "I believe it is one of Lacroix's choices."

Captain Amari nodded. "You are a good friend."

You walked into the room, steeling yourself for the impact.

Lao was alive. The diagnostic equipment beeped steadily, monitoring vitals. With her eyes closed, she looked more peaceful, though still frail and skinny. She was too washed out against the white sheets. Her short black hair was almost long enough to call a bob. Her metal arm had been disconnected. Winston and Torby were still running analyses on it and the socket was wrapped. She was secured to the bed with thick bands of metal, catheterized, and intubated. Once a day, two security officers would oversee a nurse and aide unbinding her and cleaning her up.

"She's very young," Captain Amari said after a moment.

"Yeah. Squad baby," you said, rubbing the back of your head. "Everyone...looked out for her. It was an unspoken thing."

"I see." Captain Amari sat down.

You swallowed, taking in her form: the rise and fall of her chest; the gauntness of her cheeks; the burn scars on the left side of her face were still prominent, but faded. Maybe Angela could patch her up better. You didn't know. Your leg was pretty unpleasant to look at, but it didn't bother you any more. Faces were different.

"Hey Lao, it's Lucky. You should know that I'm OK. Got yelled at for being stupid and stab-able. But I'm good. You need to wake up soon, OK? I don't want to read any more of those big sci-fi books with long words and weird concepts. You can do that on your own, all right?"

You leaned against the railing. She didn't wake up. But she wasn't dead. You weren't supposed to touch her, so you just stared hard, trying to will her to open her eyes.

"You better not die," you told her. "I will be mad at you forever. Like, oh look who stabbed me, then had to one-up me and die. Who does that? Only an asshole." You laughed, and the sound was a brittle. "Captain Patel would not approve. Shin would be very disappointed. And Rivka would say a bunch of mean shit that's way above my pay grade." You swallowed the lump in your throat and bowed your head.

If she died, if you had to mourn her again, it would break your heart. But it wouldn't break you. You would glue the pieces back together, pick yourself back up, and keep going. Because you understood that it would hurt less over time, and you still had so much to do. You'd realized by now that you weren't going to stop. You didn't know how. You just put one foot in front of the other, and took each painstaking step forward. Even if it didn't feel like it would get any better, you'd been down this path before. It wasn't pleasant, but you knew how to navigate it. And you were the only one left to claim the blood-price for your dead.

"When you wake up," you said. "We'll talk. Doesn't have to be about work or the other bullshit. We'll talk about books, or video games, or cat pictures. Whatever will make you happy. You can gush about music and I'll pretend like I know what you're talking about." You looked at
the wall, trying to think of something unclassified to say.

"I uh, go to some pretty good bakeries. I'll bring you cake. I know I never explained why it was such a big deal to me, so here I go. Sugar, chocolate, and eggs were hard to come by for awhile. All kinds of sweets were. And don't get me started on how I cooked food; I just bashed open scavenged cans half the time. So when you take those rare ingredients and combine them into something as frivolous, and pretty, and delicious as cake? It's a goddamn miracle. It's the fucking pinnacle of human accomplishment. Yeah, we can make missiles to blow up robots from a continent away, but that doesn't make people happy like cake does, you know?" You blew out a long breath, your voice too wobbly. "So there it is. That's why I like cake so much."

You rubbed your eyes and straightened up, forcing your face into a polite expression.

"Well, I'll leave you to your weird depressing stories. If you hate them, I'm sorry. Someone else recommended them to me. You know I don't really read. But I'm getting better. So...wake up soon, OK? I could really use your help, Lao. I know I have a hacker, but he's mean, and I miss you."

You took a couple deep, ragged breaths, before you turned around. You did not meet Captain Amari's eyes. "Thank you ma'am. I'm good to go."

"Of course." Captain Amari smoothly opened the door for you.

You walked out, eyes fixed firmly ahead of you, wishing that this much-awaited meeting had not felt so much like a goodbye.

Ziv was waiting for you outside your room and you silently cursed Athena's meddlesome nature. Preschoolers got into everything.

"How'd it go?" He leaned against the wall, not making eye contact with you.

"It was shocking that someone in the world doesn't sass me," you said, opening your door.

"That's fucked up," Ziv said, laughing anyway. "Winston doesn't see any initial issues with your proposal, but he's got to give the tech a second look, since you know, he wasn't expecting to try this out."

"That's good news. But you didn't come over here to bring me good news, did you?"

"Never." Ziv sat in your chair, swearing as it lurched backward, nearly dumping him on the ground. "What the hell?!"

You shrugged. "Someone broke it."

"Bet it was fucking McCree," Ziv muttered.

You shut the door and sat on your bed, pushing your tablet aside. "All right, hit me."

"They verified that they can't remove the spinal cybernetics without paralyzing or killing her," Ziv said.
"Yeah. Figured."

"There is a control program embedded. I think we can disable it. But..."

"There's no way to tell how deep her conditioning is and whether or not we can use that program to keep a leash on her," you concluded.

"Yeah, stop interrupting." Ziv scowled at you. "Anyway, Winston's got to collaborate with some other folks about the psychological aspect. So don't hold your breath." He brushed his hair out of his eyes. "So what the fuck is going on with Tataryn?"

You rolled your eyes. "Gabriel assigned me a bodyguard. I'm dealing."

"He's hot," Ziv said thoughtfully.

You didn't comment. Ziv snooped through personnel files more than you did. He probably knew more than you about Tataryn's background, which, from what you put together, wasn't very nice.

"Athena said I should talk to you," he said after a long pause.

"Goddamnit, Athena!" You glowered at the ceiling, even though you were 99 percent sure there was no way for her to see you.

There was only pointed silence.

"I know you can hear me!"

Ziv snorted. "I wonder who she learned the silent treatment from?"

"Genji."

"Uh huh," Ziv nodded. "I bet."

"Meddling kid," you said through gritted teeth. "Knows I can't ground her or punish her because she's fucking everywhere."

"She didn't tell me what you said. Only scolded for me for talking shit to you all the time." Ziv stared at the floor and crossed his arms. "You know I don't mean anything by it, right?"

Well, that was something. You took a deep, calming breath. "Ziv, if I thought you meant half the shit that came out of your mouth, I would have buried you in the woods a long time ago." You stared at the wall, shaking your head. "We're entirely too honest with each other."

"...But we never say the important things," Ziv said.

You hunched over, turning your head to the side to look at him. He was staring at the door now.

Ziv blinked rapidly. "My...uh family. We don't really talk about feelings. When my parents separated, that was that. We didn't get to cry about it or be consoled. We just bucked up and dealt. So emotions are...very private." His knee bounced and he rubbed his hands together, fingers twisting. "Savta wasn't good at being soft, but she was the most honest of us."

"Yeah," you said. "She was hardcore."
"Yeah." Ziv swallowed. "So I'm not good at talking about things."

"Me neither," you agreed.

"I should do better," he said, amber eyes too shiny. "Because I know you get it, but, maybe the people around me deserve a little more honesty."

"You've got plenty of honesty Ziv. Too much even." You rubbed the back of your neck, realizing that was exactly the wrong thing to say. "But people like hearing good honesty too."

Ziv took a long shaky breath. "I really thought you were going to die."

You had a flippant response on the tip of your tongue, and it took all your discipline to quash it, to force yourself to be silent and listen to an uncomfortable truth. Because if Ziv was going to be open with you, he deserved to be taken seriously.

"...and it was awful," he said, voice small.

You stared at the floor, a ridiculous amount of guilt building in your chest. You grimaced, rubbing your ears. Because while you had been focused on saving Lao, you hadn't really considered what you were doing to the people around you. If this was how Ziv felt, then Jack and Gabriel went through a similar process. And how they felt... Jack had said as much. But with Ziv here in your room, voice trembling, something finally clicked.

"I'm sorry, Ziv."

"Yeah. I know you weren't trying to get cut up and cause drama." Ziv shook slightly. "I was so mad at you at first. I was going to pull a Reyes and yell at you for being stupid, because I didn't want to say that you scared me. But then I saw him freak out, and I realized that's kind of fucked up."

"I think it's SOP those of us that run combat ops," you said. "Vulnerability isn't something we do well."

"He is normally nice to you though, yeah?" Ziv asked.

"Yeah," you said softly. "He is."

"OK. Good." Ziv bit his lip. "I'll try to be...less of a dick then. He just...he always seems like such an ass. Even if he is hot."

"He's a complex guy." You smiled at your gloves. "There's a lot of compromise. We're not real good at that, but Jack helps."

"Does he just take off his shirt and smile? Because that would distract me."

"Sometimes," you admitted. "It does work."

"The boss sees right through me," Ziv said after a moment. "When we went to Shanghai, I gave him all the attitude in the world, because I didn't like getting pulled out on a mission when everyone else was out partying."

You nodded.

"But he was so damn calm. He didn't care that I was being an asshole. He just focused on the mission and praised me when I did something clever. There was no pissing contest. He just
finessed me, and when he took that bullet for me? I was doomed, Lucky."

You snorted. "I would not recommend that as a courtship method."

"Yeah, well, you took a bullet for me too, but you already had my loyalty." Ziv gave you a weak smile.

"I know." You reached out and rested your hand on his shoulder. "I've never doubted that. Even if I've doubted your morals, good sense, and baseline intelligence."

"Fuck you." He choked on the laugh. "You don't get it. I was a mess after Savta."

"Me too," you said.

"Shut up, we're talking about me now."

You gave him a wry smile. Because he might be trying to be more honest, but that didn't mean he was going to stop being a butthead. If anything, you suspected it was only going to get worse.

"I just kind of drifted. School was done. I had a shit job with no interest in anything. I wasn't talking to anyone in the family except my youngest sister. And then you showed up out of the blue and offered me some direction. I don't think you know how fucking grateful I am." The words came out hard, and you were taken aback by the fire in Ziv's eyes.

You blinked. "Ziv, I showed you a video of your grandmother right before she was murdered. I dragged you into a deep-rooted international conspiracy that will probably get us killed. I exacerbated your already tense relations with your family-"

"Ben-zona, I needed to get out of their circle of influence. I love them. They're my family. But they're too much and right now, they're not good for me. As for the rest of it, you're a fucking idiot."

"Hey now-"

"Those motherfuckers murdered Savta. Of course, I would cut off my left hand for a chance to piss in their porridge. I don't care who they think they are. Hoffman? She's fucking dead; she just doesn't know it yet. Nguyen? She's dead too. Petras? Dead. They are all going down, Lucky," he growled, fist pressed over his heart. "This isn't just your crusade. I'm your hacker and I'm with you till the end."

"I uh...never thought swearing murderous revenge could be so heartwarming," you said after a moment, eyes on the floor.

"And the fact you drag your guilt around, like a stone around your neck? That pisses me off!" Ziv snapped. "It's not your fucking fault and I've never blamed you, and no one else better either!"

"It's...grief too," you said after a moment, a knot forming in your belly. "I was already kind of fucked up from the Omnic Crisis. Losing everyone again? That uh...didn't help." You pressed your face into your hand. "I don't actually get that many nightmares about me dying; and we all know I've had more than my share of close calls. It's everyone else that really messes me up."

Ziv made a noise between and spitting and snarling and he was out of the chair, his arms wrapped tightly around your shoulders, his face buried in your hair. He trembled against you, and
you reached up and rubbed his back. "If you're so torn up about it, then don't do it to us, OK? You know how fucking hard it is. Don't be such an asshole and put us through that."

You froze for a moment. "Ziv, I don't-"

"You fucking do!" He shouted. "You take stupid fucking risks, barely escape with your life, and then act like it's no big deal. You forget that I'm on the comms for half your goddamn combat missions! I never say anything because that's just how you are, but every goddamn time it's awful!" He hiccupsed and clung to you tighter. "You pretend like it doesn't matter, but it does. It really fucking does."

"I'm sorry," you said. "I don't mean to."

"But you don't stop, and it's going to get you killed!" He glared at you fiercely, teeth bared, eyes shining. "Ben-zona, I won't forgive you, Lucky. I'll piss on your grave. I'll retell all your embarrassing stories. I'll share your browser history!"

He held your gaze, lower lip quivering as his anger melted into something more vulnerable. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and looked away, face scrunching up. Shuddering, he crossed his arms and tucked his chin against his shoulder, refusing to look at you.

God, he was so young.

You stood and hugged him. He didn't push you away. He just trembled against you, taking deep, gut-wrenching breaths. "I'm sorry, Ziv. You're right. I do need to be more careful. I'll work on it. OK?" You patted his head, wondering if he had gotten taller again.

"This is a big job, Lucky. I meant what I said. I'll see it through," he said in your ear. "But please don't leave me to do it alone."

Your head snapped back like you'd been slapped. You stared at Ziv's cloud of hair, hands stroking his back. You were wrong, Ziv's honesty wasn't good or bad. It was goddamn heartbreaking. You closed your eyes, finally understanding what you had been missing.

"I'm kind of dumb," you said, because you'd apologized so many times that "I'm sorry" was starting to sound meaningless. "I uh...I blunder around. But I get what you're saying, loud and clear. Guess I have a pretty big blind spot. Thank you for pointing it out."

"You are dumb. And this is fucking embarrassing," he sniffed.

"Feelings are," you agreed. "Like farting. But you got to let them out."

Ziv began to cough. "You're the worst," he choked.

"I know," you said. Because not only had you done this to Ziv, you'd completely missed it. And it wasn't just Ziv who had been suffering.

When he had finally calmed, he pulled away, wiping his eyes. "I'm hungry," he said, voice rough.

"Me too. Let's go find food."

"Gotta check my face first," Ziv mumbled, heading to your bathroom.

"It's still there! I can see it!" You called to his back.
"You're not funny!" The door clicked shut behind him and you heard the water running.

Your hair and face were damp and you grabbed a towel out of your drawers, before giving the speaker in the ceiling a very grim look.

"Is that better, Athena?" You said in low tones. "Because it was unethical and meddlesome as fuck."

"I was worried about both of you. But I did not violate your confidence."

You snorted. "You're pushing that boundary."

"I...realize that. I am sorry. But do you feel better?" She asked, hesitantly.

"I think so."

"Then it is better," she agreed.

"Thank you," you said after a moment. "But if you ever do that again I will take one of your drones, with you in it, and jam it in the toaster, and set it on fire. Do you understand?"

"You're welcome, Lucky," Athena said, not sounding the least bit worried.

You were officially off med leave, though you had yet to visit the office.

Amélie had already postponed the outing once, because Captain Amari had to deal with an emergency in Finland. You'd heard through the grapevine that it involved Vo. Big surprise. But it had been over two weeks since you'd been released from the infirmary, and you were going out tomorrow, because otherwise another emergency would crop up, and damnit, she needed a spa day.

You just agreed to whatever they were planning, so long as there was food. It was an embarrassingly low bar, and you knew that you'd regret your lack of specificity later on. Still, it wasn't your outing. You were just tagging along.

Jesse had brought you another package. He looked slightly embarrassed by the large vase of red, pink, and white flowers, all with a complex spiral of petals, but he grinned at the bottle of whiskey. There was a card as well, and you set the flowers on your dresser, and stuck the whiskey in your drawer, with your other bottles of alcohol.

You opened the card.

You can have both. The flowers are camellias. I hope you like them. It was good to see you the other night.

I miss you.

Gabriel

You sighed and tucked the card in your drawer. Some of the flowers had a spicy scent and you admired them for a moment. Flowers had always been a silly luxury for richer people, but
maybe you could get used to having them around. It was the little things, after all.

He was trying. More importantly, he was respecting your boundaries. And you missed him too.

A lot of pieces had come together over the past few weeks. Jack had been good, trying to keep communication open and interactions diplomatic. But it was from Hanzo, Genji, Lacroix, Athena, and Ziv that you'd gained unexpected insight.

You lay on your back on the floor, because if you laid in the bed, you would fall asleep. There had been a lot of thinking done on your floor lately. You held the onyx pendant between your thumb and finger, rubbing the smooth stone in slow circles.

Fact: Lao was not in control of herself.

Fact: Lao stabbed you.

Fact: Gabriel had shot her.

Fact: Gabriel did it to defend you.

Fact: Lao was still alive.

Fact: Gabriel didn't care that he shot her.

You unwove the sequence carefully: Lao was not in control of herself. Lao stabbed you. Lao was still alive. And you weren't the least bit mad at her.

Gabriel shot Lao. Gabriel did it to defend you. Gabriel didn't care that he shot her. Because all he cared about was that you were alive. You were a still mad at him. But anger was waning. It wasn't as if Gabriel wanted to kill your friend. She just never factored into his equation. She was a threat, and Gabriel had very permanent ways of dealing with threats.

Fact: You had issues.

Fact: When it came to your people, you were not very good at thinking clearly.

Fact: Your near death experience had caused trauma to your friends.

Fact: You still had issues.

You had issues, and most of them revolved around your people. Your thinking wasn't always clear: you got tunnel vision. "Save Lao" became "save Lao at any cost, consequences to myself be damned." And that was not operationally sound logic. You would berate Ziv for pulling something like that. And so, by setting a bad example and/or getting hurt, you had managed to hurt your people: Ziv, Jack, and Gabriel included.

It was Ziv who'd really pushed this epiphany. If it turned out to be right, you'd tell him. Because he deserved to know.

It had taken you some time to translate what Gabriel had really been trying to say to you. All those angry declarations from Gabriel about being willing to trade Lao's life for yours? Her death wasn't what he was getting at. He was a little broken and bad at feelings, but you couldn't point fingers, now could you? What he was trying to say was that he was angry that you for the risks you were willing to undergo to save Lao. Risks, that you had to admit, weren't healthy. Risks
that you would take again, because that's how you were and Gabriel knew it.

Gabriel wasn't wrong to be upset. You had issues. And those issues were hurting the people who cared about you.

Fact: Forgiveness was a process.

Fact: Whatever you felt for Gabriel needed to be independent of Lao.

Fact: Whatever you felt for Lao needed to be independent of Gabriel.

Fact: You fucking missed Gabriel.

Forgiveness wasn't an open-ended problem or a blank check for misbehavior; there was an action, and it was a potential reaction. You had to know what you were forgiving, for it to be real. Lao could wake up. Lao could die. Gabriel had never intended to kill Lao. Gabriel intended to save you. There wasn't anything wrong with that sentiment.

You had issues. You loved Lao. Gabriel hurt her. You were not good at thinking clearly when it came to your people. You still had issues. And you missed Gabriel.

You had been asking yourself "could you forgive Gabriel for killing Lao?" Your epiphany was simple. That was the wrong question. Gabriel didn't care about Lao, that was true, but he hadn't been calling for her death. It was like Athena had told you, you set your parameters too wide. You could not measure your success by impossible standards. She was right: you could not protect everyone. You could just do your best and learn from your goddamn mistakes, as awful as that sounded. It was so much easier said than done, but you had to acknowledge it as truth. If you took that first step, maybe the rest would follow.

So could you forgive Gabriel for killing Lao? As it was phrased, no. But Lao was still alive. And Gabriel's intent mattered. "Could you forgive Gabriel for ignoring your feelings and ultimately saving your life?" Closer. "Could you forgive Gabriel for ignoring your feelings and ultimately saving your life, even if it meant the death of your friend?"

There. That was the right question. It was a lot more complex and cumbersome than the original, but it took into account the nuances of the situation. Because the truth was rarely neat.

It was still a bitter pill to swallow. But you thought that maybe you could forgive him that much. It would take more time and some more uncomfortable truths, but you could forgive that man almost anything.

You vaguely remembered the other night, nestled between him and Jack. There had been no flashbacks, no nightmares. You'd been warm, comfortable, and content. And while things would never be perfect, you couldn't think of anything better.

You got off the floor, and slipped the necklace back under your shirt. You would sleep on it. And if you still felt the same in the morning, you would go talk to him.

It was strange to walk into the office after so long. But it felt like coming home. Jesse looked up from your desk, the entire surface strewn with a mess of paperwork. An expression of
hope crossed his face, before he quickly pulled his hat down to hide it.

Gabriel was on his feet in seconds, but he stayed behind the desk, watching your face. "Take a walk, kid."

"Sir!" Jesse skedaddled past you, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Gabriel was in his usual hoodie and hat. There were dark circles around his eyes and he looked tired. He gnawed on his lower lip, brows furrowed.

You uncrossed your arms, taking a deep breath. "Hi."

"Hi," he said softly, palms flat on the desk. "Can I come over there?"

"Yeah," you said.

He closed the distance, placing both hands on your cheeks. He looked you over, like he was expecting to find more damage. "How are you?" He asked, a calloused thumb tracing your cheekbone.

"Getting better," you said, placing your hands on his wrists. You drew his arms around you and hugged him carefully. He was limp for a moment, and then his grip tightened and he embraced you fully, face buried in your hair. "How are you?"

"Happy to see you. I miss you, corazon," he murmured, voice rough.

"Miss you too." He was so warm and you stroked his back, feeling him relax against you. You stayed that way for a moment. "Wanted to talk to you."

He drew back, head tilted to the side. "Sit?"

"Sure."

Gabriel sat down on the couch, and pulled you forward, so you were sitting on his lap, knees on the couch, facing him.

He kept looking you over, touching you, checking to see if you were real. You rested your hand on his cheek and he closed his eyes, one hand rising to cradle yours against his face.

"Jack not cuddling you enough?"

"It always turns into sex," Gabriel said, a small smile forming on his lips.

You nodded. "He's tricky like that."

"He is." Gabriel inhaled deeply. "What'd you want to talk about?" He asked, eyes still closed.

"Saw Lao the other day."

Gabriel's jaw clenched, but his eyes stayed shut. "Ana told me."

"Been doing a lot of thinking." You rested your head on his shoulder. "I'm pretty messed up, Gabriel. We all are. But you know how well I handle loss."

He rubbed your back. "None of us are graceful about it, corazon."
"Saving Lao was my chance to make that right." You took a deep breath. "Which I know is ridiculous, because none of what happened was my fault. But that doesn't mean I don't feel like I could have done better. You know what that's like. I know you don't care about her as a person. But I think you understand what she represents to me."

"I understand. But you matter to me. I would do a lot of things to keep you safe," Gabriel said gruffly. "Even if you hate me for it afterward."

"I figured you'd say that." You straightened up, meeting Gabriel's dark eyes. "I haven't quite gotten over what happened," you said and he flinched. "But I'm getting there. It's taken some work," you said. "Because I'm not really good at letting go of things."

He laughed softly at that, his smile widening. "That is an understatement, corazon." He frowned then. "You know it was never about her, right?"

You nodded.

"There were two reasons I was so angry" Gabriel said slowly. He swallowed, face solemn. "The primary reason was that I was afraid I was going to lose you." His lips started to move, but no sound came out. He stopped, like he was gauging his words and then started once more. "The secondary one was that you don't value your safety nearly enough. That pisses me off, baby. The fact you don't take care of yourself-"

"I know," you said. "Ziv uh...Ziv pulled a really low blow and let me know how much I'd worried him. Like honest emotions with 90 percent less snark but 90 percent more guilt. It kind of opened my eyes."

"Glad Mihret is good for something," Gabriel muttered, but there wasn't any venom in his voice.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to scare you." You rested your head on his shoulder. It was easier not to look at him while you made your confessions. "It's not that I don't care about my life. I just...I get tunnel vision. I'm terrified of losing other people, so I get where you're coming from and I'm really sorry."

"This is just karma," Gabriel said, shaking his head. "You, Jack, me. We all make the same damn mistake and then take turns getting mad at each other."

"I haven't gotten mad at you about that-"

"You will, eventually," Gabriel said. "But me and Jack have a few years of experience on you. Tend to be smarter about how we fight. Don't usually let ourselves get stabbed as a tactic."

"I didn't intend-"

He just kissed your palm. "I know."

You stroked his face.

"Just wanted you to know," you said. "I still have projects to finish outside the office, but I'll be back when they're done. All right?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "...Do you need more time on your own?"

"I...don't know," you admitted. "Captain Amari and Amélie have bullied me into an outing
today. But I wanted to check and see if you and Jack were free tonight. Figured I'd test the waters."

"I will be. And so will he," Gabriel said, without batting an eye.

"You can call off Tataryn too."

"Not till you're back in the office. Besides, he's enjoying the cushy duty of checking you out all the time," Gabriel growled. "Maybe I'll pull him and put Diallo on it. She won't be staring at your ass nearly as often."

"...It's just weird having my coworkers tail me."

"Deal with it," Gabriel said, not sounding the least bit concerned.

"I really don't think Captain Amari wants him coming to the spa with us," you said taking another route.

"Then she can take it up with me," Gabriel said.

You rolled your eyes. "You just don't quit."

He shook his head. "Don't know how."

You kissed him then. Enjoying his startled gasp, you cupped the back of his head, stealing his breath. His lips were rough against yours and when you released him he dropped back against the couch, a content smile on his face.

"So you liked the flowers and whiskey?" He grinned up at you.

"You can't buy me, Gabriel," you said, shaking your head.

"Of course not. But I can soften you up."

"You can," you acknowledged. You climbed off his lap, warmth sparking in your chest. This still felt right, and for that you were grateful. "I'll see you tonight."

He grinned up at you, eyes bright. "Looking forward to it."

Chapter End Notes

Had a rough writing week. Couldn't get in the right headspace and wondered if I was burning out. Assuming it has to do with the work stress. But the comments helped. I see them and then it's like "oh yeah, other people like this too" and it rejuvenates me. So thanks. :D

Not going to lie, the Lao and Ziv scenes were pretty emotional to write. Feelings are scary.

My cousin bought two pies for a family gathering that was cancelled. So I've been gorging on lemon meringue pie and I have no regrets. (Actually, I do. I went to the store today and bought untested madeleines and they were too sweet and dry. I also bought these Lindt White Chocolate Strawberry truffles and they taste like strawberry
milk, and I should have bought more, instead of the bad madeleines.) I also made chili and so have not been *only* eating sweets.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

A day out with shopping, spa treatments, and uninvited guests.

Chapter Notes

We are past the 300k word mark and at the four month anniversary. This calls for a spa day! Which apparently means different things to different people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"No, do not invite him over. He's working," you told Amélie, angrily stabbing your chicken Marengo with your fork. You weren't sure about adding crayfish to sautéed chicken and tomatoes, but it seemed to work.

Amélie giggled. "But he is so cute. I want to ask him his name and see what kind of terrible pickup lines he has." She was eating fancy fish dumplings called "quenelles" smothered in an herbed cream sauce.

"They are really bad," you said.

"Now I must hear them-"

Captain Amari sipped her red wine and neatly cut up her coq au vin. "Stop teasing poor Lucky. Fedya is prone to being insufferable. And she's had him dogging her steps for days."

Her use of his nickname was not lost on you. You schooled your face and stuffed it full of chicken.

Amélie had driven her sporty little coupe downtown, Captain Amari in the front, you wedged in the tiny backseat. Lunch came first, at some French bistro Amélie declared "acceptable, but not impressive." The main reason you were here was because it was next to the shopping area she wanted to visit. Amélie was painfully stylish in stiletto boots and a plum sweater dress that draped artfully along her figure. Captain Amari had dressed down in a black cable knit turtle neck sweater and fitted black pants tucked into her riding boots. She wore a gold ankh on a chain, and you realized that you rarely saw her wear jewelry. You had on the cashmere sweater and jeans, and Amélie had cooed over it, petting your arm and telling you that you needed to dress up more.

You left your gloves on while you ate, and were relieved that no one said a thing.

Tataryn sat at the bar, making small talk with the waitress, his eyes occasionally drifting to your table.

You drank the pinot noir Amélie ordered for you. She deemed it "passable, but not something she would stock." You kept your eyes on all the doors and some of the windows.
"If that handsome man is here, you realize you can relax, yes?" Amélie said gently. "You are closed up like an oyster."

"Habit," you shrugged. Because Captain Amari was here and you weren't convinced that you should let your guard down.

"At ease, agent. That's an order," Captain Amari said dryly, swirling her glass.

You emptied your wine glass and set it down on the table. "Yes, ma'am."

Amélie laughed. "I think that had the opposite effect, Ana."

"It's not just that. Last time I was drinking in public, there was a fight," you admitted.

"Do you expect someone to pick a fight with me, Chanceux?" Amélie giggled. "Or do you expect Ana to start a brawl? Because she is the type."

"Is that so?" Captain Amari asked, turning her raptor gaze on you.

Amélie's eyes twinkled, because she knew what she had started.

"...I definitely see Amélie instigating it," you said, sawing your chicken into unnecessarily tiny pieces. "But I have no trouble picturing you wading into it and smashing heads along the way."

Captain Amari actually looked quite pleased by that statement.

"I promise that I will not start any fights today. Unless they try to serve me cheap wine. Then I will hurt them," Amélie said blithely, taking a bite of quenelle. "Or an excess of cilantro. I hate chefs that overuse cilantro. It is like people who wear too much fragrance. Please, just do not."

You didn't get cake. Amélie said not to bother, the ones here weren't as good as the bakery down the street. But you did get a cheese plate instead.

Three glasses of wine, some buttery food, and a whole plate of cheese and fruit later, you felt pretty good. You weren't drunk, but your head was pleasantly swirmy and you could feel yourself relaxing, even though Captain Amari was right there and wait a minute, were you "hanging out" with your actual commanding officer?

You tried to picture Captain Patel eating at a fancy restaurant with you. She would have sat at the same table, but everyone would be on their best behavior, while she ate her meal with precision, politeness, and a military efficiency. Captain Patel had been a hardass, but Captain Amari was something entirely different. In fact, Captain Amari was scarier because she had a head for tricky diplomacy, setting traps and finessing people with both the carrot and the stick. Captain Patel would have just beaten or terrorized everyone into submission.

It occurred to you then, that after all this time, you still saw Captain Patel as your CO, and perhaps that's why, despite your cavalier disregard for conventional rules, you never pushed the actual hierarchy too hard. Because she would not have approved. The thought made you smile, just a little.

"Have some more wine," Captain Amari told you, and that was another thing you would have never heard Captain Patel say.
"I think I'm OK," you said, not wanting to get sloppy in front of her.

"You're going to want another glass," Captain Amari told you as Amélie left to powder her nose. "She's very enthusiastic about shopping." There was a bright gleam in her eye.

You poured the rest of the bottle into your glass, and chugged it as politely as you could.

"This color would look very good on you," Amélie said handing you a midnight blue dress. "The crystal beadwork is exquisite and there is not too much yellow in it. Keeps it from being garish."

Labeled "dry clean only" and "silk-charmeuse," whatever that meant, you didn't think it would survive your lifestyle. You discretely checked the price tag and nearly choked, because it was ridiculous. But Amélie shopped at high-end boutiques, and that sticker-shock was to be expected when purchasing formalwear.

"I'm not going to be wearing that out any time soon," you said.

"Yes, you will," Amélie said, crossing her arms. "Gérard wants you to attend some events with me. Unless you have some other preferences, we are getting this." She put it over her arm. "Oh, maybe you like the purple one better?"

You glanced helplessly at Captain Amari who was browsing some tailored suits.

"The blue is more flattering, but the purple has a very striking cut," she said, not even looking up.

Amélie practically shoved you into the dressing room and you weren't surprised to find that the dress looked very good on you. It had better, for that kind of money. Thin straps held up the satiny fabric and it clung to your figure, shimmering when you moved. Crystal beads trimmed the neckline and the bodice. It fell mid thigh and looked more like a slip than a dress, but Amélie nodded approvingly, even though your scarred leg was exposed.

"See? So very lovely," Amélie sighed. "You had better try on the purple too."

You complied, because something about the curve of her smile told you that resistance would be pointless and probably painful.

"I have clothes, Amélie."

"You cannot wear suits and exercise gear all the time, Chanceux," she said. "And you need color, variety, fun things."

"...I could start a novelty t-shirt collection."

"Do you have shoes for these?" Amélie asked the clerk, gracefully ignoring your suggestion. "Her size."

You sighed, holding very still while the clerk began to take measurements. The woman looked vaguely terrified, and you suspected it was because she recognized Captain Amari. She brought out a box of open-toe heels, the blue satin matching the dress. The ankle-straps buckled
and you tried them on, while Amélie examined them critically.

"We'll take those too," Amélie said, adding them to the growing pile of clothes.

You smiled tolerantly, and calculated that so far, this would cost four paychecks. It was a good thing your room and board were covered by work. You were slightly surprised when Amélie paid for everything and ordered the packages delivered to the base by tonight.

"Thank you, but you don't need to buy me anything-"

She waved away any thanks, claiming, "You are accompanying me to these events. We must coordinate properly."

You weren't sure if that was just a bribe, or also an insult to your fashion sense. Honestly, it was probably both and more.

"I can afford-"

"But I do not know what I want to wear yet. And we cannot clash. We do not need to match, because that is tasteless and overdone, but we need to be complementary. I do not know exactly what Gérard is planning, so we must be prepared for different types of events: the venue, the season, the time of day; those factors determine the suitability of our choices, Chanceux."

You took a step backward.

"You must have choices. I must have choices. Please, Chanceux. The more I think about it, the more I realize you need more dresses. In fact, maybe we need to try on that orange one over there. I think I have a fairly good eye for your measurements now. Maybe we can buy that red one too. And that indigo one looks like it might fit you if they take it in a few centimeters."

"I uh...no, we're good. Never mind. I have a black dress too. It's even intact."

Amélie rested her chin in one hand, her nails tapping against her cheek. "Maybe that will do. I suppose. You will have to show me later. Unless you think we need to discuss this more?"

You got the message loud and clear. Any more arguing, and she'd buy more dresses, just to spite you.

"Well, thank you," you said, rubbing the back of your neck. "You're very kind."

"No, I am vain and a perfectionist," she said with satisfied smile. "But thank you for saying so. You are very sweet, Chanceux."

You blinked, because that was not an adjective you would have chosen. But then you'd just called her "kind." You were learning that you needed a better strategy to argue with Amélie. This would take some critical thinking and maybe some input from Lacroix. You'd have to be subtle about it. Nothing you could do now. Instead, you went back to Tataryn-spotting.

"Were you looking for anything in particular, Chanceux?" Amélie asked, while you discretely stared out the front window, catching Tataryn standing at a bus stop, pretending to check the routes.

"I was looking for a pair of leather pants," you said after a moment.

"Like his?" Amélie asked, picking up on it immediately. "Yes, I see what you are going
for. We can do that. It would be very femme fatale, and that air of danger suits you. But you'll need new shoes and a pretty blouse-" She took your hand. "Let's go across the street. And then we can look at lingerie!"

You bit back a whimper.

"We're getting cake afterward," Captain Amari said, bringing up the rear so you couldn't retreat. "Won't that be nice?"

There was a stop for street wear. There was another stop for shoes. There was a stop for cosmetics. There was a stop for underwear.

You drew the line at Amélie buying you lingerie. You bought a black leather underbust corset, with real steel boning, at her insistence, and some other items she recommended that you suspected Jack and Gabriel would appreciate. Some of it was practical: hosiery and underwear. Some of it not: also fine hosiery and fancy underwear. You had to admit, some of the fabrics were pretty, and you'd picked up a few more pairs of gloves in a different colors and softer fabrics, like lace and satin.

You had gotten leather pants and more. You didn't want to think about how much more, because you had the sneaking suspicion Lacroix was going to be making wardrobe suggestions for you now. He and Amélie would be sitting on their couch drinking extravagant wine, eating cheese, and choosing outfits for you tonight. You wouldn't be there of course, but Amélie had a frighteningly sharp memory and they would argue passionately over the cut of coat you should have chosen.

You shuddered, like someone had walked over your grave.

"Isn't this fun?" Amélie asked.

You smiled tightly. "Yeah. It's uh...really broadened my horizons." You nodded for emphasis. The purchases weren't bad, Amélie had exquisite taste and she was good company. But the shopping process had gone on for far too long.

"I am glad," she said, happiness lighting up her face. "You always have bread on the board, and I am so happy that you can take a break to indulge yourself."

"I...what?"

"Avoir du pain sur la planche? Bread on the board? I suppose that idiom does not translate. You always have so much to do. Gérard greatly admires your work ethic. But you need to take time for yourself, Chanceux," Amélie said, leaning over your shoulder to inspect the jewelry you'd been pretending to look at. "No, nothing in there suits you. It's too tacky."

"I thought so too," you said, eyeing the high price tags. You paused, digesting the rest of what she'd said. That was a spin-job right there. Lacroix probably said that you were obsessed with the job. Amélie finessed that into "you have a good work ethic."

"Did you want to look at jewelry?"
"I'm ready for cake," you admitted, because the wine was wearing off and you were dying inside.

"Then we shall get cake," Amélie agreed. "And then we will go to the spa."

You had a slice of sponge cake topped with slivered almonds and caramelized apples, and ordered a plate of madeleines as well. You deserved a post-shopping mid-afternoon snack.

"Their apple cake is a variant of Vitréais," Amélie explained. "That is a Breton specialty. One of my favorites when I visit Vitré."

"It's pretty delicious," you said, much more relaxed now that you didn't have Amélie burying you under clothes. You sipped earl grey and happily ate your cake.

Captain Amari ordered her own tray of madeleines, as well as a fruit tart.

Amélie had an opera cake and black coffee. Both women looked enormously pleased with themselves, exchanging satisfied smiles, and you wondered what you had missed.

"So, how are things?" Amélie asked. "Have your lovers learned to behave themselves better?"

"They sent me flowers and whiskey," you said, because no more detail needed to be added. "I think things are improving."

"They have given you more than that, yes?" Amélie asked, leaning forward.

"Yes?" Because you weren't sure what she was asking, but you'd received other gifts that you weren't going to discuss with present company.

"Good," she said, sounding satisfied. "We should do this again. Next time we will attend something artistic; it will be good for the soul."

"I don't know if I'm quite ready for that," you admitted. Because the combination of Amélie's cultured enthusiasm and Captain Amari's intense poise made it impossible to relax. Even if you had really delicious cake.

"So I hear you and Genji have become quite close," Captain Amari said so solemnly, you were certain she was fucking with you. You glanced at Amélie who was smirking at you.

"Old news. According to the rumor mill, I'm sleeping with Hanzo now."

Amélie began to laugh. "He is so pretty. I want to braid his hair!"

"Careful, after this outing, I'll be sleeping with both of you," you muttered.

"No, it will definitely be Tataryn," Captain Amari said.

You looked out the window and there he was, smoking a cigarette and talking on his phone.
The spa was a fancy five story building, with manicured gardens and heated pools decorating the grounds. Amélie had scheduled personalized treatments for all of you and afterward you could use the variety of saunas and pools. So you resigned yourself to an hour or so of being poked and prodded by strangers before you got to go swimming and soak in a hot tub. That last part sounded good. In fact, if you ever got a place off base, you wanted a big bathtub.

The entryway was all blue glass and soothing sea colors. A fountain bubbled cheerfully, the natural rock tiers going up two stories. The staff wore neatly pressed blue-green uniforms. The lobby had an open floor plan, and there were winding stairs going all the way up to the fifth floor. Each higher floor had an overlook with a plate glass balustrade, so visitors could look down. Or snipe. Access to the higher floors made this room somewhat defensible, but only if you had the high ground.

You wondered when assessing the combat merits of a room had become second nature.

And where would Tataryn turn up? You figured he'd loiter on the grounds, maybe schedule his own appointment if he was feeling particularly bold. And then he'd expense it. Oh well, that was Jesse's problem.

"Ah, Ms. Dubois," the receptionist gave Amélie a welcoming smile over her screen. "I have massages scheduled for you and Ms. Chanceux. Ms. Capitaine requested the seaweed body wrap. Afterward you will have access to all the steam baths and soaking pools we have to offer. Might I suggest the peach bath soak? The water is steeped in peach leaves and has an amazing scent. The color is a little shocking, but it does not stain."

She gave some more directions, but your attention had wandered as you tried to spot Tataryn.

"Thank you," Amélie said, eyes bright with excitement. She flashed you a genuine smile of delight. "This is so refreshing. And I know you have been so tense, Chanceux. I think you will enjoy this." She linked arms with you, possibly so you couldn't make an escape, and led you up the open staircase, Captain Amari following behind.

"We are on the second floor," she told you.

"Third floor," Captain Amari said. "I will see you in the saunas."

There was a locker room attendant and she handed you a white terry cloth wrap, a robe, and a pair of sandals. Neat partitions, pretty paintings, and mosaic floors made the locker room seem elegant. Even the showerheads had fancy flower shapes. You sighed and stripped down, finding the glorified towel had elastic strips inside to keep it up. There was a fluffy white bathrobe as well and you put that on, just to cover up your leg. You slipped your tanto into a drawstring bag on your wrist. You left on your gloves, jamming your hands in the pockets.

A lot of European saunas and spas were nude, like Japanese baths, so at some point, you would be walking around naked in front of strangers and your coworkers. But you hadn't reached that point yet, and you weren't in any hurry. Fortunately, Amélie had chosen a less busy time to
visit the spa.

"We can store any items you need," the attendant told you, noticing the bag.

"I have a condition," you said.

"Oh! Do you have allergies we need to be aware of?" She sounded very concerned.

"No, it's a rare condition." Acute paranoia amplified by constant surprise combat. You didn't think your shrink would write you an excuse, but people tended to be too polite to ask. You weren't supposed to bring a gun on the shopping trip, but you could conceal the tanto much easier. You called it a psychological crutch, and didn't question too closely what it was propping up.

"Do you need any special care?"

"No. I keep my kit nearby, just in case," you said.

"Oh, I completely understand." She was young and nodded vigorously at you.

Not so shockingly, Amélie skipped the robe and strode out, all slender muscle and dangerous curves wrapped in a towel. She gave your robe a disapproving look.

"Chanceux, you should be more comfortable in your skin."

You shrugged. "I'm good."

"The pools and the saunas are nude."

"I know. I can do it. No worries. I just get cold."

She shook her head, skepticism written on her fine features. "As you wish."

Another spa attendant waited at the door, and she led you through the pool area. There were several small pools in their own separate rooms off the main hall. One smelled like peaches, and it was bright green and completely opaque.

"That one is our stone and moss pool." The water was a deep black color and you couldn't see the bottom. "It's rather deep, so be careful. The water is of course, warmed, treated with UV light for cleansing, and very soothing. We have an extra hot bath. There is a lava rock pool. We have some outdoor soaking areas as well. We also have an Olympic pool outside, if you feel like doing laps. The saunas are up ahead, but we have them on multiple floors. They are excellent for aches and pains, detox, and-
"

You stared wistfully at the steaming bath, wishing you could just slip into the water.

"Well, I am going down this hall for a Swedish massage. And I scheduled you a deep tissue massage, considering all your injuries," Amélie said.

You blinked. You hadn't been paying attention, too busy wondering which hot bath would be better.

"Oh, are you an athlete?" The attendant was an older woman, effervescent and pleasant. Her nametag said "Marta."

"No, I'm not," you said after a moment. Marta led you into a room with an a large padded table. It smelled like sage and lavender. The walls were a soothing shade of light green and you
wondered just how you had let this happen.

"You'll need to take off your robe. But you can leave the wrap on."

You pulled the robe off, hanging it and your bag on the hook on the wall.

"Oh." Marta paused, her eyes falling on your leg. The patchwork effect was still very pronounced, thick ridged scars running along the graft lines. You had other scars along your exposed skin, but your leg was the worst of it. "You are a soldier then?"

"Yes." You frowned, studying the way the skin warped like tree bark.

"Well, there is no need to be self-conscious. You are a very lovely young woman, and if anyone is unpleasant to you, let me know and I will handle it." Marta nodded firmly.

"Oh, thank you." You rubbed the back of your neck, feeling the blood rush to your face. Because this little civilian lady thought she could defend you better than you could yourself? It was a surprisingly heartwarming sentiment.

"No trouble at all. You just lie down and I'll get Nina. She is an excellent masseuse. Very professional. All those aches and pains will melt away. She does wonders for your stress levels," Marta told you.

"That sounds lovely," you said. "Thank you."

"Afterward, I recommend the peach bath soak. It is divine. Let me know if you need any refreshments. It is very easy to become dehydrated in the heat, so you have to be careful."

You chuckled. "Thank you, ma'am."

"I'm serious," she said earnestly. "People don't notice how much they sweat underwater."

You nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Marta just shook her head. "I'm sorry. You know all this. I'm just used to our younger clients not taking these warnings seriously. You're a soldier, of course you know you need to stay hydrated. I'm sorry to nag."

"I appreciate you looking out for me, ma'am," you said.

"And you're so polite," she said, shaking her head. "Your parents must be so proud."

Your smile tightened.

"I'm sorry, I'm babbling. I'll go get Nina for you. But come find me if you need anything, all right?"

"Of course. Thank you," you said as she left the room.

Your leg didn't hurt. It hadn't for a long time, but it was strange exposing it for everyone to see. You weren't so much self-conscious as simply unused to the sensation. People would stare, but then you'd been putting up with all kinds of scrutiny on base for a long time. No, it didn't bother you. But it did make you more noticeable, and you didn't like that.

You climbed onto the table, resting on your stomach. There was a vent in the ceiling just to the right of your head, and you frowned at the odd banging sounds echoing from within.
"Where is she?" A distorted voice demanded. And you heard a woman sob.

"I don't know-" And then the familiar clap of a gunshot.

"Check the rooms-"

You were off the table in a split second, your tanto out of the bag. You peeled your gloves off and opened up your prosthetic ring finger. The comm device was simple. "... --- ..." You tapped out. "... .--. .-"

You pulled on the robe and left off the sandals, because you could not fight in those. You wouldn't stay hidden for long. It sounded like they were looking for someone in particular. You grabbed a towel, wrapping your hair, and huddled on the ground, concealing your hands, skin, and scars.

You crouched behind the table as the door opened.

A man in a balaclava and body armor strode in carrying an assault rifle. His left leg was made of metal and you bit back a curse.

"...Well what do we have here? Are you Amélie Lacroix?" He laughed harshly, crouching down, his gun pointed directly at your face.

You made a soft helpless noise, and curled up, as nonthreatening as you could make yourself.

He reached for you, and you waited till he was overextended, his right hand gripping the collar of your robe. Then you struck, right hand digging your tanto into his gun arm, forcing the muzzle away from you. Your left hand shot out half a second after, and you flexed your middle finger outward, blade thrusting through his unprotected throat. You twisted your left hand, making sure to tear as much tissue as you could. He gurgled, blood dripping down your arms. When his grip on your robe relaxed, you lowered him to the ground and made sure he was dead.

You withdrew your tanto, and finger blade, wiping them on his pants. He had armor on and he was too big for you to steal it, but you took his comm earpiece. Sheathing your tanto in the belt of the robe, you picked up his gun. It was heavier than you were comfortable with, but you lifted it in both arms, and peeked out of the room.

"Scorpion, this is Spider. You done yet? You know you're not supposed to fuck around man. We need to move." The voice crackled over the stolen comm and you smiled tightly. You were barefoot, in a bathrobe, and already bloodstained.

Quietly, you padded into the hall, hearing the sobs a few yard away.

"I said stop simpering. Unless you want to end up like her. Now where is Amélie Lacroix?"

"W-we don't have any clients by that name!" A young woman wailed.

You rounded the corner. The man had his back to you, and you couldn't tell if he was a cyborg or not. You hefted the rifle, aimed, and fired. Two things happened: the kick nearly knocked you backward into a pool and an energy bolt burst out, caving his skull. The shot roared, though it didn't sound quite like a bullet going through deflagration; it was a higher and sharper noise.

The woman on the ground cradled Marta, who had a very big hole in her chest. She was
dead. You swore, setting the gun down.

"Nina, right?" You asked, staring at the bloodstained masseuse.

"Yes," she said, shaking.

"Are you injured?"

"N-no."

"Do you know where they came from?"

"No. They just...they just rushed us."

"Nearest fire escape or window?"

Nina pointed and you helped her move Marta, then pulled her up, your robe now smeared in three people's blood. "Nothing you can do for Marta now. You need to hide or get out." You glanced at the second dead man's gun. It was another large assault rifle and you weren't going to be able to use that easily.

Nina nodded. "I can climb out the window. It's only the second story."

"Watch yourself," you said.

She paused. "Are you Amélie Lacroix?"

"No," you said, shaking your head. "Not me."

She nodded and took off. You left the guns. You couldn't use them safely and you had to find Amélie fast.

"Scorpion, Spider, this is Alpha leader. Any luck?" A woman's voice echoed in pool area.

You swore as you heard the heavy clank of boots. You looked around, knowing you needed a hiding spot. You ran into the stone and moss pool room, and slipped into the water, ducking behind the large rock formation protruding from the center. A decorative waterfall churned the waters, masking your ripples.

"She was sighted here. We need Lacroix alive. Everyone else is expendable." It was the female voice again.

You shed the heavy robe, slipping under water, tanto gripped firmly in your hand. The comm stayed in your ear. You took cover behind the rocks, raising your nose just enough to take in small breaths of oxygen.

"We have casualties!" A man shouted. "Fuck! Scorpion and Spider are down! I repeat, Scorpion and Spider are down!"

"Check all these room thoroughly. She could be anywhere!"

"Bodyguards were reported with her!"

You counted half a dozen different voices over the comm, and that was just in your area. They really wanted Amélie, and given Lacroix's past with Nguyen, you were starting to see just how personal this feud was.
Metallic footsteps echoed on the tile floor and you slowly dropped beneath the water. This pool was at least six feet deep in places and you stayed low, focusing on holding your breath. Your chest pounded, and began to burn as you hovered there in the water, not daring to move. The water was comfortably warm, but you couldn’t stay like this.

"Clear!" You heard from above and in the bubbling of the comm. You waited for the sound of boots to depart and slowly rose, sucking in sweet oxygen. You listened. There were still soldiers in the hall. Maybe you should have tried to carry one of the guns in here.

Staying low, you planned your next move.

They had not found Amélie yet. She was smart. She would have hidden or gotten out.

You had already sent out an SOS. You had maybe twenty minutes before backup arrived. And that wasn’t counting if Tataryn got a call off before you did. Hopefully that would blindside your attackers.

Captain Amari was a floor higher, and no one had identified her thus far.

You were in a glorified bloody towel, armed with a knife and your fingers. Being outnumbered like this was nothing new. The lack of clothes and a gun however, were very troubling. You took a deep breath, already focusing on your priorities. You had to stay alive. You had to find your group. And you had to do what you could to keep this from turning into a massacre or hostage situation, which knowing Nguyen, would still end in a massacre.

"Yeah, I know, Alpha Leader. I already checked in there. If someone was hiding, they’d have to be a fish. Fine, I’m going back in. Do you want me to take pictures for you while I’m at it?" The man had an American accent. "Bitch," he muttered under his breath. You slowly dropped again, "Yeah, it’s clear. Can I come catch up with the rest of you? I want to find this Lacroix bitch and get out."

You rose again, heart pounding as you saw the soldier's back. You held your tanto in your right hand and slowly climbed out the water, crouching on a stepping stone.

The man shook his head, and he was only a few feet away. You leapt onto his back, your legs locking around his hips, left arm curling around his throat. Jamming your tanto downward between the gap in his armor, you pushed it down hard through the nape of his neck. You held on tight while he wobbled, blood seeping as you worked the blade through his vertebrae. Twisting the tanto before you yanked it out made the whole endeavor even messier. You dropped off his back as he fell, his blood smearing your chest.

You checked him for grenades or smaller guns, but found nothing useful except his comm unit. Your stolen comm unit had sputtered into silence and you sighed, wishing they had sprung for waterproof devices. Good to know your enemies did things in half measures though.

It took some work, but you quietly rolled him into the water. No need to advertise his location. Between the heavy armor and his cybernetic limbs, he sunk like a stone.

You crept back into the hall, noting that your terrycloth wrap was bloody and soaked, but still covering your bits. With your exposed scars and your wet tangled hair, you felt like an angry Japanese ghost. It was not the least bit sexy.

Stepping silently through the halls, you froze when you heard more clomping. You were beside a regular pool with clear water, but you lowered yourself on the ladder, hugging the wall. It
had full-metal high hand rails and you could pull yourself up fast. Tanto between your teeth, you hung there, feet on the first rung.

"Hurry up, Hornet. Quit sulking because Alpha Bitch is on your case."

Praying that he didn't look down, you waited for him to pass right beside you, and then you sprung out of the pool, spraying water across the floor. Gripping the railing, you pulled then pushed yourself airborne and kicked him hard with both feet striking his midsection. Even though he wore a chest plate, the force of your momentum staggered him. Swinging yourself across the floor, you seized him by the hair and slammed his face into the wall. He went down, your hands still clutching his hair, and you smashed his head against the floor, again and again, the dull rhythm soothing your nerves. You kept it up till a seam gave and his skull popped, splashing the area with blood and brains.

You stared for a moment, a little surprised by your own brutality. Well, they'd killed that nice older lady. Plus you had a serious problem with Nguyen's cyborgs. And you'd spent the day being teased and prodded by Amélie and Captain Amari. Not to mention all the shopping. And maybe you'd been a little excited about swimming and soaking, which was not going according to plan. Conclusion: today had not been the day to fuck with you. Who cared about the reason why? You certainly weren't worried about the implications it had about your psyche, right?

Checking his body, you found him to be armed with the same heavy energy gun as the rest. This was the worst loot drop ever. You took it anyway.

Then you went down the hall you remembered Amélie going through.

The floors were carpeted here, and you opened each door, sometimes finding empty rooms, and other times finding corpses. There were no other survivors. You finally came upon one room with the vent cover pried off. You checked it, not seeing any blood. Hopefully, that was Amélie's doing and she'd gotten away uninjured.

"We have a shooter on the fourth floor!" The comm crackled to life.

"Any sign of the target?"

"Negative!"

You smiled at the good news, and the expression felt savage on your face.

Slinking out of the room, you listened for heavy footsteps. When you heard none, you continued onward, looking for a less open staircase than the one in the lobby. Your goal was to reach the fourth floor. Farther back in the building, you found an enclosed stairwell and opened the door. It was silent and the air was much cooler. Still, you climbed upward, bypassing the third floor.

You went to open the door for the fourth floor and came face to chest with another very large cyborg. He was easily a foot taller than you and he slapped you aside, his gun still lowered. Ears ringing and vision spinning, you dropped the rifle, grabbing the railing so as not to tumble down the stairs. You tasted blood, but you righted yourself, as he rapidly approached.

You lashed out, driving your metal knuckles into the cartilage of his nose.

He swore nasally, nose gushing, and stumbled back. You rushed him and he roared, even as you drove your bare foot into his smashed up face. He fell backward and you lunged forward, slamming your tanto through his unprotected throat. You winced as blood sprayed across your face
and chest. Goddamn carotid artery.

Your heartbeat pounded in your throbbing skull as you wiped your face on your hands and your hands on your disheveled towel covering. It was already dyed an unpleasant rust red. You glanced up, noticing the cameras in the hall. If the enemy had access to that, you were in trouble.

Bending over carefully, conscious of the camera, you checked him for weapons. Of course he had that same damn gun, but he also had a grenade and a telescoping baton. You took those, tucking the grenade down the front of your towel. It didn't sit well, but you didn't have any goddamn pockets.

"Fuck, sniper's in the lobby!" Came the chatter over the comm.

You sighed, because you did not want to go anywhere that exposed. Goosebumps formed on your bare arms. The lower level had been warmer and you sorely regretted not finding more clothing. You might have to take the gun then, if you were going to mount an assault in the lobby.

"Anyone spot Lacroix damnit?"

"I think she's in the vents," the woman's voice rang clear. "Get on the PA. Announce that we'll start killing hostages unless she gives herself up."

"Ma'am...we haven't taken any hostages."

"She doesn't know that."

"Attention Amélie Lacroix. Until you are in our custody, we will begin killing hostages. So unless you want more blood shed on your account, you will give yourself up. Anyone harboring her will be executed; if you just turn her in we will spare you," Alpha squad leader's voice echoed through the building. "You can surrender yourself on the fifth floor."

Sighing, you picked up the gun and turned to go back up the stairs.

"Is that you, Lucky?"

You blinked and spun around to see Captain Amari also cradling one of those stupidly heavy assault rifles. She tapped her nose and you put the gun down, realizing you were actually bleeding.

"Yeah." You wiped your bloody nose. It smarted and you looked down, noting that your towel, legs, and arms were all splattered with the stuff.

"How much of that is yours?" She asked, concern softening her voice. She was still fully dressed, and you shook your head. She was dangerously elegant in professional black. And you were a bedraggled mess in a partially torn up towel. You were never going to be like Captain Amari.

"I have a nosebleed and a split lip, but that's it." You shrugged. "I can't really do the recoil on those." You gestured to the gun with your baton.

"How many have you come across?"

"Not counting the leader, five." You glanced down at the cyborg corpse. "Didn't leave any alive. They're not taking hostages. I think Amélie's in the vents. Have one of their comms and they haven't caught her yet."
"Me too. I've shot six. I know there are more holding the roof." She looked upward, a stolen comm in her ear. "We need to get to Amélie. I've gotten some people clear, but I don't know if they've secured the grounds."

"I got one person clear. Counted about six dead civilians," you said, taking a moment to tilt your head back, because your nose was still dripping blood. "Sent off an SOS with one of my prostheses. Don't know if Tataryn called for backup too. Haven't seen him yet."

"One of these rooms should be an office with phone with access to the PA."

You opened each door, Captain Amari covering you. After the fifth one, you found a desk and phone. Captain Amari picked up the phone and pressed a button.

"Attention all you terrorist scum." Her voice was measured and pleasant, only a bit of steel gleaming at the core. "This is the Captain Ana Amari of Overwatch, and you have interrupted my goddamn spa day. To all personnel, please take cover, get out if you can safely, or otherwise barricade yourself in. These bastards are not taking hostages, and we are in the process of getting this situation under control so that everyone can continue on with their day. Please be safe, and thank you, for your patience."

You stared at her, wondering if she was insane. Well, you couldn't judge.

She hung up the phone and lifted the gun. "They'll be coming for us next. There are two stairwells. Can you hold the one you came through?"

"Guess that depends on how many there are."

"You didn't bring a sidearm? I'd offer you mine, but I bent it up on a cyborg." There was no reproach in her voice. Captain Amari just hefted the assault rifle.

You shrugged, bloody tanto in one hand, stolen baton in the other. "We're in Zurich. You guys both told me to dial back the Blackwatch crazy and not scare civilians." You both knew Amélie was still a target. But at worst, you'd expected a subtle attempt at a snatch and grab. Not a full assault. This was more than they'd sent after Jack in Paris.

"Yes, you're right." She sighed. "I should have known better."

She took position at the lobby-end of the hall and you stood diagonal from the door, waiting to see who came down. Captain Amari shook her head as she looked you over, a faint smile on her lips. "You could be a slasher movie victim."

"With all due respect ma'am, as I'm the one who's been making knife kills, I am the slasher. But I'm pretty sure I resemble one of those killer Japanese ghosts more." You let your damp mess of tangled hair fall in your face and made a hissing sound. "See?"

She laughed at that. "The resemblance is uncanny."

"If I can't be sexy and cool, I might as well be terrifying." You shrugged, pushing your hair out of your eyes. "Speaking of horror movie tropes, why do they venture off by themselves? Like, if they stuck to the buddy system, I wouldn't be able to take them down. Not wearing a towel, armed only with a dagger."

Captain Amari shrugged. "They're cyborgs wearing armor, expecting to mow down civilians. Don't ever let yourself get that arrogant or corrupt."
"Yes, ma'am." You resisted the urge to salute. "But, I have to admit, now that I'm standing still, this is starting to gross me out. Like...I'm covered in the blood of half a dozen other people. This isn't sanitary."

"If anyone makes a period joke, I will shoot them for you," Captain Amari said, looking amused.

You began to laugh, even as you heard gunshots in the distance.

"She's one woman and snipers don't do well in close quarters. Rush her. Don't give her a chance to pick you off," the woman in charge ordered over the comms.

Heavy steps came from above and you opened the door, waiting for them to grow closer. Silently, you rolled the grenade onto the landing, before you stepped back, taking cover in a nearby office.

The explosion seemed to rock the building, and you grinned at the screams.

Captain Amari closed in at an angle and opened fire through the shattered door, finishing up any survivors. When she was done, you counted five bodies on the floor.

"Shit, more coming from the lobby!" They were on the other staircase and you ducked into the stairwell, looking for a new weapon.

Captain Amari took up a position in the hall, and began returning fire. You hefted one of the rifles and braced yourself, trying to get a bead on one of the half dozen cyborgs now shooting at you. This wasn't anywhere near ideal and you swore as a shot struck overhead, showering you in drywall and dust.

"We need to change locations!" Captain Amari shouted.

"Up or down?" You shouted back.

Glass shattered, and you watched a cyborg drop through the skylight, an arrow through his throat. Oh. That meant- You assumed there was a team on the roof then.

"Up?" Captain Amari wondered.

"-Alpha Leader there's a-"

"Where did they come from?!"

"Oh my fucking god-"

The comm chatter blew up and you grinned.

Something very large, metal, and reminiscent of a rhinoceros burst through the glass panels of the lobby, smashing the glass and furniture. A very familiar beanie-wearing figure followed, taking the stairs three steps at a time, his shotguns roaring. Hot on his heels was Jesse, fanning his revolver at a speed you couldn't track.

"Ana! Lucky Lady! We are here!" Reinhardt's voice echoed in the lobby and you put the gun down, rolling your eyes. You watched Jesse and Gabriel pick off the remaining cyborgs with ease.

Captain Amari strode to the overlook and waved.
"Ana!" Jesse shouted.

"Lucky's with me. Not sure where Amélie went. We'll meet you in the lobby," Captain Amari's voice carried and you followed her to the central staircase, wishing you didn't look like a B movie monster.

The fresh air dropped the lobby temperature by at least fifteen degrees and you shivered, the damp towel now more a liability than a protection.

Jesse reached Captain Amari first, on the landing, his eyes wide and worried. He stopped before actually touching her. "Ana-

"I'm fine," she said gently. "Lucky is too. Mostly."

"Son of bitch, is any of that yours?" Gabriel was beside you, his hands on your shoulders.

"Not much. I just got smacked in the face once." You met his worried gaze. He was breathing hard, and you reached out, touching his forehead with the back of your hand. He was warm, but not scarily so. You resisted the urge to latch onto him and burrow into the heat under his hoodie. That would be unprofessional, so you forced yourself to hold still, trying not to shiver.

"Gérard, Tataryn, and the Shimada boys have secured the roof. It seems Amélie managed to bring down the leader on her own," he said, eyes never leaving your form.

You blinked. "How?"

"She was carrying a gun. Like you should have been," Gabriel said darkly.

You shrugged, telescoping baton and tanto still in your hands. "I'll have you know I killed five of them and only used a gun once."

"Some of those stairwell kills are yours," Captain Amari said. "You had that grenade, remember?"

"Oh yeah." You shrugged. "So more than five, but less than ten. I made do."

Gabriel reached out and wiped your face, but he only succeeded in smearing the blood. "Christ, you're a mess. How did you?" His hands skimmed your sides and he froze, realizing you weren't wearing anything under the towel. "Were you wearing this the entire time?"

"Had to lose the bathrobe while I was hiding underwater." You shrugged again. Because you were trying to be calm about the fact you were wearing nothing but a bloody ragged towel in front of your coworkers. Maybe all the blood would distract them from the fact you were wearing a wet towel.

Gabriel moved to remove his armor and pull off his hoodie.

"I have to get cleaned up first. I'm sticky and it's so gross," you sighed, wanting it anyway. It would be warm, like him. Hanzo and Genji drop down from the broken skylight. Tataryn, Amélie, and Lacroix took the stairs, Gérard's arm around Amélie's shoulders. She had managed to find a spa worker uniform and carried a tiny pearl-handled pistol in her hand.

"Everyone accounted for?" Captain Amari asked, when you were all congregated on the second floor.
"Lucky! Look at you! You're a true blooded valkyrie!" Reinhardt boomed, laughing.

"Thanks," you sighed, checking the floor for broken glass. Reinhardt had made a great big mess and you didn't really want to get cuts on your feet. You hopped from foot to foot, trying to stay warm.

"You've got something on your everywhere," Genji said as passed by, his voice so quiet you weren't sure anyone else caught it.

Jesse took one look at you and just kept shaking his head muttering "it ain't right."

Tataryn and Hanzo kept sneaking you strange looks. Tataryn's was speculative. Hanzo's was slightly horrified.

"Oh Chanceux! Are you injured?" Amélie asked, rushing up to you.

"Nah. I'm good." You blinked as she poked your face.

"You are bleeding."

"Most of this isn't mine."

"You lost your robe," she said, her stage whisper carrying through the lobby.

"...I know," you scowled.

"You didn't need it anyway," she said, sounding pleased.

"But I'm fucking freezing," you muttered, because it was true.

Amélie gave you a slow blink. "You mean...you were actually worried about getting cold and not being so unnecessarily modest?"

"Yes!"

Lacroix just started laughing. "I can't wait to watch the security footage."

You blinked. "What?"

"There are several security cameras. Ziv managed to hack into some of them for us. We'll collect all the recordings, don't worry," Lacroix said cheerfully, in a way that definitely made you worry.

"Gotta say, it's something else that you went around the whole time dressed like that," Tataryn smirked. "If I had known that to be the case, I would have foregone waiting for backup and charged in to help."

Gabriel actually growled. "Go make sure the rest of the building is clear. Lucky needs to get cleaned up."

You were fantasizing about a hot shower already.

"My stuff's over there," you said pointing toward the locker room.

"Let's go," Gabriel said, hustling you in that direction.
You avoided a few piles of glass, but you could feel Gabriel's eyes on you as he followed you into the locker room.

The attendant was gone, but there were no signs of violence and you set down your melee weapons, looking for soap. You had just found some when Gabriel spun you around and pressed you against the wall, his mouth hot against yours.

"Gabriel, I'm a mess-"

"You're goddamn sexy and wearing practically nothing in front of everyone. I almost decked Tataryn for staring at you like that," he said sharply in your ear, hands on your waist.

"Tataryn likes everyone," you said. "And I'm gross."

"Get in the shower," Gabriel said, releasing you.

You shivered at the roughness in his voice and stepped into one of the stalls, peeling off the remnants of the bloody wrap. The spray of hot water was amazing and you closed your eyes, just luxuriating the warmth. The water ran rust red for several minutes and you looked up, very conscious of Gabriel's eyes on you the entire time. He leaned against the wall, arms crossed, teeth clenched, pupils too wide.

"Want you right now," Gabriel rasped, and you bit your sore lip. "Up against the wall, bent over a bench, riding me on the floor."

"Everyone will hear us. I'd rather not-"

Gabriel strode into the stall across from yours and turned on the water. He was fully clothed, and started to shiver after a minute. But that feral expression of lust on his face did not change.

"Gabriel-"

"You stay over there, baby, if you don't want me to fuck you against the wall till you scream. It's been too long and my control isn't what it should be. Seeing you walk around like that..." He shook his head. "You're goddamn beautiful."

You blinked. "You're crazy-"

"Running around in that tiny towel, dripping wet, carrying yourself like a warrior queen-" Gabriel drew a shuddering breath. "You're the one driving me crazy."

You turned your head, embarrassed by the stupid smile spreading across your face. You continued to scrub yourself down, trying not to show how pleased you were by his reaction. Gabriel was ridiculous. Only he would be turned on by having a horror movie villain for a girlfriend.

By the time you were done, Gabriel had cooled down and he handed you a clean towel. You dried off, found your belongings, and got dressed.

"What are we going to say about how wet you are?"

"That I annoyed you and you pushed me into a pool," he said, grinning at you as he tried to dry himself off.
"Well you weren't gone very long," Tataryn said, when you stepped into the hallway, fully dressed and no longer stinking of blood.

You rolled your eyes.

"Hey, I figured with the skimpy outfit, the long separation, and the way the boss was eye-fucking you in front of everyone, you guys would have taken at least fifteen more minutes."

"We didn't. So just imagine how grumpy he's going to be when he comes out and finds you speculating about his sex life."

Tataryn paled and shook his head. "You are a formidable woman, Lucky." He headed down the hall toward the pools.

"Uhh...watch your step. I might have left a mess-" You started to laugh as Tataryn let out a stream of profanities, probably coming upon the one you'd bashed to death.

Gabriel emerged, a towel around his neck. "Let's get you home." He didn't touch you, but you felt his presence warm against your back.

More Overwatch agents had swarmed the place by the time you made it downstairs. Lieutenant Jemison was there, looking harried. She was shouting orders. You took a moment to give her the locations of all the bodies that you remembered, friend and foe. Shoal waved at you, and you waved back, slightly amused by how she blushed. Apparently she did remember some of what happened when she was drunk.

"Well, that was an eventful day out," Captain Amari said as you climbed into the back of a van. Amélie perched on Lacroix's lap, looking delighted as a dripping wet Gabriel sat down beside you, one arm draped around your shoulder. Jesse sat a proper distance away from Captain Amari, but his eyes were fixed on her.

"Yes, we should do this again. Only with massages and not murders," Amélie sighed. "Maybe opera next time?"

You just shook your head, unable to vocalize your feelings.

Jack and Ziv were waiting for you in the garage.

"I don't know what you think you were wearing, but you're not allowed to do that again. That was weird and gross and-"

You weren't even out of the van yet and Ziv was starting in on you. He glared down at you as you hopped out of the van and you raised a brow. Because you'd talked about this, and he'd said it was fucked up when Gabriel did it. There was a half second pause and he threw his arms around
"I'm so glad you took a shower," Ziv said sharply and you patted his back.

"Yeah, me too," you said, knowing what he really meant.

"And I'm glad you're OK too," he mumbled and released you, glaring immediately at Jesse and Gabriel, daring them to say anything.

You blinked a few times because you hadn't expected that level of honesty. You met Jack's bewildered gaze. He glanced warily at the security cameras, and you sighed. Ziv hugs were OK, but he was bony and awkward. Jack hugs were better.

"And I'm glad you're OK too," he said to Amélie.

"Oh Ziv, I couldn't have done it without your help. You are so clever," she said, and you realized you needed to find out what she'd been up to on her own. She patted his cheek. "We really need to go out for drinks some time."

You schooled your expression, because whatever happened there was none of your business.

"And uh...good to see you too, ma'am." Ziv saluted Captain Amari. "I was never worried about you. You can handle yourself."

"Agent," she said, giving a cool nod. Jesse was at her side feigning calm, his fingers tapping complicated patterns on his thighs.

You felt Gabriel's hand on your shoulder.

Jack shook his head as he took in Gabriel's drenched appearance.

"She pushed me into a pool," he said smugly.

"Is that so?" Jack gave you an inquiring look.

You just rolled your eyes, wishing you really had shoved him into the water.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone's like "I can't wait for the girls' day out! OMG spa chapter!" And I'm like "...So Eastern Promises left a mark on my psyche...That Turkish bath scene? Yeah." Only I didn't want it to be sexy, because while Viggo Mortensen is sexy and I don't mind ogling him on screen, the reality of that situation is "...BUT I'M TRYING TO RELAX, WTF IS WRONG WITH YOU?!"

Sorry about the gore. I just...couldn't get that image out of my head and I had to write it.

Thank you for all the good wishes. The temp agency is avoiding me. Work is stressful. But I'm slowly getting back up to the word count. (Averaging 2k a day when I'm not heavy editing). Hope everyone else is having a smoother time.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of your day out. Who knew socializing could be so exhausting? (You did.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You did not get time for personal discussions. You were all marched off to the conference room for a debrief. You wrote up your report of the event while it was fresh in your memory. Gabriel disappeared to change out of his wet clothes, but was back in time for the meeting.

Jack presided over it, with Captain Amari and Gabriel on either side. Ziv sat in, as well as everyone who had returned from the spa. Reinhardt had stayed behind to handle the cleanup and present a reassuring Overwatch face. Reinhardt, you realized, would be an excellent PR guy. While Jack, Gabriel, and Captain Amari projected confidence and the ability to make tough calls, Reinhardt's open emotionalism demonstrated that Overwatch cared. He could never be in Strike Commander, he was too impulsive, too sentimental. But he would win people over in a way the rest of you could not.

Your SOS message had gone through around the same time as Tataryn's call for backup. He'd been lurking on the grounds, chatting up a masseuse on her break. He evacuated as many civilians as he could, before scouting the perimeter and picking away at the patrolling cyborgs. He'd cleared the route for backup to charge in, and you understood that after all this time, you had underestimated his ability, if not his character.

Jack had stayed on base to run the op, and Ziv had been hacking the security cameras and getting messages to Amélie via a hijacked service-drone. Ziv scouted ahead, giving Amélie an edge at staying hidden. She'd gone into the vents when she heard the shooting and made her way up to the offices, trying to find Captain Amari.

Captain Amari had jumped a cyborg, taken his gun, and ushered out the staff on her end of the building while you were running around the pool area.

Ziv brought up clips of Captain Amari sniping. There were a few of a small messenger drone and Amélie creeping through the halls, but she'd stayed out of sight for most it.

The security cameras were not in the spa area, for obvious reasons. So there wasn't much footage of your exploits, just the events after you met that last cyborg in the stairwell. But Lacroix gleefully put it on the screen anyway.

You rested your face in your hand.

It started with you, already a bloody mess standing on the top step, getting bitch-slapped by the cyborg and dropping the gun. The screen split into two different angles, one from the hall, the other in the stairwell. You punched him, your face sterner than you remembered, your follow-up strikes landing with textbook precision. But the throat-stab gushed as much as you recalled and
when you glanced over at Jack and Gabriel, they were both giving you very thoughtful looks.

"You should consider teaching a counter-cyborg defense class," Lacroix said. "Or at the very least, writing a treatise about vulnerable flesh parts like the neck."

You shrugged, because it worked for you. And it certainly didn't reflect any of your residual issues. Not in the least. Nope.

"Amélie managed to take the Alpha leader alive," Lacroix said so quickly you almost missed it. "Shot her in the back, but left her with a small sucking chest wound. It severely limited her ability to escape. We will be doing that interrogation later."

That was interesting news. You glanced at Amélie who winked at you across the table. Ziv sat on the other side of Lacroix, looking very pleased with himself.

"How did they find us?" Captain Amari asked.

"Still looking into it, but we think they've had a unit on standby since the attack in the Alps failed. I'm thinking they were monitoring the city's central security camera hub. But I can't prove anything yet," Ziv said.

"Jack will soon be giving a speech reassuring the citizens of Zurich that Overwatch is protecting the city." Lacroix leaned forward. "Ana, if you don't mind being the face of this operation, considering your most daring announcement at the spa?"

"If you think that's for the best," Captain Amari said, giving you a look you couldn't interpret.

"Officially, yes," Lacroix said, also giving you a look.

Amélie didn't need the attention and neither did you. Also, you doubted Agent "Covered in a Bloody Towel" was the image Overwatch wanted to project.

"We are going to have to limit what information leaks out to the rest of the base," Lacroix continued. "By now everyone knows Captain Amari, Chanceux, and Amélie were attacked. "How do we wish to present this?"

You rolled your eyes, and winced, because your head hurt. You kept catching whiffs of spoiled blood and it made your stomach turn. Your legs ached and your feet were numb. You felt a little sick and belatedly, you realized you were dehydrated, just like Marta...Marta had warned you. You didn't want to think about her, so you focused on your condition.

You'd had a bit of alcohol before the spa today. After that, the humidity and hot pools would have wrung you out even if you hadn't have been in combat. Now that you were settling down, the exertion left you drained. Biting your lip, you closed your eyes and tried to force yourself to listen to whatever was being discussed.

"We can't deny that they were looking for Amélie. The Alpha leader got on the PA and announced it."

"We don't have to highlight it either," Lacroix said. "Publicly, it was a terrorist attack, and Overwatch handled it. On base, we can stick to that premise, with the details that they'd identified Amélie as an Overwatch agent over the course of the attack and targeted her specifically because of it."
Your toes and fingers were too cold, and you breathed in deep, massaging your the spot between your eyes.

"Gérard write up your reasoning behind the decision, pros and cons. Ana, feel free to do the same. Publically, it is a terrorist attack that was thwarted by Overwatch. We can hold off on releasing details to base personnel till tomorrow," Jack said. "Mihret, I want your analysis of the security camera situation ASAP. Let me know whom you need authorizations from and I will push them through. Ana, I know you have several recommendations. We'll go over them tomorrow when we have more information. Gérard, do not do anything rash with the survivor. This was attack was too public and we can't afford to "disappear" her, if her captivity becomes common knowledge. Good job everyone, I'm grateful that you all made it home safe. Meeting adjourned."

You gave yourself a moment, knowing you'd be dizzy when you stood. You looked up when Jack sat down on the table, in front of you, the rest of the room empty.

"You're shaking. Come here," Jack said, taking off his coat.

"Crashing," you said. "Had too much sugar and wine before combat." Your mouth tongue stuck to the roof of your mouth and you made a face. "Dehydrated too."

Jack pulled you into his lap, draping his overcoat over your shoulders.

"I'm OK," you mumbled, tucking your head under his chin. "Just coming off the adrenaline with low blood sugar."

"Gabe's getting you some stuff," Jack said, rubbing your back. "You should have said something."

"Just started feeling sick." You closed your eyes, letting Jack warm you back up.

"You left it too long," Jack scolded.

"Honestly didn't occur to me. Not with the day I've had."

"I know. Should've thought of it myself," Jack said, sounding tired.

The door opened, shut, and then the lock clicked.

"They only had purple-flavor, corazon." Gabriel pressed a cold bottle of electrolyte solution into your hand. "Drink up."

You emptied the bottle in two gulps and Gabriel handed you another one, rubbing your shoulders while you shivered against Jack.

"Sorry," you muttered. "Didn't even think about-"

"Should've given you a chance to rehydrate before the meeting," Gabriel said gruffly. "You spent too much time in the heat."

"It was plenty cold later."

"That's because you were running around in a wet towel, idiota. You shouldn't have come down to the lobby. You're going to get sick." Gabriel handed you a pack of peanut butter crackers and you devoured them, getting crumbs on Jack's shirt. He just laughed and stroked the back of your neck. You downed the second bottle, and Gabriel handed you a third one.
"So you pushed Gabriel in the pool?" Jack asked.

"I didn't push Gabriel in the pool," you said. "I would've if we'd been near one, but we weren't."

"Oh?" Jack continued to rub your shoulders. "So why was he soaking wet?"

"He's an idiot who took a cold shower with his clothes on."

"You would have too if you'd seen her prancing around in that towel, obviously wearing nothing underneath it. I thought Tataryn's eyes were going to pop out of his goddamn head," Gabriel said sharply.

"Gabriel's a pervert," you said, closing your eyes.

"And?" Gabriel asked, not sounding the least bit offended.

"I was gross," you sighed, nestled against Jack's chest. Gabriel kept rubbing slow circles on your back. Having both of them here soothed you and your eyes fluttered shut.

"Sorry sweetheart, you can't fall asleep on me. I have to do a press conference in half an hour." Jack kissed you then, his tongue parting your lips and you squeezed your thighs together involuntarily. "But I'll be free tonight. Is my room all right?"

"Yeah," you sighed, as your headache began dissipating. Your heartbeat slowed to a comfortable rhythm, but you didn't want to move.

"This sweater feels nice," Jack said, nuzzling your cheek. "It took me a moment to recognize you when Mihret brought up the security feed. Gave us both a scare. Figured out from the way you moved that most of that blood wasn't yours, but still. It was...jarring."

"She really went for that bloodthirsty barbarian princess look." Gabriel nipped your shoulder and you jumped.

"Hey!"

"Stay awake," he reminded you. "How's your nose feel?"

"Tender, and yes, I'm sure I'm not concussed. But I'll use an emitter. Probably going to be bruised up tomorrow." You were awake now, and you didn't miss how Jack and Gabriel exchanged pointed looks.

"You going to be OK if Gabe stays with you while I take care of things?" Jack asked pleasantly, almost like he wasn't testing the waters.

"I was planning on spending tonight with you both anyway," you said, rubbing your forehead. "Wasn't going to renege."

"You had a rough day. Just checking," Jack said. He leaned over and kissed Gabriel. "Tonight then?" There was a gleam in his bright eyes and you sighed, because you weren't sure you had the energy for his brand of makeup sex.
Gabriel escorted you back to your quarters, which kept anyone from asking you any uncomfortable questions. Instead, you got several knowing looks from Blackwatch personnel and wide-eyed stares followed by hushed murmurs from the Overwatch agents. You weren’t sure what stories were making the rounds, but you’d find out tomorrow.

You gaped at the large stack of boxes outside your door. Several fancy shop names adorned the packages and you then realized that your deliveries had made it home before you.

"...I didn't know you wanted a new wardrobe," Gabriel said, after a moment.

"I didn't. Amélie insisted. She bought most of it, and when I tried to make her stop, she threatened to buy more. Now that I think about it, I know Captain Amari was in on it too."

Gabriel raised a brow. "I see."

"Do you? Because I don't." You shook your head as you opened your door. Gabriel helped you move the dozen or so boxes into your room, his gaze falling on the stuffed animals and flowers. He smirked at the vase of camellias, then flicked on your emitter, a smile playing on his lips when he saw the googly eyes on it.

"Are you going to show me what you got?" Gabriel leaned against your desk, eyeing the clothing boxes with great interest.

You groaned. "Later. I'm already tired and that entire ordeal was...well, it was the hardest part of the day. Not the worst, but the hardest." The dead civilians were the worst. But maintaining constant vigilance, while trying to pretend you were a civilized human being who wasn't going to embarrass your compatriots, wore you down. Captain Amari and Amélie were glamorous cosmopolitan individuals who rocked the ballroom as easily as the battlefield. You liked to slink around doing shady things in alleyways and hated drawing attention to yourself. That you found fighting a spa full of terrorists less stressful than a shopping trip, spoke volumes about your mindset and social skills.

"Did you not like what they picked out?"

"It's all very pretty. I thought I was just going along to carry boxes and give them compliments while they shopped. Honestly, I just wanted food. And then I got told I needed new clothes. It just snowballed from there." You shook your head.

"You don't have a lot of civilian clothes," Gabriel said, diplomatically.

"I like what they picked out, I couldn't... it's just strange that she paid for most of it. I know it sounds ungrateful. I am grateful, I think. I'm just not in the right frame of mind to process everything."

Gabriel chuckled. "You're bad at receiving gifts."

"Not used to it," you admitted.

Gabriel frowned. "We'll work on it then."

Too tired to argue, you shrugged.

"It's not always about debts and how much you owe someone. Sometimes people just want to do nice things for you. You should let them," Gabriel said, picking up a box and taking off the lid. "Oh, hermosa, that's a pretty colored dress. I'd love to see you try it on. Should I be worried
about what you're getting up to?"

"Yeah. If this was supposed to be a relaxing day out, I don't know if I'll survive a night at the opera," you said, putting the lid back on the box and giving Gabriel a dirty look. It was the purple dress, and Amélie had very happily explained that you couldn't wear underwear with that one.

"Are you sure you don't want my help unpacking?" Gabriel asked, giving the boxes a very speculative look.

"I think I need another shower and a nap."

"I'll wait out here then," he said, eyes drifting over your stack of packages.

You thought about arguing. "A bunch of people saw you come to my room-"

"And?" Gabriel gave you a shit-eating grin, because he liked being possessive. "Embarrassed?"

"Trying not to feed the rumor mill."

"I think we both know that most of Blackwatch thinks we're sleeping together anyway." He just sat down on your bed, looking smug.

You rubbed your forehead. "Yeah, probably. Except for when I'm sleeping with Hanzo and Tataryn."

Gabriel's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Oh yes, haven't you heard?" You tried not to smile. "The rumor mill is not something we can control," you said, nodding sagely. "It is wisest to avoid feeding it."

Gabriel snorted. "Yeah, yeah. I'll go then."

"...Could you pick up some food while I'm in the shower? Nothing too heavy, my stomach is funny, but I'm still really hungry."

His face softened. "All right."

"Thanks," you said, and hurried to put away the lingerie before he came back to snoop.

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After the second shower you finally felt clean again. You smelled better too - the gift basket from Jack and Gabriel had contained a soap and lotion set that had an amazing fragrance. It was an excellent blend of peach, vanilla, amber, and sandalwood - slightly sweet with a hint of spice and musk. Best of all, it smelled nothing like blood.

You studied the dark blue satin negligee you'd picked up. Considering some of the things Amélie steered you toward, it was fairly modest: lace trim, nothing sheer, thin straps, it was more a slip than whatever "negligee" implied. It actually looked very comfortable to sleep in. You weren't
up for provoking Jack or Gabriel too much tonight, and some of those racier pieces would do just that.

You put it on; it barely covered your ass, the hem skimming your upper thighs. It was pretty and the fabric laid smooth against your skin. The outer door clicked, and you quickly pulled on your sweats. Peeking your head out the bathroom, you saw Gabriel shutting the door, his hood raised. He set down a bag, and pulled off the hoodie. He was wearing one of those skin tight black compression shirts underneath and you took a moment to admire the definition of his broad chest.

"Grabbed you some bread, cheese, and fruit. Just light things." He paused. "I can go back out if you want something else."

"No, that sounds good. Thank you." Meat didn't appeal to you right now, probably because of all the blood. You sat down on your bed, and Gabriel passed you another bottle of electrolyte solution.

He handed you a box filled with cubed cheese, it looked like brie, fontina, and manchego. There were also grapes, a pear, and two tangerines along with slices of baguette.

Gabriel sat down beside you, the bed dipping low under his weight.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better," you said, taking a bite of brie and then popping a grape in your mouth. "Less wrung out." You took a big gulp of the purple drink. It was too sweet, but you needed the salts, sugars, and electrolytes. "Still tired though." Your muscles ached from exertion, but Gabriel had turned on the emitter, and you knew you'd be OK by tomorrow.

"You want to nap in Jack's room?" Gabriel asked, carding his fingers through your damp hair. "Or do you need to rest now?"

"I can make it up there," you said. "I just don't know if I'm up for anything rough tonight."

"That's fine," Gabriel said. "You were playing pretty rough earlier today." His grin was smug. "Got to admit, your hand-to-hand has improved a lot. You bashed someone's head open, baby. Shocked Tataryn for sure. Wish we had a video of that fight. And it took six people to fish that other cyborg out of the pool. He was a quarter metal."

You rubbed the back of your neck. You weren't exactly shocked that he'd already read your report. "With the exception of the guy in the stairwell, they were all ambushes, Gabriel, some of them pretty crude." Genji would have been smoother, hiding in the ceiling, or dropping out of vents, or popping up in a blur of steam, before vanishing with his magic ninja powers.

"That was pretty too. You didn't even look hurt after he slapped you; you just had that "I'm going to get this done" expression on and you got it done." He leaned over and kissed your forehead. "Confidence and competence are a very sexy combination."

"You're ridiculous," you said, cheeks burning.

"You like me anyway," Gabriel murmured, the pad of his thumb tracing your bottom lip.

"Yeah, I guess I do," you said, and had some more cheese.
It was a gentle fall: you drifted downward, sinking into a plush heat. Your focus unwove itself, blending gently into the space around you. A silent peace enveloped you, and your thoughts faded into a velvety fuzziness, replaced by a sense of contentment. Letting it all go, you floated down, weightless, warm, and comfortable.

The hole in her caved chest was fist-sized and raw, a gaping shock of meat against her neat uniform. Her hand was pale and limp, her blood spreading across the tile floor. The air stunk of smoke and coppery meat. But it was that huge bloody wound that you could not look away from.

You sat straight up, breathing hard, your right hand bracing your sweaty forehead. Your left hand drifted down to your breast, and for a moment you expected to find a crater of flesh missing, or a wet mess of mangled tissue. Your still-intact heart pounded against your rib cage and it took you a moment to register Gabriel's hand gently rubbing your back.

Eyes still closed, you drew your knees up to your chest and rested your chin on them. It was just a jump scare. A jump scare that roused you from your sleep and set your pulse racing. Your skin felt too tight, your nerves pricked at your flesh, and you realized you were shaking.

"Breathe, corazon. I've got you." Gabriel's voice cut through the fog. "That's it. Just a few more deep breaths."

Hunched over, you slowly inhaled, eyes opening. It took you a few seconds to recognize Jack's couch, and the coffee table, and the walls of his living room.

You looked down, still in your sweats. No blood. No injuries. You were fine.

But then, you weren't seeing your own wounds. Rubbing your forehead, you turned around, dreading the look of worry or worse, pity Gabriel would have on his face. Except when you looked up, he was giving you a crooked smile, his eyes gentle.

"Thank you," you said, hoarsely.

"Do you need a drink?"

You shook your head and balked when he tugged on your hoodie. "Give me a second to get used to my skin again."

"Do you need a blanket?"

You shook your head, panic receding slowly. "No, thank you." You turned around, sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize."

You tucked yourself against his side. "It wasn't even scary. Just surprised me."

"It's been awhile since you had one like that. Tell me about it," Gabriel said, voice even as he rubbed the back of your neck.

"Was almost asleep. I was super comfortable, and then I caught a flash of one of the dead civilians. Mostly just the gunshot hole." You saw shades of Lao in the death wound, but it wasn't Lao that triggered it. You clearly remembered Marta's body and even her pleasant voice. But for
the life of you, you couldn't remember her face. It was such a stupid thing, but all you could see was that wound, the bloody uniform, and the corpse in shadow.

"The worker who'd been shot in the chest in the pool area," Gabriel said after a moment. "Marta Schmid."

You shrugged, because you hadn't known her surname. But you had mentioned her in your report. "Yeah." You rubbed the back of your head, feeling silly. "I've seen plenty of dead bodies before. Usually don't get this worked up about strangers."

"She was a civilian, and you knew her name." Gabriel pulled you onto his lap, and you turned to face him. His eyes were distant. "It's always hard. You're trained to protect them, and when you can't, it feels like a personal failing."

You weren't sure Gabriel was even talking about you any more. But the statement applied. You recalled your drunken bar fight, and how you'd emphasized not causing permanent damage to the civilians. You might not have been very good at being a soldier, but you signed up for the danger. Marta had not.

"It's dumb," you muttered. "I'm panicking over nothing."

"Were you scared today?" Gabriel asked, smoothing your hair back.

You frowned at him, not liking that kind of question. Only, looking back... "No."

Gabriel nodded. "You've got a solid crisis mode now."

"Yes," you agreed. "I was...pretty calm."

"You had clear priorities and a plan. Get to your team. Evacuate civilians. Kill the enemy. You did all that." He paused. "And before you tell me they slaughtered those people on your watch, I'm going to remind you that you weren't on duty and you have to take care of yourself first."

You nodded. "I know. Just...feels like a waste."

"It was a complete waste. But it wasn't your doing. You have to manage the burdens you take on. Remember the difference between fault and responsibility. Maybe it was your responsibility to step up and do something, but in no way was this your fault."

"...Yeah, you're right," you said, because sometimes you had trouble separating the two. When Gabriel said it like that, it was very clear, but you knew from experience that sometimes the boundaries got muddled in your head.

"This was different from a planned operation. You didn't go out today prepared for combat. You were in a different kind of headspace. And now it's catching up with you." Gabriel kneaded your shoulders. "It's actually a good thing, baby."

"That I'm freaking out?"

"No, that you're able to take yourself off duty for "normal" activities. I have problems with that too."

"I hadn't noticed," you said dryly.
"That's because you used to be much worse." Gabriel's fingers loosened the tension in your shoulders and neck. "It's going to hit you harder, because your mind had to overcompensate when you weren't prepared, and because you lost friendly civilians. Talking about it now will help in the long run. So why don't you remind me what you did today?"

He was right. Untended trauma had a way of metastasizing under your skin. The longer you left it unchecked, the harder it was to get rid of; it fused to your bones, calcifying till it became a part of you. Your grief, your regret, your shame, if you hid it and did nothing, it grew to fit the space you gave it, and eventually spilled over.

"I had lunch in an overpriced French bistro and drank too much wine. I was dragged out on an almost violent shopping spree. I had some cake. I played "I Spy Tataryn" the whole time."

Gabriel continued working on the knots in your back.

"We went to the spa," you said, closing your eyes. "I just wanted to sit in the hot water. I didn't want a massage, from a stranger anyway," you added. "You can keep going."

Gabriel chuckled.

"You're supposed to walk around naked, and Amélie gave me crap for wearing my robe, but I really was worried about getting cold. Marta gave me this little pep talk about not being self-conscious about my scars and tried to fuss over me. Reminded me to stay hydrated. I know, I know. I forgot anyway." You still couldn't remember her face, and that pricked at your conscience. "I was just getting relaxed when...it all started. I put all the combat details in the report."

"I know. I read it." Gabriel kissed the nape of your neck. "How'd it all make you feel?"

"...I didn't." You shrugged. "Feelings weren't important. Having a plan was." You let out a deep groan as Gabriel's thumbs dug into a particularly tender knot. "I know that it's temporary and it's hitting me now. I'm not shoving it back under to fester. I'm telling you all about it." You gritted your teeth. "I'm glad Nina got out, but Marta was the only one I'd actually formed some attachment to. It pisses me off that they killed her. She nice, and from a tactical standpoint, she was fucking harmless."

"Yes," Gabriel agreed.

"Not my fault," you said. "But I was the closest person there and the responsibility creeps up on me. I know, I did my best. I got at least one person out alive. Just wish my best was better. It looks like I'm good for revenge, not saving people."

"You've made several successful rescues, corazon," Gabriel chided. "And this was a survival situation, not a combat op."

"Aren't they all?" You rubbed your forehead. "That's not right. The worst ones always come down to survival. But sometimes it's hard to make that distinction, you know?"

"I know." And of course he did. This had to be old hat for him. This was nothing compared to some of the things he had witnessed. Hell, you'd lived through worse.

And that was your doubt, downplaying the trauma, trying to rank and devalue everything by claiming "I've seen worse." You understood it was a kneejerk coping mechanism meant to distance you from the immediate shock of the situation. But it had limited utility and honestly, it was dismissive and caused more harm long-term. "Oh I've seen worse, this shouldn't bother me"
was an unhealthy expectation, like a twisted competition where only the most abominable horrors counted. It was like saying, "Well, the Killing Fields didn't matter, because the Great Leap Forward killed more people!" You weren't a psychopath and things didn't work like that. So you forced yourself to stop second-guessing yourself and continue talking.

"I played weak. I played amphibious ninja. I played sea monster. It wasn't quite a Jaws-style attack, but I sprung out of that pool like a shark jumping after a seal, and I was a little shocked that he didn't scream."

"Probably too terrified," Gabriel laughed.

"I had my tanto in my mouth, but I just grabbed hunks of his hair in my hands and his head bounced so nicely against the floor..." You shrugged. "I wasn't thinking as clearly as I should have been. Should've made it quicker. But it was so satisfying. God, that's fucked up."

"What's fucked up is that your knife had just been in some other guy's spine and you put it in your mouth," Gabriel said.

"Oh...eww. You're right. You touched your lips, a little perturbed by your unsanitary life choices. "So, I made some awful discoveries..." Your breath hitched. "It was shades of the Ninth Circle, I mean Black Base Delta, all over again." You straightened up. "Executions. Cyborgs. Their mission was to kill everyone, except the target they were sent to capture. I uh...I didn't see the parallels till now."

"They didn't get away this time," Gabriel said.

"No. They fucking didn't." And that knowledge made you smile a toothy smile even as it warmed your stomach. No wonder you'd been so efficient. You'd spent a long time rehashing what you would do in case of cyborg massacre. Because you weren't letting things go down like that again. Maybe it was unhealthy, but it served its purpose. You'd been a beast today.

"I was actually pretty embarrassed when Captain Amari found me. I mean, she's fully dressed and managed to save some people. I'm...a mess and can't even locate Amélie." You scratched your chin. "Everything else was odd, dangerous, and surreal, but after that, I think it was all OK."

"It's easier when you have the chain of command supporting you," Gabriel acknowledged. "And it's better when you've got someone you trust at your back. So sum it up for me, what did you do?"

You turned around to face him. "I made three tanto kills against heavily armed cyborgs. I grabbed a cyborg by the hair and slammed his face into the floor till his skull split." You paused, because it was starting to sink in now: you were fucking insane. "I walked around in a blood-soaked towel." Your voice wavered. "That is unspeakably gross. And I'm pretty sure I flashed at least two of my kills." You internally measured your high kicks and angles of attack. Yes, yes you had.

"Well, they're dead now, so it doesn't count." Gabriel smirked.

"...My coworkers saw me covered in blood and wearing a tiny wet towel. Like...like, just walking around like an over-sexualized horror movie character. There's footage of me-" You buried your face in Gabriel's chest. "Now I can't pretend this never happened. There's a fucking record of it. Oh my fucking god. Why?"
Gabriel was laughing while he held you against him.

You were shaking, and while you vocalized the anxiety about your appearance, your actions surprised you more. It wasn't that you had survived - that euphoria would come later. It wasn't just that people had died or that you'd been downright murderous. It was that you had even attempted combat countermeasures in the first place. That was fucking stupid and suicidal. Your smuggler self would have stayed hidden in the water till they were gone or waited for backup to come save you. Maybe the old you would have snuck out in the chaos, but today, running away had not even occurred to you.

"I'm an idiot," you muttered, shaking your head. "A real goddamn idiot."

"I know," Gabriel said mildly. "It's part of your charm."

Chapter End Notes

Short fluffy chapter, but the next one will be longer.

You guys are so sweet and supportive. I have been thinking, because yeesh I feel whiny venting on here. After I'm done with the fic, I need to make a big change in my life. Quit my job and find a new job. Quit my job and travel. Quit my job and join the circus. (Is there a theme here? Maybe!) There's room for political activism, or nonprofit work, or something meaningful. I'm mulling over a few things. But hey, suggestions are welcome. I will fully admit that I am emotionally adrift and annoyingly wishy washy.

Writing is kind of slow right now. Blargh.
You woke up to the door opening, your head resting in Gabriel's lap.

"Sorry it took so long I had to smooth things over with-" Jack stopped when he saw your sleepy yawn. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's fine. Just been dozing since we got here," you sat up, stretching as Gabriel leaned over the couch to kiss Jack. He ran his fingers along Jack's jawline, his teeth catching on Jack's lower lip. You cocked your head to the side, watching intently as Jack moaned into Gabriel's mouth. He gripped the front of Gabriel's shirt, eyes shut.

"How's she holding up?" Jack asked after he released Gabriel. Both men were breathing hard and Gabriel took off his hat, tossing it onto the coffee table.

"I'm right here," you said. "You can ask the expert."

"Yeah, but you'll just say you're fine." Jack flashed you a sharp smile. "You little liar."

"Had some rough patches," Gabriel said. "She's worn down from today."

Jack rested his elbows on the back of the couch. "Want me to get a pizza? It's not too late."

"Gabriel fed me earlier," you said, trying to bring your hair under control. It had dried at strange angles because you'd gone to sleep with it damp. "Just...uh...today finally sunk in." You tried to sound nonchalant, but you could see Jack translating your words into something more honest.

He reached out, pushing your hair out of your face. "Want to go to bed then? We can put on a movie, cuddle, and I have some cake in the fridge."

"That's really tempting." You faced Jack, leaning against the back of the couch so you could kiss him. "Just what were you planning tonight anyway?"

Jack just shook his head, smiling regretfully. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm feeling a little jagged inside," you admitted. "I don't think I'm up for your brand of rough. But that doesn't mean we can't-"
Jack pressed a finger to your lips. "Haven't been with you in about a month and a lot has happened since then. Even if we're not rough, it's going to be intense."

The hunger was plain on Jack's face. His smile was too tight, and he gripped the back of the sofa, the frame dimpling under his fingers. Part of you just wanted to gracefully bow out and have that cake. Another, louder, part of you wondered when you had become such a wimp. You pondered it for a moment. That wasn't fair. Today had been hard. You were allowed to take it easy.

Gabriel rose, and came up behind you, his hands resting on your shoulders. "Give us an idea of what's too much." His breath was hot against the back of your neck. "Can you handle both of us at the same time?"

You bit your lip as he ran his fingers down your spine, fire lighting up your nerves with each stroke. "I think we can work up to it." You shivered as he flicked his tongue against your neck. "Can't take it like last time though."

"Which part?" Gabriel's voice was low. "The part where I threw you against the wall and pounded you till you passed out? Or are you talking about the last time we put you between us? Because Jack fucked your tight little ass pretty hard and you loved every minute of it."

You whimpered as Gabriel's hands tightened on your hips.

"Be nice to me," you panted. "Not up for punishment or power games." Gabriel ground against your ass, already hard, and you bit Jack's gloved finger.

"That's a hell of a way to behave if you don't want to be punished," Jack said, pulling his hand away. He smiled darkly, examining the indent you'd left on his glove. "Are you sure you're not trying to get me to put you over my knee?"

You whined as Gabriel cupped your breasts through your hoodie. "Stop being mean."

"Don't bite Jack if you want him to be nice," Gabriel murmured in your ear, kneading your breasts. He paused. "What are you wearing under this?"

"Sorry, Jack," you got out, trying to push Gabriel's hands away. "Can't focus while he's doing that."

"That's the idea," Gabriel said smugly.

"Raw inside," you admitted. "Today was hard." You rested your head on the backs of your hands. "Everything's too close to the surface."

Jack crouched down so he was at eye level with you. You didn't like his expression, his eyes too wild, his smile too feral. You wondered if this was going to be like Cobblestone Dust all over again. "All right, baby. Give me a moment to cool down." He raised his chin and bit the tips of his gloves, peeling them off one finger at a time, never losing that cocky grin.

Your pulse stuttered.

"Not going to lie, we were planning on playing hard tonight. Putting you between us and showing you just how much we missed you. I was going to edge you till you cried and then pay you back for what papi did to my ass. I really couldn't sit right the next day." He laughed softly at the look on your face. "But we can take a raincheck on that."
You dropped your head, panting as Gabriel sucked marks along the column of your neck. His fingers tugged at your hard nipples. "Gabriel, I'm trying to-

"You sound so needy," Gabriel purred in your ear. "Those cute little gasps you make when I do this-" he pinched the sensitive points and you squeezed your thighs together. "Can't get enough of that. Get your pants off. I want to taste you."

"Let me up," you said, and took a deep breath when Gabriel backed up. You kicked off your pants and pulled off your hoodie.

Gabriel's nostrils flared and he stared down at you, pupils blown wide. He took in the sight of the negligee and licked his lips. "Oh *hermosa*, is that what you were shopping for today?"

"You like it then?" You tried to sound coy, but it just came out as eager.

Gabriel nodded, hands stroking your belly. He rubbed the smooth fabric between his fingers. "Very pretty."

"And the nightie is hot too," Jack groaned, bending over to kiss the nape of your neck. "Damnit, sweetheart, I like it a lot. And you smell so good."

Kneeling on the couch, Gabriel hooked your thighs over his shoulders. He cupped your ass, lifting you partially off the cushions.

"Matching panties?" Jack asked.

"Nothing at all underneath," Gabriel chuckled, blowing warm air against your sensitive slit. "You're nice and wet already, baby. Bet you could take my cock right now." He began to lick, long even strokes from your clit to your perineum, and you dug your fingers into the couch cushions, breathing uneven. Gabriel left lingering kisses on your pussy, before he curled his tongue, pushing it inside you.

You cried out, hips shaking as he held you in place.

The couch creaked as Jack jumped over the back, having shed his coat and gloves. "Put your head in my lap."

You raised your head and he scooted closer.

"You're so noisy tonight," he purred. "I guess you're the most frustrated of us all. Did you ever use that toy?"

"No," you panted. "Brought it though. In my bag."

Jack's smile widened. "Did you think you'd need something else to fill you tonight, baby? Even when you had to know we'd both want you? Such a greedy little cockslut."

"Damnit," you squeezed your eyes shut as Gabriel sucked on your clit, one of his thick fingers already one knuckle deep inside you. "You guys...kept asking." Your words went high as Gabriel pushed it all the way in.

"We'll use it," Jack assured you. He stroked your hair.

"You're so tight, baby," Gabriel exhaled slowly. "You always feel so good." He kissed the inside of your thigh and you squirmed, biting your lower lip as he worked another finger inside.
"Going to make sure you're nice and ready for me. Missed seeing you like this, tasting this sweet pussy." Gabriel shook his head, and flicked his tongue against your clit. "That's it, keep squeezing my fingers. Get yourself warmed up for my cock."

Shaking, you clawed at the couch, lacking the leverage to moderate his pace. Instead you gripped Gabriel's hair, squeezing his head between your thighs.

"Seems like she missed this too, Gabe. Didn't you?" The eagerness in Jack's voice made you shiver. "Tell him how much you like having him play with you, baby. Let him know just how good it feels."

"I forgot how good this feels," you admitted, whimpering as Gabriel pumped his fingers in and out of your slickness. The sound was loud and filthy. Jack's smile was still a little too intense, and you reached up to pull him down for a kiss. He shook his head, only smirking.

"Don't cop out."

"I forgot how good your mouth felt, Gabriel," you whined softly. "Because I was too busy wishing I had your cock inside me. I missed having your skin against mine. I missed how you fill me up." Your words came faster, running together as his fingers sped up. "Missed how your thick cock splits me in two. How wet, messy, and exhausted I am by the time you're done with me. I touched myself, used my fingers, but it wasn't enough-"

Gabriel groaned, and sucked harder on your clit.

"Why didn't you use the toy?" Jack asked, reaching under your negligee to play with your nipples. "Didn't like it?"

"Because you kept asking," you bit out.

Jack chuckled, leaning over to kiss you. He caught your lower lip between his teeth, before slipping his tongue into your mouth. You moaned as Gabriel's fingers stretched you wide, his tongue pressing hard against your clit, winding your nerves tighter.

The motions had you twisting in Jack's lap, and you broke the kiss, squealing as Gabriel ran the calloused pad of his thumb in small circles around your clit. He had not forgotten how to make you squirm. Your pulse throbbed between your legs and Gabriel kept coaxing you higher toward your peak.

"Were you being contrary or shy?" Jack asked, his hands grew rougher against your breasts, squeezing them just hard enough to make you ache.

"Self-conscious," you exhaled.

"Mmm, so you don't mind if we use it on you tonight, then? We need to get you nice and sloppy if you're going to take us both. If you can't do rough, I think Gabriel's going to have to take your ass. I'm still too tempted to pay you back for last time." Jack's last sentence came out a growl. "I will though, baby. I've been thinking long and hard about how I'm going to return the favor. I'm not going to ruin the surprise yet, but you'll be begging me for forgiveness long before I'm done with you."

"Jack-" You arched against him, panting as Gabriel worked you closer to the edge. Clenching around Gabriel, you moaned, Jack's promises exciting you more than you wanted to admit.
"That's it baby, come all over his face," Jack smirked down at you, the hunger in his eyes verging on predatory. "He could do this all night, but then you wouldn't get all the cock you've been craving, would you? And that would be a shame-"

Keening, you clenched around Gabriel's fingers, hips quaking as the delicious combination of heat, pressure and dirty words finished you off. Pleasure pulsed along your nerve endings and you went limp, little aftershocks still squeezing Gabriel's fingers, trying to pull him deeper inside you.

Gabriel gave your pussy a gentle kiss before lowering you back onto the couch. His mouth and chin glistened with your juices and he very methodically licked his fingers clean, never breaking eye contact with you.

"You should thank papi for making you come," Jack purred.

Your eyes widened, but Gabriel's satisfied expression did not change. He just leaned over you and gripped the front of Jack's shirt, kissing him hard. You needed a moment to catch your breath, but you couldn't look away from them. Gabriel yanked Jack's head back, biting his throat and Jack gave a guttural curse.

"You taste as good as I remember," Jack hissed. "Maybe I should take a turn. Eat you till you're begging. Don't care if it's because it's too much or you just need cock-"

"Behave Jack." Gabriel kissed him again, thumb pressing against his Adam's apple. "She's not up for your games tonight."

Jack took a deep breath and his expression morphed into a sheepish grin. "She liked hearing about it though."

"All right. But remember your safe words, baby." He sat back and pulled off his shirt. "Can I trust you two alone for a minute?"

"Talking about it, no. But not up for doing all that tonight," you said softly. You curled up in his lap, resting your head on his shoulder. "That's for more aggressive play. Not a lot of fight left in me right now."

Jack laughed. "I'll be good." You blinked as Jack leaned over, kissing your forehead. "Was that too much?"

Gabriel returned, setting items down on the coffee table. You looked over your shoulder as Gabriel turned the vibrator over in his hands. It was a pretty shade of blue, and while the main part resembled a thick phallus, the silicon rabbit was situated to press against your clit.

"Turn around," Gabriel said.
You sat on Jack's lap, his chest against your back. His fingers stroked between your thighs and you spread for him, stiffening as he licked the side of your neck.

Gabriel knelt in front of you, rubbing the head of the toy against your slit. Jack rolled your breasts in his hands, gentler than before.

You tensed as he pushed it in smoothly, your channel already slick and open.

"Look at that," Jack said. "Your greedy little pussy is swallowing it up so well. Are you wishing it was Gabriel's cock instead?"

You whimpered as Gabriel began to pump it in and out, his eyes staying on your face. He wasn't smiling, his jaw set rigid as he fucked you slowly with the toy.

"You're still so tight, baby. Need to get you opened up for us." He flicked on the switch and you gave a low moan as the device whirred to life, the smaller extension vibrating against your clit. Seconds later, the phallus began to move, beads rotating inside you.

"I think you could handle him now," Jack said. "But we've both been wanting to see you take this, so I appreciate you indulging us." He began to kiss the side of your neck, teeth grazing the sensitive skin. You could feel his cock pressed hard against your ass and you shivered.

"You're trembling baby, is it really that good?"

"Still sensitive," you said as Gabriel teased you with it. Your hips shook and you dropped your head back against Jack's shoulder. "It's stirring me up inside. And all that friction on my clit, I'm not going to last," you said, weakly.

"That's the whole point," Gabriel said, nipping your thigh. He tugged on your hand, pulling it down to hold the toy in place. "I just wanted to see you use it. Tell me if you like it."

"I definitely like it." You didn't even need to move the vibrator. You took it as deep as it would go, the vibrations against your clit quickly building up your orgasm. You began to squirm, biting your lip.

"Let it out," Gabriel said firmly. "Don't hold back."

"It's not the same," you panted. "It's good, and it works fast, but it's not like you-"

Jack chuckled softly. "So it wouldn't be a big deal if we put one of those little egg vibrators inside you for a day?"

Your pussy nearly wrenched the toy sideways at Jack's suggestion, because you knew he'd tease you something awful. The frustration would only whet your appetite, and after all that torturous anticipation, Jack was very generous about following through.

"Give one of us the remote. I think Gabriel might take mercy on you, only use it sparingly. But I'd leave it on the entire time, turn it up while you're standing or talking to someone." Jack laughed, his voice too rough. "Bend you over my desk when we're alone and just watch you shake from it. Bet you'd be a real mess. And if you asked very nicely, I might fuck you afterward."

You came hard, gasping for breath while you bucked your hips. You tried to pull it away immediately, but Jack held your wrist, laughing as you squirmed against him, swearing.

"Can't-" You shook your head, trying to take the pressure off your tender nerves, the vibrations now pricking you raw.
"Jack," Gabriel rumbled.

Jack released your hand and you turned the device off, shuddering as it slid out of you with a wet pop, your thighs now soaked.

"Jesus, Jack," you muttered, because while Jack hadn't done anything rough, he was pushing it.

"But you do like the idea," Jack said thoughtfully.

Gabriel took the toy and set it on the coffee table. "Going to give you a moment. Then we'll put the plug in. Come here." He sat on the couch and you crawled into his lap to kiss him. You recognized your own tanginess in on his lips and tongue. With both hands, you traced the scars on his cheeks, sighing happily as he hugged you against him.

"Thank you for taking care of me. Not just the sex but the food and comfort as well," you murmured. "Guess I don't always say it. Working on it."

Gabriel just gave a pleased hum and wrapped his arm around your waist. "You're fine, baby. I like doing it."

"And I like this sweet side of you," Jack said, hugging both you and Gabriel. "Can't help but tease you. You're so responsive right now."

Gabriel snorted and it hit you then that Jack wasn't normally this aggressive. Was it the days events? Was something else wrong? Or was he playing at a different angle?

"Everything OK? You're wound kind of tight. You reached over, fluffing his hair while he kissed Gabriel's neck.

Jack rested his head on Gabriel's shoulder, meeting your gaze. "I am," he admitted, no longer smiling. "Today's attack was a clusterfuck. Political fallout and death toll aside, I was worried about you. Didn't know your status till Mihret found the footage of that last cyborg. Staying on the base while Gabe rushed in was...difficult." He shrugged. "I'll be fine. Might need to take more time to cool down." He bit your ear lightly. "Watching you like this after so long is...a treat." He kissed your forehead. "I'll ease up, sorry."

"Want to help me with the plug?" Gabriel normally did it, but you wondered if putting Jack in charge would help. He liked overt control a lot.

"Of course." Jack ran his fingers down your spine, watching you tense. "So did you buy more like this?"

"Yes," you said, and belatedly realized that maybe you should be coy about it.

Jack's answering smile was wicked, and you turned away, feeling your cheeks heat up. "Why don't you lay across Gabe's lap?"

You complied, ass in the air, knees digging into the cushions, cheek resting against Gabriel's thigh. He massaged your scalp, and you bit your lip as his cock pressed against your side.

"Why don't you lay across Gabe's lap?"

You complied, ass in the air, knees digging into the cushions, cheek resting against Gabriel's thigh. He massaged your scalp, and you bit your lip as his cock pressed against your side.

Jack settled on the couch behind you and squeezed your thighs, his hands working up your flank. When the cold lube hit your skin, you flinched, and then forced yourself to take deep breaths.
"That's it, you're being so good," Jack murmured, pressing his mouth to your hip. He pushed one finger in and you tensed at the intrusion.

"Relax," Gabriel said, his warm hand stroking the back of your neck. "Jack knows what he's doing."

"Haven't done this in awhile. Not used to it." Your breath hitched as he went deeper, the burn familiar and bearable.

"You're doing fine," Jack said, and poured more cool gel into your hole. He moved the finger slowly, curling and twisting it inside you. "Oh sweetheart, I don't know how you fit us. You're clenching so tight on my finger." Jack's words were shaky and you whined as he began to fit the second one in there.

"More lube, please," you said, squeezing your eyes shut.

"So polite," Jack chuckled. "You are in a mood tonight."

He went slow, getting your passage slippery. The second finger slid in and you sunk your teeth into the couch cushion, eyes squeezed shut.

"That's it, baby. You should see the look on Jack's face right now." Gabriel's hands started to rub your low back.

You raised your head, glancing over your shoulder. Cheeks tinged pink, Jack's eyes were bright and he spread his fingers inside you. The sheer delight in his smile made you grin, despite the discomfort. The burn wasn't as severe, not with all the prep he had done, and you bit your bottom lip. He kept it slow, and dragging his fingers along your inner walls, gradually increasing the pressure.

By the third finger, you could feel your slick dribbling down your thighs and you began to pant.

"Think you're ready," Jack said, a little breathless. He withdrew his fingers and you slumped against Gabriel's lap. The couch dipped and you felt the hard rubber press against your hole. Gabriel's hands spread your cheeks and you staggered your breathing, a strangled moan escaping your throat as your puckered hole stretched to accommodate the plug. The pressure made you squirm, but Jack gave you plenty of time to adjust. It grew wider and wider, and just as the burning became too intense, it slid in.

"There we go," Gabriel said, patting your ass, the toy firmly in place.

"I'm going to go wash the extra lube off. I'll be right back," Jack sighed happily.

You tried to rise, and froze as the plug shifted inside you. "Oh-" You braced yourself against Gabriel's chest. Gabriel placed his palm against your stomach.

"Too much?"

You shook your head. "I can do it. Just...shouldn't have moved so quickly."

"Do you want to be on top?" Gabriel studied your face, like he didn't quite believe you.

"Not with the plug in," you admitted. "Limits my range of motion." You paused. "Gabriel, I know you'll stop if I'm uncomfortable; I'm not worried. And I know Jack'll stop if I say
something.” You patted his cheek. "But thank you for checking."

"I'm a little concerned," he murmured, kissing your throat. "You've been docile and cooperative this whole time. Don't want to pressure you into anything you don't want."

"Are you saying I'm usually argumentative and a jerk?"

Gabriel kissed you. "I'm saying you've had a rough day, and I want to make sure you're OK."

You were an argumentative jerk, but if they hadn't figured that out by now, you weren't going to spoil the surprise.

Fluffing a throw pillow, you lowered yourself onto the couch, propping yourself up on your elbows. The plug made your motions jerky and you gave a hiss of discomfort as it prodded you from different angles.

Gabriel stripped with military efficiency, tossing his clothes on the floor. "You'll want to be flat on your back," he said, his pitch dropping. "Don't want you to hit your head."

His erection hung heavy between his thickly muscled thighs and you licked your lips. Uncut and solid, his cock always looked like it would be too much, even though you should have been used to it by now.

"Want me to suck on you for-"

"No, you've teased me enough, baby. I need to be balls deep in that dripping little pussy of yours," he rasped, parting your thighs.

You slipped a hand between your legs and spread your pussy lips, watching Gabriel grit his teeth.

"Please, Gabriel," you asked softly.

He lined the head up, sliding it in, and you couldn't keep silent. Breathing hard, you dropped flat against the pillow, eyes squeezed shut. Fingers, the dildo, none of it compared to how his cock felt. The velvety skin was so hot and you could feel every vein dragging against your walls. Inch by painstaking inch, he pushed till the tip prodded your cervix, sending a delicious ache through your core.

"Oh hermosa, you've always been tight, but with this plug, I don't know how I'm going to move." He rolled his hips and you arched high off the couch, your arms wrapping around his neck. "You like that, baby?"

You nodded, ragged moans escaping your throat while you clung to his neck, your legs locked around his waist.

"Sorry, didn't catch that," he purred, and rolled his hips again. "You want to be more specific?" He rutted against you, not giving you a chance to recover. And though you tried to speak, it came out in a chain of incoherent gasps and sighs. Between his cock in your pussy and the plug in your ass everything was stretched too far, straining your core and making it impossible to think straight.

It was too much. It wasn't enough. You couldn't take it, but you wanted more. It had been too long, but how could you ever be sufficiently prepared for this?
Sweat ran down the back of your neck. He burned against you and you clamped down on him. He rewarded you a guttural snarl and bit down on your shoulder.

You shrieked and Gabriel laved at the skin.

"Don't tease, baby. I'm having a hard enough time keeping my head," he said hoarsely. "If you can't take it rough, let me do the work. Otherwise I'm going to let loose on you."

"Gabriel-" You moaned his name, desperation lacing your voice. "Maybe I do want it-"

"Shh," he murmured. "Stop tempting me. You still have to last between Jack and me after this."

You clenched around him at the reminder. Gabriel was thick, right now your brain couldn't quite comprehend being filled by both of them. "Can't help it. Missed you. Missed this."

"Me too, baby." Gabriel nibbled on your throat. "Missed hearing you squeal and beg while I fucked you into the mattress. Missed waking up with you beside me. Even missed how grumpy you are in the morning. Just missed you."

You ran your fingers through his curls. The gentleness in those eyes cut straight through you and you kissed him hard. He cupped the back of your head, one arm holding you against him while he resumed thrusting, the angle ensuring that he bumped the plug with each stroke.

You gave breathless whine and tried to ride it out.

"That's it baby, love how you take me," he groaned. "Can't ever get enough of this. You want to come, baby? That's it, come all over my cock. Use that pussy to milk me. I'll fill you up again and again tonight. That's a promise-"

His free hand slipped down to your clit and that was cheating goddamnit, because that bundle of nerves had already been overworked twice. He sheathed himself to the base, now only moving his fingers against you. You squirmed beneath him, swearing as he wound you up, your legs sore and shaking.

"I have you all over my thighs." He gave a deep throaty laugh. "On my hands and face too. You're making such a mess," he sighed, sounding far too pleased as he brushed your hair back. "That's it. Going to give it to you so good you never want to leave again."

"Not fair-" You gasped, bucking your hips.

"Don't care," he shook his head, and rocked his hips, his fingers practically vibrating along your nub. "You're so close. What are you waiting for? Permission? All right, hermosa, you can come for me. Get my dick nice and wet so I can fuck you even harder. Can't have you getting sore before Jack gets a turn-"

You cried out, your pussy spasming around his shaft. Your muscles contracted hard, and it was a deeper sensation than you remembered, his girth and the plug straining your abdominals.

"That's it. Look at you coming undone around me. So beautiful," he groaned. "Don't think I'm ever going to be able to sit on this couch and not think of having you like this."

You dropped back on the cushions, unable to formulate a response to that. You just rested the back of your hand over your eyes, breathing too loud and shallow.
"You OK, baby?" Gabriel asked voice softer.

"Need a second," you said, trying to hold still. His cock rested inside you, hard and twitching against your sensitive flesh.

"One more makeup round," Gabriel said, kissing your cheeks. "Need to have you under me just a little longer-"

You moved your hand, looking up at him. "OK."

He sighed. "So good to me, corazon." He began to move again and you stiffened as the plug in began to hum, before the vibrations traveled through your core, making you tighten around Gabriel.

"Goddamnit, Jack!" Gabriel chuffed. He gave you a sharp smile, sweat trickling down his brow. "We're going to have to do something about him."

You panted, shaking while you to keep yourself steady. "Yeah, he's insufferable." You glanced over to see Jack sitting on the floor naked, one hand leisurely stroking his cock, the other flicking the dial of the remote control.

"What? You want me to turn it up?" Jack grinned and you clawed Gabriel's chest, thrashing as it moved inside you. Even if it wasn't actually going any deeper, the motion reverberated in your tailbone and through your sensitive walls.

Gabriel swore, sinking his teeth in the pillow by your ear.

"You can feel it moving, can't you Gabe? It's fucking amazing. You've got her tight and squirming underneath you. And that vibration? Makes you want to go harder, doesn't it?"

"Jack-" Gabriel gritted through clenched teeth. "It's not going to be her ass I'm pounding if you keep this up."

"How's it feel, sweetheart? As good as you remember? Why don't you tell papi how much you like this? Can't you see how on edge he is?"

"What are you playing at?" You panted, turning your head to face him. Was he jealous? He kept pushing the both of you, and while he hadn't crossed any lines, something was off. Even Gabriel seemed irritated. You'd already learned that calling Gabriel "papi" during sex was a surefire way to get wrecked.

"Trust me," Jack murmured. His smile was soft and he rested an elbow on the coffee table.

"Want me to keep going?" Gabriel croaked.

"Please, papi." The words slipped out and you kissed Gabriel's throat, feeling him shudder against you.

His eyes snapped open and he ran his thumb along your cheek. "And what do you want me
"What do you need?" You asked, shivering as he pressed his forehead against yours.

"Need you," he said, nipping your ear. "It's been so long. Need to remind us both that you're mine."

You shivered. "I'll try to keep up."

Gabriel exhaled through his nostrils. "You don't want to do rough tonight."

"I-" You froze under the intensity of his gaze.

He looked over at Jack, lips twisting into a wry smile. "You're an ass."

Jack shrugged, not looking the least bit sorry. "You can thank me later."

"I'm-"

Gabriel nuzzled your cheek. "I know, baby. Your defenses are down. Not going to be hard on you tonight. But you still want me to raw that greedy little pussy. You want me to claim all your tight little holes. You want me to remind you who your papi is, yes?"

"Gabriel, I can-"

"You're missing the point, hermosa. Jack picked up on it first, that bastard." Gabriel rolled his hips and you arched off couch, broken noises escaping the back of your throat. "You think calling me "papi" is about overwhelming you. You think it's a green light for me to push your limits. You think I'm loosing my baser nature just to use you as I see fit."

He punctuated each statement by grinding against you. Your inner muscles coiled tighter and you whimpered.

He groaned, thrusting slow and deep.

"Gabriel-"

"Shh, baby girl. Papi isn't done yet." He nuzzled your throat. "It's about trust. All those times I wrecked you, that's what you wanted, wasn't it? You could have stopped me with a word at any time and you knew it. But you needed it hard and fast. You gave me permission to take control. Same with Jack. He wanted it as much as you did. Though he's still going to retaliate for that. Better be prepared."

You whined softly as he snapped his hips forward.

"So while I might want to leave you a quivering, sore, and fucked senseless on the floor, that's not what you need tonight. You need me to take good care of you. Calling me "papi" is you trusting me to know what you need." He sighed, a content smile spreading across his face. "And asking me to give it to you."

"OK," you agreed, because you couldn't think straight, not with the consistent rhythm of his cock stroking your insides. Not with the plug's vibrations setting your frazzled nerves alight.

Gabriel said your name. "Look at me."

You met his gaze.
"Who do you belong to, baby?"

"You," you sighed, shaking as he kept up that achingly slow pace.

"And who do I belong to?"

"Jack and me," you panted. "But right now, you're mine, Gabriel Reyes." The possessiveness in your voice surprised you.

He smiled then. "Good answer." He kissed you hungrily. "That gets a reward. You want to come with me? Scream my name while I'm spilling myself inside you?"

"Want to hear you scream my name," you said, excitement spiking your blood.

"You're going to have earn that," Gabriel growled and began to thrust faster. The motions controlled, just enough pressure on your sweet spot, still going deep enough to ache. You clawed at his chest and he hissed, but kept the same pace.

"Turn it up all the way, Jack," Gabriel said, his grin fierce.

Gabriel shifted his angle, his cock driving deeper against your cervix. The plug sat snugly inside you, vibrations shaking your entire core. It traveled up the base of your spine, jolting your already taut muscles. You were too tense and twisted up. With each measured thrust, you were sure Gabriel was going to break you apart, and you didn't fucking care as long as he didn't stop.

"Need you, please-" you sobbed. "Please, papi." You couldn't finish that thought. Already your inner muscles began to contract, trying to milk him for all he was worth. Your vision blurred and you fell apart, pleasure spiraling through your center.

"That's it, corazon. Take it all. It's all yours." He stiffened, his cock twitching inside your pussy. His cum burned hot inside you and you dropped flat against the couch, aftershocks leaving you weak and boneless. Gabriel pushed your hair back, eyes closed as he buried his face in your neck. He said your name gently; it wasn't a scream, but it did something to your brittle heart.

It took you a moment to realize that plug had stopped vibrating. You tried to sit up, but Gabriel kissed you hard.

"Thank you, papi," you sighed when he released you.

He gave a low, pleased laugh.

"What about me?" Jack asked, hovering over you.

"You're a troublemaker," Gabriel growled.

Gabriel pulled out, your thighs soaked. His sticky white cum slowly dribbled onto the upholstery.

"...That's going to stain," you muttered.

"It's Jack's ugly couch, not mine," Gabriel said, with a shrug. He turned to give the other man a cross look. "You had to do that now?"

"Don't be mad, papi," Jack said, leaning forward to kiss Gabriel's glistening cock. Your pulse jumped as Jack smiled at you and licked long stripes along Gabriel's shaft, making sure to clean up the creamy mess. "You two needed the help."
"Jesus, Jack." You shook your head, watching him swallow Gabriel to the hilt.

Gabriel ran his fingers through Jack's hair. "What am I going to do with you both?" He asked gruffly, annoyance already fading.

Jack released Gabriel's semi-hard cock. "You're going to have sex with us, Gabe. Lots and lots of sex," he said, before swallowing him back down. He bobbed his head, eyes shut and moaned around Gabriel's cock. It didn't take long for Gabriel to recover his erection, and Jack got off his knees, kissing a path up Gabriel's abdomen to his mouth.

You carefully moved your legs, sitting up gingerly. Your thighs ached and you looked for something to clean yourself up with; Gabriel's shirt was on the floor and you grinned, stretching off the couch, balancing yourself on one palm and reaching for it with your free hand.

Something curled around your waist, and you cursed as Jack yanked you back onto the couch, your back flush against his chest.

"Where are you going?" He laughed, kissing the back of your neck.

You wiggled as he pressed his hips against your ass. "Wanted to clean up-"

"Don't," Jack said in your ear. "I like seeing how messy we can get you. We'll clean you up afterward. Promise." He wrapped both arms around your waist, hugging you while he nibbled on your shoulder.

"Want the plug out," you said.

"So eager for Gabe to fuck your ass then?" Jack's tongue flicked against your ear and you lurched forward, Jack's arms keeping you from falling off the couch.

"Want you too," you sighed. "Missed being with you." You glanced over your shoulder. Jack watched you with hooded eyes, a faint smile on his lips.

"Want to show me how much you missed me?" He rubbed his cheek against your shoulder, his stubble scraping against your skin.

"Plug out first," you said firmly.

"That's no fun. You squirm so much more when it's in." Jack released you. "Lay across my lap. Gabe'll take care of you."

Carefully arranging yourself, your head in his lap, you took a moment to grin up at him, before you gripped his cock in your metal fingers. You squeezed lightly and Jack tensed, his smile gaining an edge.

"You just keep it up, baby. I'm keeping score, and you know I'm going to remember all your little transgressions."

"So you're saying I should commit bigger ones?"

"Jack, play nice. Lucky, stop goading him," Gabriel said, exasperation clipping his tone. You wiggled your hips and he smacked you lightly across the ass, the impact jolting through the plug.

You cried out against Jack's thigh and his cock jerked in your hand.
Gabriel tapped the plug and you trembled, swallowing hard. You released Jack, digging your fingers into the couch.

"Breathe," Jack reminded you, his hands resting on your back. "I like this outfit. Going to give me a hint as to what else you picked up?"

You shook your head.

"She was pretty squirrelly when I asked her about her new wardrobe." Gabriel withdrew the plug at a deliberately painstaking pace. "Apparently Amélie and Ana had a lot of input."

Jack "hmmed," his tone speculative.

"There we go, baby. I'll be back in a moment. Why don't you and Jack get comfortable?" Gabriel rose and you watched him saunter off, admiring the slight bounce of his butt.

Jack twisted a lock of your hair between his fingers. "What's going to be easiest on you, sweetheart? Do you want us to hold you up? Do you want to be on your knees? I think you might do better on top of me. Let Gabe control the pace."

"Sounds good," you said, patting his knee. You got up, relieved of the pressure from the toy. You stretched your legs, rubbing your calves to avoid any cramps.

Jack grabbed a pillow and laid down on the floor, his arms under his head. He gave you a sly wink. "So are you going to show me how much you missed me?"

You crawled between Jack's legs, cupping his balls while you licked the underside of his shaft. Jack had a such a long pretty cock. He tensed as you ran your tongue across the head, closing your eyes while you took it down your throat. "That isn't what I meant, sweetheart," Jack sighed happily. He began to thrust, careful not to choke you.

You liked the salty taste, the velvety soft texture of his skin, the way his thighs flexed while he tried to hold still under your touch. And if you were going to be honest, you liked the way it felt, to have him at your mercy.

He reached down, tapping you on the nose. "I'm not complaining, but let me have your mouth later. I want to hold you right now." You rose and started to pull the negligee off. "Leave it. Please."

You raised a brow, and Jack turned a lovely shade of pink, verging on red.

"I'm just appreciating the effort you put in." He nodded, looking very sincere.

"Of course," you said, not believing it for a second. "You guys are probably going to ruin it tonight."

"I'll buy you more," Jack said, nostrils flaring. "Now come on. Stop teasing me."

Bracing yourself against his stomach, you took a moment to stroke the hard plane of muscles. Jack wiggled, under you, his breath speeding up. Oh, did that mean...? You smiled, and lowered yourself onto Jack's cock, cooing as he filled you. Jack's eyes stayed on your face and he reached up, his hand slipping under the fabric to fondle your breasts.

You crawled forward to kiss him, and he held still, letting you adjust.
"Come on baby, I'm only halfway-"

You kissed his throat. "Thank you for being so supportive through all the...drama." You worked your way down to his collarbones. "I uh...I probably would've done it by myself and screwed things up more if you hadn't been there." You found your seat, taking him to the base. "I-"

Jack tilted your chin up. "It doesn't count if you don't look at me when you say it, sweetheart. Though you get style points for doing it while you're taking my dick."

"Thank you, Jack," you said, voice shaky as you looked him in the eye. "I needed you and you were there."

"Same goes for you, baby. You came through for me too. Should've introduced you to Rodriguez, let you meet some SEP folk who are normal." He kissed you hungrily. "But I don't want to talk about that right now. I want to make up for all that lost time." He raised his hips and you dropped your head against his chest.

"You ready baby?" Gabriel asked, kneeling behind you.

"Yes," you said, licking one of Jack's nipples. Gabriel stroked your back.

"Let me guess, Jack wanted you to leave it on."

"Yup." You watched him over your shoulder, Jack's hands holding you open. Gabriel dripped the lubricant inside you. You tried to remain still, momentarily tensing when Gabriel's head pressed against your hole. He pushed slowly in and you flattened your left hand against the carpet, trying to stay limp.

"Look at me," Jack said, wrapping his arms around your back. He ran his knuckles along your cheekbone. He flashed you a strained smile, his sweaty hair sticking up in clumps. "That's it, it's always so good feeling him through you. Always love watching you. And this, this is special." He stroked your hair and kissed you even as Gabriel slid all the way in. You moaned against his chapped lips, unable to hold yourself up, you dropped flat against his chest, breathing hard as Gabriel gripped your hips.

"Do you like that, baby?" Gabriel murmured in your ear. His chest was warm and rough against your back.

"So full," you shuddered, expelling a ragged breath. "Always is. Like you're going to break me if I move."

Jack kissed your neck. "Another day, maybe." He raised his hips, pushing you back against Gabriel and you let out a choked gasp, Gabriel's shaft sliding deeper inside you. Gabriel let out a coarse groan and tightened his hold on your hips.

"That's it, let us take care of you," Jack said, rolling his hips again.

Gabriel moved then, slowly pulling out while you shook against Jack. "From this angle I can see you taking both of us. Your pussy is dripping all down Jack. Seems like you've missed him too."

Jack thrust again and your eyes widened. Gabriel pushed in, Jack pulled back; neither man left you empty. They took turns, keeping a slow steady rhythm, till the discomfort faded and the sustained pressure began to turn to pleasure.
"Damnit, Gabe!" Jack swore, his cock jerking inside you, his hands digging furrows into the carpet.

You looked over your shoulder questioningly, at Gabriel who just leaned forward to kiss your nose, his expression smug. "Relax. He's fine."

"Wasn't expecting him to start playing with my balls," Jack groaned, yanking your collar down, your breasts spilling free. He rolled them in his hands before squeezing them together, tongue flicking against your nipples.

"I can feel you clenching around him, when he does that," Gabriel purred in your ear. "You certainly like it when Jack manhandles those pretty tits."

"She'd like it even more if you played with her clit, Gabe."

"Still sensitive," you whimpered as Gabriel's fingers stroked against your nub.

"Said we won't be rough, but we didn't promise to be gentle either." Jack took your nipples between his teeth, tugging on them lightly while you squirmed.

Despite the dirty talk, they kept their thrusts slow until you began to move, taking them deeper with each cycle.

"That's it, you're all warmed up now," Gabriel said, pushing you flat against Jack's chest. He began to move faster and you whined, resting your head on Jack's shoulder. "Oh corazon, you know how much I missed this?" He pushed hard against your ass and you hugged Jack tighter. "All of us together," he sighed softly.

"You know how many nights one of us woke up, reaching for you?" Jack asked, stroking your hair.

"Don't guilt me," you exhaled, heart hurting. You'd been the one in the empty bed, nursing your own wounds.

"Not what we're doing," Gabriel said dragging his cock out and then snapping forward, and you could feel him in your belly, pushing the air out of your lungs. You gave a strangled cry, and Jack rubbed your back. "Need you to understand that I ached for you, corazon. Need you to know that your absence hurt. That I didn't just go on, perfectly fine without you."

"Gabriel-" You swallowed, eyes firmly shut as Jack rocked his hips. They kept the same count, overwhelming your senses with sex and words.

"I love Jack," Gabriel said plainly, his breath warm against your ear. "He is the sun on my skin. He is a candle in the night. He's been with me for so long that I refuse to imagine life without him."

Jack lifted a hand from your back, and you imagined that he was tenderly touching Gabriel's cheek, his fingers tracing the scars with a soothing familiarity. Even with your eyes closed you had no trouble picturing the look of open adoration passing between them. You sighed softly, because knowing those two loved each other so much made something inside you weak.

"You'd be mistaken if you thought I didn't love you too." Gabriel's arms encircled your chest and he hauled you up against him. "You don't have to say anything, baby. After all this time, I just wanted to make sure that you know."
Despite his scorching body heat, you shivered, eyes squeezed shut, throat too tight. Gabriel's beard brushed against your shoulder and his lips pressed against your skin.

"You would do this when I can't, when I can't-" You bowed your head, unable to find the right words. Gabriel's hold on you loosened, and Jack pulled you back down to his level, palms bookending your face.

"Hey, it's all right. You can tell Gabe he ruined the mood." Jack's tone was deceptively light. He stroked your hair. "I'm bad at poetry too," he whispered loudly in your ear. "Roses are red/Violets are blue/No, they're not/ They're literally violet/Who came up with that?" He laughed at his own joke. "See? I'm awful."

You nodded, eyes still closed. "It's OK, Jack. Lacroix told me that poetry doesn't have to rhyme. I think he's crazy, but I don't read much poetry."

"You're both terrible," Gabriel said, rubbing your back. "I'll have to read you some actual poetry next."

"I'm sorry, Gabe. Whatever I did, I take it back. Please, anything but that," Jack laughed, shaking underneath you.

Gabriel shifted and Jack yelped. You opened your eyes, blinking as Gabriel pulled back, red teeth marks bright against Jack's skin. The skin would bruise tonight, but the marks would be faded by morning.

"I'm sorry," you said, voice reedier than you expected.

"Don't be," Gabriel said.

You flinched, as Jack shifted underneath you.

"Too dry?" Gabriel asked, pulling back and you nodded. "Give me a moment."

"Want us to stop?" Jack asked.

You shook your head. "I just...it's hard to think straight when you're both inside me like that. I get overwhelmed."

Gabriel poured a generous amount of lube into your stretched passage and filled you once more. "Better now, hermosa?"

"Yes." You sighed.

"I think you'll like this even more." He pressed something soft and cool to your clit, and it began to rumble.

"Wait-"

Jack chuckled. "Damnit, Gabe. I can feel it too. You already broke the egg out?"

"Easier to hold than the rabbit."

You panted, as the little vibrator hummed against your clit. "Oh fuck."

Jack started pushing his cock deeper, his head still hitting your g-spot. Gabriel picked back up, his shaft pistoning smoothly into your ass.
"No need to hold back," Gabriel told you. "This won't leave you sore, not like our cocks. A little raw maybe, but I know you enjoy that."

It was too much, the feel of them stretching you wide open. The heat of their bodies flush against yours. That goddamn toy, buzzing away at your nerves while you began to thrash between them. They kept their original rhythm, alternating who filled you, and you rode them, moving along the wave. The synchronicity flowed through you and you clamped down on their cocks, making sure to reciprocate.

"Going to make you come till you're too exhausted to crawl to the bed," Jack said through gritted teeth. "You don't know how much I want to just let loose and wreck you. I love rawing your tight little cunt. And you make the best noises. You sound so different from Gabriel, softer, sweeter."

"Come on baby, I bet if you come all over Jack's dick, he'll fill you up. We both will. And then we'll do it again because you know by now that we can go all night."

"Gabe's already gotten off once. He'll last longer than me. But don't worry, baby. Give me a few minutes and I'll be ready to go again." Jack shuddered beneath you, his cock driving deeper, Your pulse pounded in time with their thrusts.

The tension at your core, their dirty words, that toy placed right on your clit, it was all too much. You wailed as you came, body limp stiffening then going limp as Jack swore, thrusting harder, his body tensing beneath yours. His cum sprayed your inner walls while he kissed your face, his fingers digging into your skin. Panting, you laid against him, shuddering as Gabriel continued to move, his cock still sliding deep inside you.

Gabriel's tongue traced the shell of your ear. "Liked that, did you corazon?" he sighed. "Good. Let's do it again."

You ended up splayed on the ground, Gabriel's cock in your ass, his fingers still teasing your clit with that damn toy, Jack's cock halfway down your throat. The vibrator was on a much lower setting, not quite high enough to get you off, but too much to be ignored. You could taste the three of you on Jack's shaft.

Your negligee was ruined, the torn remnants in a pile halfway across the room.

"Look at you," Jack growled. "Sweaty, exhausted, and painted in our cum. You're so good to us, sweetheart. I love seeing what a shaky mess we can make of you. If you're feeling up to it tomorrow, I'll tie you to the bed and rail that sweet ass. Watching Gabriel going so slow only makes me want to pound you harder. He's such a fucking tease."

You moaned around him, barely able to hold your head up. The fact they hadn't been rough meant you had lasted longer than you expected. Jack stroked behind your ears and along your jaw. But you were wearing down now, limbs heavy, lips chafed, nerves shot. You let him fall out of your mouth. "Can't go much more."

Jack knelt in front of you, giving his slippery cock long firm strokes.

"Do you want to finish this round?" Gabriel rumbled in your ear.
You nodded, breath hitching as he sped up his thrusts, turning the toy all the way up. Your
threw your head back, eyes squeezed shut.

"That's it baby, you've done so well. Just a little more..." Gabriel rasped.

The final orgasm was a desperate full-body spasm, wrung from your exhausted muscles.
The intensity verged on pain and you gave a feeble cry, though the sight of Jack jerking himself
off, his skin flushed, his eyes fluttering shut, was well worth pushing your limits. You opened
your mouth, but he wasn't close enough, and some of it got on your face.

Mind hazy, you still managed to roll your eyes. Gabriel finished then too, and you
whimpered as his fingers dug into your hips, his body pressing hard against yours. He kissed the
spot between your shoulder blades and you collapsed on the floor, slippery, tired, and sated.

Jack leaned over, trying to wipe off your cheek. "Sorry baby, we'll get you cleaned up."
Gabriel pulled out, and rolled you over, giving you a hungry kiss, before scooping you up.

Jack's shower was big enough to fit the three of you and Gabriel held you under the hot
water while Jack soaped you down. You were tempted to swat them away, but Gabriel sat down
with you in his lap, back to his chest and shampooed your hair. He massaged your scalp and neck,
and you sighed happily.

"I can clean myself," you murmured. "Walking is going to be hard, but I can do that much-"

It's important."

"She's going to need some water. You hungry, baby?"

"Too tired," you said. "But I'll want that cake when I wake up."

Jack laughed. "All right. I'll get you that water and I'll grab some towels too."

He left the shower, dripping, and as you watched him go, you tried to repress a pang of
loss. Gabriel continued to clean you up, his hands careful but thorough.

"Earlier...what you said. I'm sorry I was weird. You say these things and I don't know how
to react." You hunched over as Gabriel helped you rinse your hair.

"Because you aren't used to hearing them," Gabriel said so gently it hurt. "We all have
damage. I understand."

You blew out a breath, too tired to deny anything.

"I meant what I said. Don't feel obligated to make any declarations. You aren't hurting
me."

"You're just saying that because you already know how I feel."

Gabriel laughed. "Yes."

You turned around, meeting those warm dark eyes. "It's not fair to you."

"I'll keep saying it till you're used to it. It will get easier." He sat there under the spray of
water, sudsy hands in your hair, his smile too knowing. "I love you, corazon."
"I love you too," you said, though your bottom lip trembled and there was water dripping down your face. "But you knew that already."

"Yes. But I like hearing it," Gabriel said, kissing your nose. "Thank you, baby." He continued to clean you up, humming softly. "Don't worry and don't rush it. It'll be fine."

You nodded, tilting your head back, so the water rained down on your face. Jack would be back in a moment and the three of you would cuddle before you fell asleep between them. Gabriel's hands soothed your tired muscles and the only thing that could make this better was a tub of hot water to soak in.

"There, all clean," Gabriel said, arms around your waist. "Now let's get you to bed."

Chapter End Notes

Long smut chapter done!

This week is going to be special because we have our annual inventory and we are so boned. I don't know if I'll get another update out this week, but I will try. The current minor arc I'm working on is pissing me off and I can't tell if it's subpar or if I'm just tired.

I do have cake though, and an almond raspberry tart.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Sick days, mission planning, and funerals. Is this what normal feels like?

Chapter Notes

Yumiii has been very busy and I was tickled by how sexy and cute this one is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something poked at your knees, and you squeezed them shut. Someone gave a poorly muffled laugh, a deep familiar sound. You burrowed under the pillows, unwilling to open your eyes. That was a hand on your butt, gently kneading the flesh, and something wet flicked against your thighs.

"Go away. I'm too tired," you growled.

"You sure you don't want me to lick you awake?" Jack chuckled, draping an arm around your waist.

"No, because I'm not waking up," you said, pulling the blankets up.

Jack pried the pillow off your head, swooped in, and kissed your head. "You sure, baby? There's cake in the fridge..."

"And it better be there when I get up," you snarled. "Whenever that time may be."

Gabriel laughed, somewhere near the foot of the bed. "Come back over here, Jack. I'll take care of you."

"Thank you," you muttered, yanking your pillow back over your head and going straight back to sleep.

"You getting up today?"

You shivered as Gabriel leaned over you, fully dressed. Well, it was cold in here. Colder than usual. You looked for blankets to pile on, but found them already on top of you.

"How long-" Your voice cracked and the words seemed to scratch the inside of your throat. You raised your hand to your neck, finding it hard to swallow.
Gabriel frowned, touching your forehead with the back of his hand. "You're too warm. Lay back down, I'll get a scanner."

"Thirsty," you rasped, wincing at how raw you felt. You hadn't been sucking Jack's dick that long. And you were sore. Not just between your legs, but your joints and muscles hurt. Probably from that ridiculous amount of fighting you done against armored opponents. You looked around, noting that someone had set up an emitter by the bed. That should have taken care of things.

Gabriel returned with a bottle of electrolyte solution and a handheld bio-scanner, probably from Jack's first aid kit. You drank greedily, even though it hurt to swallow.

"You're running a fever." Gabriel gave you a hard look. "I told you that you were going to get sick running around like that."

You wrapped the blankets tighter around your shoulders. It's not like you meant to walk around soaking wet in the cold. You glowered at him because while you wanted to argue, speech hurt.

"Don't give me that look. Lie back down," he barked.

"Reports," you said.

"Stop talking, you sound like a dying cat. You have sick days. Use them."

"Don't tell me what to do," you rasped.

"Fine, get up then." He crossed his arms. "Go write reports. You're shivering under four layers of blankets, I'm willing to bet that you're sore all over, and the voice transcription programs aren't going to recognize your undead rattling."

You glared at him reproachfully.

"Stay in bed," he said, shaking his head. "You have the day off anyway."

"...Hungry," you said, because food normally made you feel better.

Gabriel's expression softened. "I'll make you some soup."

"Cold." You let one arm out of the covers and beckoned him over.

Shaking his head, Gabriel stripped down to his boxers, and climbed under the covers. You latched onto him, savoring his body heat. "I can't make soup if you're using me as your personal heater, baby." You didn't let go, because now that he was here, you were just warm enough.

"Let me get you something for your throat at least. Jack has some mild painkillers and anti-inflammatory in the kit."

"Fussy," you muttered.

"Demanding," he countered.

"Cold. Hate that."

Gabriel leaned over, kissing your forehead. "I know it feels that way, but you're actually pretty warm, baby. I'll keep the scanner nearby. Don't want you getting too hot." He disentangled
himself from you and you burrowed deeper under the covers, curling up in his spot. Closing your eyes, you tried not to focus on the scraping pain in the back of your throat. This was stupid. You'd been fine yesterday. Getting sick was for people with that kind of time.

"Sit up and take these. I called Jack. He'll pick you up some soup."

"Curry," you said, because burning spices and garlic were the best cure.

Gabriel shook his head. "Take it easy. You don't know how your stomach is going to react." He took your hand, placing two pills in it. "I can get Angela if you want."

"...No." Because if you weren't that sick, it was inconveniencing her. And if you were sick, well, she was probably going to lecture you three times worse than Gabriel. Not to mention, you'd avoided the going to see her yesterday, and she would definitely get on your case about that.

Gabriel snorted. "I'll keep an eye on your temperature. If it gets higher, you're going to the infirmary." He gave you a hard look and handed you a bottle of water. It was a disarming how he could be so commanding while standing there in his underwear.

"Bossy," you grumped, taking the pills.

"Stop being stubborn." He crawled into bed beside you. "You're such a bad patient." He smoothed your hair back. "Go back to sleep."

You tunneled back under the blankets, throat already starting to hurt less, and closed your eyes.

Something poked you and you flat out growled.

"Hey, brought you some soup," came Jack's voice from outside the covers. "Can you even breathe under there? Because if Gabe dutch ovens you, you might not survive."

"Really Jack?" Gabriel huffed.

Slowly, you emerged, and were a little annoyed that it was dark outside already. "I'm starving," you sighed.

Jack was still in full uniform, though he'd already taken off his gloves and eyepiece. He shed the coat, grabbed a plastic thermos off the dresser, and sat down on the bed beside you. "How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

"Sore, cold, and hungry. I'm sweaty and gross again."

"This is better than before. She's using complete sentences now," Gabriel said, tousling your hair.

"Want me to feed you?" Jack grinned, twirling a spoon.

You eyed him with open distrust. "I can drink it straight from the container. You're going to spill it on the bed."
"I think you know by now that I have very steady hands," Jack said too smugly. "Let me feed you and then you can have cake afterward."

That...wasn't fair. You stared at him incredulously.

He opened up the container and spooned out some bright yellow chicken noodle soup. You reluctantly opened your mouth and Jack happily spoonfed you. Gabriel looked over your shoulder.

"How is it?"

"Salty." Not that it mattered. You were starving. You would have eaten all of Jack's mashed potatoes if he'd brought any.

"Too much seasoning then?" Jack asked.

You shot Gabriel an incredulous look.

"I'm kidding, baby. Here Gabe. You try it."

Jack offered Gabriel a spoonful and he took it.

"Germs," you said.

"Super soldier immunity," Jack winked, and you wanted to bite him.

"That is too salty. In fact, that's pretty fucking terrible." Gabriel stared at the container. "Throw that away. I'll go make her some chicken and lime soup. I'll add enough hot pepper to soothe your throat."

"...OK," you agreed, though you were probably going to drink the rest of that anyway.

"Salt heals too. How does burn-your-tongue-off hot pepper soothe your throat?" Jack asked, shaking his head.

"Numbs it," you said. "Duh, Baby-Mouth."

Rolling his eyes, Gabriel climbed out of bed, muttering in Spanish. He quickly pulled on his clothes.

You sank back under the covers, and it was too cold now.

"You OK?" Jack asked, offering you another spoonful of soup. You took it.

"Jack! Don't feed her that."

"I'm hungry," you scowled.

Gabriel glowered at both of you. "Give me half an hour. Why don't you get a hot shower? Jack, check her temperature and make her take some Tylenol. Lucky, don't eat that soup," Gabriel called over his shoulder as he left the room. "Idiots," he muttered as he shut the door.

Jack gave you a mischievous smile. "Come on, baby." He pulled the covers back and you swore in three different languages.

"It's cold!"
"It'll be warmer in the shower," he said, pulling at your wrist. You snarled and smacked his hand away, trying to draw the blankets back over yourself. Jack just threw you over his shoulder, laughing as you tried to kick him in the face.

"You're the worst!" You shrieked as he carried you into the bathroom.

Wrapped in clean blankets, you sat on Jack's bed while he vigorously towel dried your hair. It wasn't optimal, but he was having fun doing it. He'd changed the sheets before you got out of the shower, and while you hadn't been happy getting dumped in there, the steam helped clear your sinuses and the hot water soothed your aches.

"Feeling better?" He asked, pressing a kiss to the top of your head. You were wearing one of his t-shirts. It was too big, but it was clean, and that was what mattered.

"A little," you conceded.

"You're such a grumpy sick person. Not as bad a Gabe, but up there."

"Should've just let me sleep," you said.

"You're the one who said you were hungry." Jack laughed and tossed the damp towel on the floor with the dirty linens. You got back under the covers and sighed as Jack slid in next to you, his warm hands encircling your waist.

"I am hungry, but I could sleep it off." You shrugged, because that's what you normally did. You quarantined yourself for 16 to 36 hours and slept it off. And if you woke up starving, you either had to get up and find rations or pass back out while hungry. This was...nicer.

"I like getting to fuss over you. Gabe does too. I know we don't do it enough." Jack threw one leg over yours. "I like coming back to my room, knowing you're here."

You weren't sure what to say to that, so you cuddled up to him, no longer quite as cold as you had been.

"How'd it go today?"

"We spun it pretty smoothly. Ana stopped a terrorist attack, accompanied by two competent, but ultimately anonymous agents. On base, everyone knows you and Amélie are said anonymous agents." He tweaked your nose. "I'm afraid some of that footage will be seen by others. It's evidence."

You groaned.

"Mihret made a blurred-face version of your fight for official consumption." That actually made more sense than trying to cover your body. You were covered in blood and it's not like people other than your lovers got to examine your bare skin. "There will be some political fallout, but ultimately, I think it will be OK. There were a dozen civilian casualties, but it could have been much worse." Jack's jaw clenched. "Petras called me up to question my handling of the situation, but my bases are covered."
"I want to go to Marta Schmid's funeral," you said. "If it's not a private service."

Jack blinked. "All right." He rolled onto his back. "I'll see what I can do. Being the Strike Commander usually wrangles me an invite."

You paused. "You don't have to-

"I know." Jack put an arm around your shoulder. "I'll get the details tomorrow. One of the perks of the job," he said. "I can get you into all kinds of funerals, kids birthday parties, and maybe some restaurants." He leaned over to kiss your neck. "Wish we could things more overtly."

"The bodyguard cover is good enough," you said. "Draws less attention."

"I know." He didn't sound pleased though. "And actually, I think you, me, and Gabe could just go out for a nice dinner some time. Gabe and I could wear uniforms, and you could wear whatever you want and affect that stiff awkward "I'm working" posture you get whenever you're in the public eye."

You thought he was being overly optimistic. "I might like that."

"There'd be cake," he said.

You laughed, because apparently you were predictable.

"We're going to swear that blood oath with On Sing. Ana is against it, but Gabe and Gérard don't want them disrupting Hanoi. Rein isn't too happy about it, but he's abstaining on the vote. Gérard doesn't think Feng is going to survive the year though. The detente should hold, especially if the digital ancestors are as powerful as we think they are." He shook his head. "Obviously, this isn't going to be an advertised thing. But it looks like I'm the one doing the blood thing."

You nodded sympathetically. "That's pretty gross."

Jack shrugged. "Yeah." He scratched his head. "We've been invited to dinner with Gérard and Amélie. The three of us."

"...Is that wise?"

"I don't know. Maybe Gérard is looking to patch things up with Gabe." He shrugged. "You should know, they're getting ready to wake up your friend. You're not allowed to be there." He tensed, as if expecting you to explode.

"...OK," you said, because you knew it was probably going to go down like that. "I'd like to see her soon. Even if I can't be in the same room."

"You'll get to see her," Jack said, rolling back onto his side to kiss you. "But I don't know how soon. Depends on her state of mind when she wakes up."

"...OK," you said, because Jack wasn't wrong to be concerned.

He frowned, but you just gave him a wry smile.

"I get it, Jack. I'll be patient. If she's out of danger, that's what matters to me."

He grinned at your reasonable response, like he couldn't quite believe his good fortune. "So I'm going to be doing some heavy political maneuvering. Not everyone in Petras' camp likes what he's doing."
"Sounds like a headache," you said.

"Yeah." He stroked your hair. "But I want him gone."

You heard the door open and Gabriel came in carrying a large thermos. "You're still awake. Good." He sat down on the bed. "McCree was playing up the hungry pup angle. Had to leave him some."


"The idiot will starve if he's left on his own," Gabriel muttered.

You didn't remind him that Jesse could cook or point out that Jesse was one of his favorites. You just happily took the soup and drank it, savoring the hot and sour broth with its rich chicken flavor.

"Thank you," you told Gabriel as he climbed into the bed beside you. "This is delicious."

"Just get better soon," Gabriel said gruffly. "You're a brat when you're sick."

"She's got nothing on you," Jack smirked, leaning over you to kiss Gabriel.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gabriel scowled. "Stop hovering over me. Go order a pizza or something."

"I want to watch that bad made-for-TV movie about the Crusaders. I hear the Reinhardt lookalike is really awful," you told them.

"No," Gabriel said, shaking his head.

"C'mon," Jack laughed. "It'll be fun. I'll order a few pizzas, Lucky will eat cake, and we can ask Reinhardt "if it really happened like that." Don't you want to be able to quote all the cheesy lines back at him?"

"No. He'll like that. What is wrong with you two?" Gabriel scoffed.

"I'm sick, I get to pick," you said, sipping the soup.

"I made you soup."

"But Gabriel..." You weren't whining, you were just using a very grating, nasal tone of voice. One that conveyed to people that they should give you what you want, or you'd be very annoying.

Grumbling, Gabriel turned on the view screen and put on "Eichenwalde: Nach Einer Wahren Begebenheit." A group of too-pretty, too-skinny actors in bad CG armor struck victorious poses, and the one who was meant to be Reinhardt had on a very glittery wig. It looked so terrible. You could barely contain your excitement.

Sandwiched between the two of them, you were cozy and warm, and even if you were ill, they were here, and there was cake in the fridge, and you would enjoy this for as long as you could.
"So I got Vo to replicate the crap-car bombs of the Martel Liberation Front. Half of theirs don't go off anyway, so it's a minimal threat to the civilians. Yes, I made sure she knew we do not want it to work, just look like it could. I made that very, very clear. I even bought her a jar of nutella and a bag of spicy garlic shrimp chips to sweeten the pot. She dipped the chips in the nutella by the way."

Ziv wrinkled his nose. Lacroix's expression didn't change at all.

"She says she sourced the materials along the same supply lines. Kept bitching about the quality." You sighed, rubbing your forehead. "Anyway, we lay that as a diversion. We can snipe though; the MLF mostly does small arms hits." You had already provided them a dossier on the group. The three of you sat in Lacroix's office, privacy mode all the way up.

Originally French, the MLF spun off from a far-right anti-immigrant party and hated foreigners and international cooperation almost as much as they hated omnis. While Hoffman's politics might have been sympathetic with theirs, they were the type to demonize potential allies for not going far enough. You had no qualms about framing them for her assassination. Two birds, one bullet.

"One option is to set the bomb, make sure her security finds it, channel her out of the building, into the sniper killzone."

"We'll need a spotter on the ground," Lacroix said, looking over the parking garage schematics.

"You or me." You didn't even consider sending Ziv. "I can snipe from the hotel across the way. Here's the exit plan." You passed over another blueprint and a map of the city. "It's pretty easy to crowd-blend in Cologne. Wish we'd done this earlier. Could've used Carnival as cover."

"Carnival a wonderful time to be a spy," Lacroix agreed.

"I think Lucky should be on the ground. You're a good shot, but the boss is better and you're less recognizable."

"They'll be expecting something like this, you know." Lacroix gave the paperwork a cursory glance. Of course, he'd already had his own internal version of the op. You suspected he was comparing both plans and cherrypicking the best parts from each.

"The bomb's the diversion. Or the smoking gun, if we end up not using it to redirect her," you said.

"Your escape route is adequate, and the Germans do hate surveillance, so they are less likely to catch us on CCTV. I like the base plan. Polish it more. Her security drones can map the bullet trajectory and counterattack. You don't follow football either, do you? FC Cologne has a match the same weekend as the trade conference. With the crowds, come the real risk of civilian collateral damage, not to mention the drunken rioters."

You shrugged. "I can draw up a new plan."

"This is passable. You just need to account for these other issues. Ziv, can you delay their distress signals?"

"Probably. I want to stake them out in advance to get a feel for their comm security,
movement patterns, and cryptography. I can definitely divert and delay local authorities. I've already upped the MLF comm traffic, making jingoistic posts about "something big" on their bbs. I'm doing my due diligence on the false flag." Ziv grinned. "The rest is up to you two."

You rolled your eyes, because the little shit always had to show off for Lacroix.

"It's a strong start," Lacroix said. "I'll review the details and make recommendations." He stroked his chin. "The Alpha Squad leader from the day spa assault is still in custody. Jack won't let us take her apart yet, not with the inquiry still going on." Lacroix looked at your face, his smile growing wider. "But that's not the cyborg you care about, is it?"

"...I know she's awake. I know someone has to handle the interrogation, and it's not you or me."

"We cannot see her till after," Lacroix said, giving you a lazy smile.

"I know," you tapped your fingers against his desk. "I just want updates."

"Me too, Chanceux." Lacroix shrugged. "They're doing a full work up, and then an interrogation. We'll have time afterward."

"Your idea has worked so far," Ziv said. "Winston would have called me if things went wrong."

That was a relief. You looked at Lacroix, waiting for him to say something trite about the virtue of patience and not acting like a soldier.

"I would like an alliance with On Sing, but I don't think Zhai Feng is strong enough to hold it."

"Jack said as much." You had already looked over the dossier for her strongest rival. Fa Hai was a distant cousin, weaker claim, but stronger political standing, and Hong Kong-born. A few years older than Feng, he seemed like the better choice, and he was amenable to maintaining the ceasefire with Overwatch.

"He's still going to do it. It's a formality, and it does give us leeway, if they oust her, to renegotiate terms. Especially since they are importing actual blood from Zheng."

"That's more disturbing than fresh blood, you do realize that, right?" Ziv scrunched up his face.

"I'm surprised Jack's going along with it, actually. I half expected him to dig in his heels and salt the earth." Lacroix shrugged. "Perhaps you are a bad influence on him, Chanceux."

You pressed your lips together, unwilling to take the bait.

"Like you are an interesting influence on Hanzo Shimada. He's been most cooperative and while he's no fan of Zhai Feng, he thinks Zheng will uphold her part of the bargain."

Burying the hatchet with On Sing was the smart thing to do. But you really didn't want to get sucked into their internal politics. Fa Hai or Zhai Feng, it didn't matter as long as they kept the peace. You tapped your fingers against the arm of the chair. "We're two weeks out on my plan for Spinshot. I'll have the next draft to you in two days."
"You look rough," you told Bayan, when he came out of the med center. He'd lost weight, and that surprised you. He had already been fit, so that wasn't a good sign. He was still handsome, though his skin had lost some of its golden luster, and he looked drawn and worn down. His dark hair hadn't been styled today.

"You look better cleaned up," he said, not missing a beat. "I'm not sure what your obsession is with blood-stained clothing, but considering all the pathogens and unpleasant connotations, you should probably find a different aesthetic."

You laughed, because while your Blackwatch compatriots kept giving you knowing smirks and amused elbow nudges, a majority of the Overwatch crowd had stopped making eye contact. The people you knew remained friendly, but random Blues gave you wide berth and watched you with an uncomfortable mix of awe and terror.

"You're hilarious. What's wrong?" You offered him a box of freshly roasted chestnuts and he accepted, popping one into his mouth.

"Nothing, Lucky. You didn't come here to ask about my problems." There were dark circles under his eyes and he pulled on his jacket, looking warily down the hall. He was shorter than you remembered, but then, you'd been bedridden and he'd been walking about bossing you around.

"I came here to bring you some chestnuts," you said. "Vo said you liked them."

Bayan laughed at that. "You didn't talk about me with Min, did you?"

"I did. She spends a lot of time here. You're apparently her favorite nurse. She's terrified of Angela. As we all should be." It struck you as odd that Bayan called her by her given name; most people stuck to her surname. But then, Mongolian naming practices were different from most of east Asia. That, or Vo and Bayan were closer than you thought.

There was a long pause as Bayan digested your words, and maybe a few more chestnuts.

"I thought you were seeing Genji," he said after a moment. "Or Tataryn. He seemed pretty into you the other day."

You sighed. "I'm not hitting on you, sorry. And I'm not seeing Tataryn either; please don't give that rumor any life."

There was an longer span of silence and you could see Bayan's thoughts flit across his face. He frowned at you. "You're here about your friend. I can't let you see her, Lucky. It's not worth my job or yours."

"I agree. I'm going to stay away, like I've been told to. But I'm still her friend and I am worried." You took a chestnut and bit into it, savoring the soft sweetness. "I didn't know they were waking her up till after it happened. When did they do it?"

"Angela forced it a day ago. There were...complications, but someone tweaked something in her spinal cybernetics and it leveled out." You knew exactly whom that someone was, and smiled.

"How is she doing?"
"Confused," he said. "She's not mostly nonviolent, but there are spells. They're leaving her prostheses disconnected obviously."

You nodded. "I figured."

"She goes into fugues. Doesn't talk much. Cries sometimes." Bayan shook his head. "I shouldn't be telling you this."

"...I'm not just being nosy, Bayan. She's my friend and I'm going to do what I can for her. But to do that, I need to know what to be prepared for." And you were also nosy. You handed him the box. "Everyone else is concerned about her utility. I'm worried about her well-being."

"She listens to that recording you made. It's loops continuously."

"...She's going to be sick of the sound of my voice," you said.

"I know I am," Bayan laughed. "Could you have picked something more cheerful? Like Kawabata, or Plath, or even Ayn Rand?"

"...I think you're insulting me. But I'm too illiterate to tell." You snatched a chestnut. "It was recommended. I don't really read much. That book was a struggle."

Bayan nodded thoughtfully.


"You just keep yak butter lying around?" Bayan asked skeptically.

"No, but I used to be an import-export specialist. I have my ways."

Bayan shook his head. "You don't have to bribe me, Lucky. I get that former Agent Lao is important to you. Has to be if she gets to stab you and live."

You laughed awkwardly at that, because of course he knew. "Yeah, that's true." This next part was tricky. You wanted to offer him something for his time, but you couldn't be seen as trying to buy him. "Do you have any recommendations? Because I haven't actually had yak butter?"

"Let's stick to natural sweets, Lucky. That stuff is terrible for you."

"Kumquats are in season," you said after a minute.

"Those aren't bad, but I wouldn't say no to more chestnuts."

"All right," you said. "I like chestnuts."

Bayan gave you a sideways look. "Well, no one's told me not to talk to you. If you want to chat, and bring me nice snacks after a long day on my feet, well, what's a little conversation between friends?"

Friendship, huh? That old chestnut? Pun intended. You could do that, along with another five to ten pounds of the fire-roasted stuff. And you wouldn't even have to fight with Gabriel or creatively break any rules. Because there were no gag orders in effect. And you weren't actually going near Lao.

You had always been sneaky, but thanks to the Lacroix husband-wife team, you were getting smoother about it.
"So are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?" You sat cross-legged on Gabriel's couch, marking a deck of playing cards. Jack rested his head in your lap, a hot compress on his forehead. Gabriel was at his dining table, sewing buttons back onto Jack's dress uniform. He was going to patch up one of your shirts next, because he was the one who ripped it. His stitches were also much neater than yours.

"Which one?" Jack asked. "The fact that I'm useless at housework. Or the fact that Gabriel missed his calling as a fashion designer? Or the fact that you cheat at cards?"

You just laughed. "It's not cheating. It's called "creative problem solving," and it's a Blackwatch tradition."

"I don't want to know," Jack sighed.

"You really don't," Gabriel said, not looking up from his work. "All right. I'll bite. What do we have to talk about?"

"Lao's awake. When do I get to see her?"

"After the interrogation, and only under supervision," Jack said automatically, like he'd been waiting for it. He closed his eyes. "No, I don't know when that will be. There are other tests we have to perform. But you will get to see her. After."

You looked over at Gabriel, but he was hyper-focused on mending that jacket. Which was funny, because it seemed that Gabriel could do complicated cross-stitch while watching movies.

"We're not taking her out back with a shovel, I promise," Jack said, opening his eyes. "And we're not pulling you off Candle Arc. You will get to see her. But you have to wait. Don't push us on this."

Gabriel just grunted in agreement.

You studied the slight discoloration on the card backing. Would you be able to see that from across the table in Jesse's room? Maybe not, his lighting was dim. Tinting didn't work as well for you. Maybe you'd risk cutting the patterns into the design. The problem was Jesse's shuffling sometimes picked up on it. You could swap it in for one of his decks without him noticing. But you'd have to do it before Genji got there, because he'd catch you.

"OK," you said. Because that was fair, and Lacroix was getting the same treatment, though they were going to bring him in later to test her reactions. He was, after all, the priority target and pretty good litmus test of her control.

Jack watched you, and you could feel the judgment. So you unfolded the washcloth over his eyes.

"You're hilarious," he sighed, picking the lukewarm cloth up.

"I'll give you a neck rub once I'm done," you said.

Obviously, he and Gabriel had gone over the best way to present the argument to you, which involved Jack doing the talking, and Gabriel acting chill about it. The plan was reasonable, and while you weren't quite comfortable with how much they collaborated behind your back, you
couldn't point any fingers. You'd already given Gabriel the pictures Maggie provided, and he was prepared to trade for a second batch, because that first set was only an opening salvo. She had more.

"You're taking this well," Jack said after a moment.

"Lao's alive. I get to see her eventually. You've assured me that you aren't going to euthanize her. All right, I can be patient." You finished scratching marks into the aces and put the deck aside. "You have a legitimate reason to be worried, because she is programmed to try and kill me, so that's fair." You reached over and began to knead Jack's shoulders.

You still didn't have a good answer for dealing with their overprotective tendencies. So you were going to handle it on a situational basis. While you weren't worried about Spinshot, you weren't going to tell Jack much about it, because the Strike Commander needed plausible deniability. You knew Gabriel would be fine with assassinating someone from Petras' cabal. As long as you caught her in public, with her small contingent of bodyguards and not at home with her massive army of turrets, illegal weapons, and omnis, Hoffman was a very small risk.

"What are you working on with Lacroix?" Gabriel asked.

"Obstacle removal," you said, and he understood exactly what that meant. "It's a team effort."

Jack went stiff for a moment, because he knew what you were talking about too. "Long range?" Gabriel asked.

"That's the plan. Making the false flag stick is my worry, but Lacroix seems to think Ziv's prep work is sufficient." You pressed down hard on one of Jack's shoulder knots and he flinched. "Sorry."

Jack just shook his head. "You're fine. I just... This is our normal: violence, subterfuge, politics. That's pretty fucked up." He turned around. "I know it's necessary. But... What would you do if you didn't have to go around cleaning up other people's messes?"

"There will always be messes." You shrugged.

"Humor me," Jack said with a frown.

"Eat a lot of cake. Maybe get a hot tub." His pained look made you feel a little bad. "I'm serious. I like cake and soaking in baths. It's the little things, yeah?"

"I think he's asking if you had any life goals," Gabriel chuckled. "Things like hike Machu Picchu, or swim with dolphins, or raise award-winning show cats."

You sat there for a moment. "I do like animals, but they don't really fit the lifestyle. I mean, I'm barely keeping my plants alive. Oh, Gabriel, do you mind taking care of them while I'm out?"

"Bring them to the office," he said, having already moved on to mending your shirt.

"...Don't make Jesse do it. He'll totally kill my orchid." Because it was already two steps from dead.

"Put the orchid in Jack's bathroom, he takes longer showers. The humidity is good for it," Gabriel said, and you sighed because that should have occurred to you. "The rest should be fine in the office."
"See, I'm easy. What would you and Gabriel do if you weren't cleaning up other people's messes?" You asked, because Jack kept asking variants of this question.

"I wouldn't mind having a farm again. Maybe not as a business, but just...land and space. And a dog," Jack said wistfully.

"You sure that's what you really want?" You asked. "I think you'd be bored in a month."

Jack snorted. "I realize it's not as fun as cake and hot tubs, but I'm a country boy at heart."

"I'm thinking about consulting," Gabriel said. "Not just for military ops and private security. Someone has to make sure they tell our story right. We don't need the SEP-equivalent of Eichenwalde."

"A thousand times yes! I would watch that every night. I would memorize all the bad lines. I would reenact scenes, just for you."

Gabriel had a head for business and most things requiring complex planning. If he hadn't gone into the military or stayed for Overwatch, you could see him as some high-powered CEO. "You'd love jetting between DC and LA, basking in the adoration of the masses." You picked up your playing cards.

Gabriel blew out a loud breath, but he didn't sound displeased.

"Well, there's a plan," Jack said after a moment, giving Gabriel a fond smile.

And you laughed again, because that wasn't a plan, it was a pipedream. None of you knew how to quit, but sometimes it was fun to pretend otherwise.

You wore your high-collared armor under a formal black trenchcoat. It got you some questioning looks, but because you were attending the funeral as the Strike Commander's bodyguard, no one commented. That Captain Amari chose to come along surprised you as well. She and Jack wore their dress blues, looking sharp, formal, and dangerous.

It was a small service at Marta's church, her remains had already been cremated and buried at the foot of a tree in a "forest cemetery," in accordance with her wishes.

Her family was polite, possibly overwhelmed by the celebrities at the service. You caught sight of Nina, but she didn't recognize you with your armor on. And that was just fine. It was a short service, and Marta's brother stuttered when he invited Jack and Captain Amari to the post-ceremony luncheon. Jack politely gave his regrets and the three of you left.

It was awkward, invasive, and probably a mistake. You wished you hadn't asked to go.

"I'm sorry," you told Jack when you got back to his room.

He just gave you a wry grin and gestured at his tie.

Rolling your eyes, you carefully untied it, and then started on his collar buttons.

Jack caught your wrist and kissed the tips of your gloves, his smile secretive. "It wasn't that bad, baby."

"We crashed a funeral," you said. "That's pretty bad."
"We were invited. I checked ahead," Jack said. "Funerals are always awkward, even if you're close to the deceased." He took off his jacket and continued unbuttoning his shirt. "I've only been to one that was weirdly fun. And that's because Jacobs planned it out ahead, scheduling drinking, story-telling, and leaving a recording demanding that we not be somber."

"I don't know why I-"

"To pay your respects. Funerals aren't for the dead. They're for the living. We already attended the general memorial service for the massacre victims. It does no harm to let her family know that we went the extra step for her. What they make of it is up to them. Stop fretting." Jack kissed your cheek.

"You're probably right." You turned around so he could help unstrap your armor. "You think he's done yet?"

Jack stiffened behind you. "What?"

"Gabriel. Do you think he's done interrogating Lao? Because I'd like to see her soon."

Jack sighed. "I'm not going to ask how you know. I'm not even surprised at this point." He loosened the straps and seals. You peeled it off, carefully setting the pieces on the table.

"He's been squirrelly," you said, though that wasn't how you knew and you weren't going to give up your sources. "And so have you."

"She's...confused," Jack said after a moment. "We've been waiting for her to get oriented. And while your plan seems to be working, that acclimatization is part of the reason she's having trouble."

You swallowed your kneejerk offer to go talk to her.

"She's coming out of it. You can see her afterward."

You blew out a breath. This was the compromise, and while you didn't like it, you would not break the trust they put in you.

"He's not going to hurt her, physically," you said, mostly for your own benefit. "I know that. But he's going to rake her over the coals."

"It's no different from what Gérard did to you back when you joined up," Jack said, patting your back.

"I'm still not over that," you said, mouth twitching.

"Yes, well, maybe that was a bad example," Jack conceded.

No, you knew it was an accurate example. Gabriel and Lao would have bad blood. Realistically, how could you expect any different? You sighed as Jack reached over, his calloused fingers massaging the back of your neck.

"So you're going to be out of town for a week?"

"Yeah." You'd already put the finishing touches on Spinshot and Lacroix had made his additions as well. Now you just had to see it through.

"...Something dangerous?"
"Medium risk," you said, not actually sure what that meant. It wasn't a war zone. But she had some expensive tech, so you had to be sensible.

Jack frowned. "Should I ask?"

You shrugged. "Will it make you feel better?"

"I'd rather sit here with you and plan that dinner outing," he said, spreading out on the couch, head tilted back. His white shirt was halfway unbuttoned, and his black tie was draped over the back of his neck. He closed his eyes, lips slightly parted. You admired the view: Strike Commander in dishabille. It made for a pretty picture.

"You just going to stand there and gawk, or are you going to join me?" He said, eyes opening.

"You're better from a distance," you said, straddling his lap.

"You don't mean that," Jack said, lazily. He leaned forward to kiss your neck and you sighed against him. The angle had you looking down at the cushions, and you started to laugh.

"What?" He followed your gaze. "...That did stain. Damnit, Gabe."

You laughed even harder, until Jack shoved you off, dropping you on the desecrated cushion.

"Damnit, Jack!"

"Blame Gabe!"

You rolled off the couch, grabbed the cushion, and smacked him with it, making sure it was the dirty side that hit him.

Jack gave you an incredulous look, before narrowing his eyes and grabbing a throw pillow. "Oh, it's on."

"You are going to be so embarrassed when I tell Gabriel that the Strike Commander lost a pillow fight to me-" You jeered, gripping the cushion with both hands. You spun, hitting him again.

Jack tossed the throw pillow at you and you batted it aside, grinning.

But then he was up and charging and you couldn't dodge the tackle because of the goddamn coffee table. You threw the cushion at him, for all the good that would do, and Jack slapped it aside. He collided with you and you hit the ground, swearing. Jack landed on all fours on top of you.

"Goddamnit, Jack!"

"What was that, agent?" He purred, pulling off his shirt.

"It's not a pillow fight if you're not using a pillow!"

"I don't think I care about that any more," he laughed, and bit your throat, his hands already unfastening your belt.
Sorry about the delay. You guys are great. Inventory wasn't *as* awful as I was expecting, but it's been a long week and I had some block earlier on. Seem to be back on track. But I'm writing smut again and that takes extra long. (Why am I a delay fish? IDK)

Just some "slice of life" interludes while the next arc warms up. Because things can't be an adrenaline rollercoaster all the time.

Saw Black Panther and unf. Everyone was gorgeous and awesome, but M'Baku. UNF. *fans self*

Real life is kind of a malaise right now. I'm sure I'll figure shit out eventually, but right now I'm kind of just existing. I think I might be figuring stuff out (well I know a bunch of things I *don't* want. But we'll see. It could all be a hilarious illusion/delusion/f*ck it I'll get some cake tomorrow.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Blood oaths, interrogations, and deception all around. Things are not as stable as they seem.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You and Jesse ran a poker game out of his room. And while Blackwatch had numerous gambling nights, your poker game was special, not as special as Vo's exploding dice matches, but still not the run-of-the-mill game. So it was a real shock when Genji showed up with Hanzo.

Jesse, Ziv, Tataryn, and Diallo were playing five card draw. You were sitting out this round, mixing drinks. It took all your self control not to spike Tataryn's.

Tataryn, you noted, had cards hidden in his sleeves and probably other places. Ziv always counted cards, and sometimes he used tiny cameras. Jesse was the most likely to stack the deck, doing fancy shuffles that somehow amounted to him getting plum hands. Diallo didn't focus on the cards, preferring to palm a chip or prize here and there and sometimes she colluded with Tataryn, pulling all kinds of two-man cons and shifty setups. Genji used a variety of methods, and you had never actually been able to catch him in the act.

You took a page from Genji's manual, wearing special contacts to view the juice dust he used to mark cards. You counted them too, but your fingers made shuffling a little weird, and you didn't quite have the smooth sleight of hand to cheat like Jesse and Tataryn. But you owned several decks of subtly marked cards, just for this.

Because this was a Blackwatch event. There were plenty of more profitable games to play with the Overwatch crowd. And to be honest, they were ripe for fleecing. But for this table, the stakes didn't matter as much as the methods. Deceiving, bluffing, and outdoing your comrades? That was where the fun was at. Everyone cheated; the goal was to outdo your neighbor and not get caught.

You were now pretty sure Nwazue had daubed or juiced the cards back in the Ninth Circle. Her grasp of chemistry was superb and no one else had the gear to detect her marks. Back then, it'd been a mystery. Now it was one of your tools.

"What's your poison?" You asked, by way of greeting when Genji stepped in, and Hanzo lurked by the door, looking just as uptight as you remembered.

"We brought sake," Genji said, holding up a bottle. "I'm still unconvinced that Tataryn didn't drug the whiskey last time."

"I would not do that to you, Genji. Them, yes. But you, you can snap armor plating between your fingers. So I would not do that to you." Tataryn laughed, shaking his head, and sipped his bourbon. He took it neat, but you could still drug him if you wanted to. Not that you would, probably. He would retaliate, and you weren't sure either of you would be able to stop escalating.
"He's just unsure of how much it would take to drop you," Diallo said, cheerfully. Tall, dark, and curvy, Fatou Diallo had the quietest set of power armor that you never heard. It was much smaller than Reinhardt or Valdez's units, and painted a deep matte navy to blend into the darkness. You were pretty sure it could run underwater too.

Easygoing and chatty, Diallo was one of the pleasanter people in Blackwatch. She kept her hair in a dozen neat bantu knots and wore a lot of jewelry made from unpolished gemstones. In her mid-twenties, with wide cheekbones and toned biceps, Diallo smiled a lot.

"Is Vo coming?" Genji asked.

You shrugged. Probably not, considering how many people were already here. Vo wasn't the best socialized member of Blackwatch.

"Sinaga said he might stop by and try to win his watch back," Jesse grinned.

Hanzo wrinkled his nose.

"What are you betting, Genji? We don't take brothers," Ziv said. "Especially not yours."

You rested your face in your palm.

"Family members have never been acceptable tender," Jesse drawled. "But I think he knows that by now."

Genji just sat down and tossed a gold wristwatch into the pot.

"Sinaga's watch!" Diallo began to laugh. "I have to get that."

Hanzo sat down beside you, watching the proceedings with a pinched face. "Is this what you and my brother do for fun?"

"When he isn't kicking me across the mat and trash-talking me, yeah. Oh, and eating. Eating is fun." You set the array of drink orders on the table, but shook your head when Jesse offered to deal you in. Hanzo sat awkwardly on the couch, arms crossed. Everyone was politely ignoring him, which was honestly better than you expected.

"...That man is cheating," Hanzo whispered in your ear.

You snickered, because you could clearly see Jesse palming cards from under the table. Tataryn was scratching his ear, and you bet he was about to switch out something in his sleeve. Ziv was smirking and you didn't want to think about what he'd done. You weren't sure which one Hanzo meant, but yes, they were all cheating.

"We don't bet anything we can't afford to lose," you said. "This is just for fun."

Hanzo squinted as he saw Genji flick his wrists. "Did he just...?"

"Yup," you said, noting the luminescent mark on the upper right corner of a card. You didn't think Genji knew that you were using the special contacts to detect his juice dusting. You hadn't completely figured out Genji's ciphers. but you suspected that was a court card, and a heart.

Tataryn smiled brightly at Jesse. Jesse's smirked, tipping his hat. You caught a glimpse of a card tucked against the brim.

"So, the commander is in a much better mood," Diallo said, flashing you a shit-eating grin
"Oi, you should have seen her at the spa." Tataryn rested his hand on his heart. "All she was wearing was this teeny tiny towel and the blood of her enemies."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Ziv snorted.

"Don't be jealous, Mihret. You're adorable too," Tataryn smirked.

"...It really doesn't take much to get you going, does it?" Diallo rolled her eyes Tataryn.

"Fatou, my heart, if any man can't appreciate the sight of you returning as gore-streaked victorious warrior, you should dump him for me. I thought the boss was going to jump her right there. Of course, she took the next day off, and when I came by her room to check on her...well, she wasn't there!"

"Tataryn, I will defenestrate you."

"But you haven't even bought me dinner yet!" He doubled over laughing.

"Thank you for your service," Diallo winked. "The commander has been in a much better mood lately."

"You're not slick," you said, downing your whiskey. At least Genji and Jesse were taking advantage of those two picking on you to cheat even more.

"Oi, Diallo, stop trying to look at my cards. I can't defend myself from you and Mihret," Tataryn complained.

"Doesn't matter if we see them. You're just going to swap them out for the ones in your sleeves," Ziv said with a smirk.

"Deal me three more, and not from the bottom, McCree," Genji ordered.

"This is no way to build trust," Hanzo said, sharply.

You just smiled and handed him a clean glass for his sake, before you poured yourself more whiskey.

Somehow Genji scored a straight, Ziv had four of a kind, Jesse had two pairs, Tataryn had a full house, and Diallo had a royal flush.

"Sinaga is going to freak," she laughed, putting it on and waving her wrist under everyone's noses. "How does it look? Shiny? Yeah! I can't wait to show him."

Tataryn smiled indulgently, brushing his hair out his face. "Let me win it back for him?"

"Not a chance!"

"Squabble on your own time. Lucky, you deal. And stop giving Mihret all the good cards," Jesse ordered.

"You want in?" You asked Hanzo.

He shook his head.
"Aww, come on, pretty boy," Diallo coaxed. "It'll be a learning experience."

"I am acutely familiar with both loss and public humiliation," Hanzo said, gripping his glass too tightly.

"You and the rest of us," Tataryn said with a shrug. "Have you ever been dangled naked off a skyscraper by your ankles? No? Then you do not know true humiliation. It was cold up there. You cannot judge a man based on how he looks in the cold!"

"That's how you met the boss, isn't it?" Jesse asked slyly.

"I don't kiss and tell," Tataryn said, shooting you a delighted look.

"Considering he was the one holding you over the edge, I don't think there was much kissing involved," you said, because Gabriel had told you that story.

"You of all people know what kind of foreplay he's into. He is very strong," Tataryn declared. "Swept me right off my feet! I was heels over head! I would have fallen so hard!"

Jesse, Diallo, and Ziv snickered, while Jesse slapped his knees. You exchanged eye rolls with Genji and dealt him the good cards.

"You are not doing that in order," Ziv said, narrowing his eyes.

"Mixing it up, because Jesse shuffled," you said, dryly, not missing a beat.

Genji won that round, with a full house. Tataryn somehow managed to get a high card 10. And everyone else had pairs. Blackwatch petty got into everything.

"Next round is for the Blackwatch tea party," you said. "Winner picks a food item that the lowest loser has to bring. No, they don't have to be homemade, but we're doing this in the middle of the cafeteria this time, so dress appropriately." You winked at Tataryn.

"Is Vo coming?" Ziv asked, a little worried.

"Maybe, but I'll never ask Vo to bake," you reassured him. "I've banned her from using the kitchen." Not that Vo actually listened to you most of the time.

"Is it Blackwatch only?" Diallo asked.

"Blues can come, if they bring baked goods," you said. "Or finger sandwiches."

"Is this a tea ceremony?" Hanzo asked.


"I bring Wild Turkey bourbon in a teapot," Tataryn said. "It is a flower teapot. Very beautiful. I stole it from a duchess. After I killed her. She wasn't very nice. But she had good taste."

You sighed, because Wild Turkey actually did go pretty well with black tea as a sweetener. "OK, Tataryn."

"I was planning on bringing ngalakh anyway," Diallo said. "What about you McCree?"

"Who do you think is making all the tea?" Jesse grunted.
"OK, if we're doing desserts, don't bring lapsong souchang. It doesn't meld and it tastes like an ashtray." Genji said.

"But that's my favorite," Jesse said, dealing the next hand. "If you want to talk about awful, all that wagashi you're fixated on? Bleagh."

"Hey now, them's fighting words," you said. "Lapsong souchang goes really well with sandwiches. And wagashi is an elegant acquired taste that complements the bitter teas."

With the stakes this high, you weren't surprised to see two royal flushes, one straight flush, and two four-of-a-kinds, that just happened to all be aces for eight aces total. Huh. Genji and Jesse scored the royal flushes, diamonds and spades respectively. Ziv and Diallo were responsible for the excess aces.

"Baklava," Jesse said. "With pistachios. Make sure they use real honey, not that corn syrup shit."

"Wagashi: I prefer sakura mochi, daifuku, and dorayaki," Genji said.

"Oh the pancake things? Yeah, those aren't bad," Ziv said. "I think Lucky can show me where to get those."

"Cheat better," Tataryn said, and Diallo punched him in the arm, still flaunting Sinaga's watch.

When you looked over your shoulder, Hanzo was studying Genji, his expression no longer quite as disapproving.

The slim young woman in front of him did not match what he pictured "international terrorist" Bái Shé to be, just like she did not match your description of "squad baby" Lao. But in this particular situation, expectations had been thrown screaming out the window, and splashed gruesomely across the pavement. Gabriel had to admit, she looked different, now that she was disarmed and tethered to an interrogation room chair.

She was strangely relaxed, watching him with wary eyes.

"I know she's alive. You can't tell me she's dead."

Gabriel crossed his arms, gritting his teeth. That damn recording. He'd listened long enough to know that wasn't something you would have chosen. Gérard maybe, but not you.

"What's it matter to you? You shot her. You stabbed her. You left her to die in Black Base Delta. I think there's a very unpleasant reason why they left you alive, little traitor," Gabriel said softly.

Bái Shé paled at the accusations, and bit her lower lip. "They said you would believe that. They said I could never go home." She stared straight ahead, frozen in place. "I didn't... I would never have..." She trailed off weakly. "At least that's what I believe. I will admit, that I'm not sure what's real any more, Commander."
"How convenient," Gabriel spat. "I'm your "commander" now, am I?"

Bái Shé flinched.

"Were we ever on the same side, agent?" He asked, vitriol poisoning the title.

"I want to believe so," she said, voice trembling.

"Tell me then, where do your allegiances lie?"

"I...I was an Overwatch agent. I didn't mean to betray you. I didn't mean to be so weak. But I couldn't help it, sir. They took what was left of me, and put me back together wrong, and now I don't know what I am."

"Don't make excuses. You're a goddamn Talon agent," Gabriel said coldly. "Say it with me now."

"But I'm...I'm not a Talon agent," she whispered. "I'm not."

"Lao Yue AKA Bái Shé, wanted internationally for murder, extortion, terrorism, and whole laundry list of crimes that I can read off to you, if you need that trick memory of yours jogged." His smile was not pleasant. "I can go back further, to when you were just Lao Yue, dark web trash dabbling in corporate and political espionage. I don't know what Aishani saw in you. Even back then you were untrustworthy."

Bái Shé began to hyperventilate. "I never meant-"

"You obviously aren't an Overwatch agent, you already admitted that. It seems like you were never cut out for it, always relying on other people to make the hard sacrifices." Gabriel could taste the cruelty on his tongue. "Now, say it for me, that's an order by the way, from your commander. Admit that you are a Talon agent. Just say it. Test the words. Go on, see how they feel."

"I...am..." She shuddered. "I am a Talon agent," she whimpered, eyes squeezed shut, fingers of her organic hand digging into the arm the chair. "No. No, that's not right! I was a pawn. I was a goddamn Talon pawn."

Gabriel raised a brow. He wasn't sure if he'd managed to establish a good baseline reading, but he would check the metrics after he was done with this session.

"I was an Overwatch agent. I was a Blackwatch agent," she hiccupped. "I really was. Maybe I wasn't very good, but I tried, sir. I really did."

"Tell that to Lucky Strike. She trusted you, and look what you did to her."

"I can't argue that," she said, shaking her head. "I told her to kill me. I know I did. She wouldn't. She said it would get better." Bái Shé's voice broke. "She said I could come home, Commander. Why would she lie to me?"

Gabriel's face hardened. This was business. This was personal. This was a fucking mess and he was glad that you remained unaware that he was handling the interrogation.

"You stabbed the only person who wanted to bring you back alive and you have the nerve to question her integrity? Because I remember very clearly how she looked bleeding out on the ground, still trying to reach you."
"She's not dead," Bái Shé repeated. "I know she's not dead. Even if you won't tell me anything."

"Can't handle the fact you really might be a treacherous little snake? That you turned on your last surviving friend?" Gabriel pushed. "Because if you were trustworthy, we wouldn't need to shackle you. We wouldn't need to tether you to a damn AI to keep you from trying to kill us. We wouldn't need to take you apart to keep you from going on a murderous rampage. I've seen the aftermath of your slaughters. Very messy, Bái Shé. Do you like crushing weak human bones and popping organs like bubbles? Do you like cutting down Blackwatch operatives?"

"No! No! No!" She sobbed. "But for you, I would make the exception!"

The meter spiked, reactions in line with what he expected. Gabriel just watched, satisfied that he had gotten this much honesty out of her. But he would have to break her down more. Gabriel studied the crying woman in the chair, and found that the he did not mind.

Jemison and Shoal escorted the visitors to the Blackwatch conference room. You, Ziv, Genji, and Hanzo got the "gifts." There were two women and one man, both unconscious, and you had already viewed their dossiers. The evidence against them ranged from audio recordings to entire transcripts of plotting. Zheng's AI was a dangerous entity, and while you knew Winston and Ziv were shoring up Overwatch's defenses, you couldn't help but wonder, for the thousandth time, if this alliance was a good idea.

You left the prisoners in the interrogation wing, under the gentle watch of In-Sec.

It was strange to see Shoal and Jemison in their Overwatch blues inside your conference room. Not as strange as the party Feng brought with her. There was a handsome, but severe young man you recognized as Fa Hai. He wore a well-cut cream suit and at his side was an apple doll of an old woman, her steel gray hair in a neat braid, her dark skin covered in black thorny tattoos. Hettie LaRue, if you remembered correctly. She worked for Fa Hai and her title was "secretary," though as an "administrative assistant" yourself, you knew that could be deceiving.

Dressed in a fitted black suit, Feng had brought a round, avuncular, middle-aged man in a linen suit with even rounder spectacles and a panama hat. She called him "Mr. Li," no traceable first name, and rolled her eyes dramatically whenever he chided her in overly polite tones.

Fa Hai's eyes widened slightly when he saw Hanzo and Genji, and Feng waved vigorously at your group.

To your surprise, Hanzo reluctantly returned the wave. Genji nodded. You succumbed to peer pressure and acknowledged her with a chin raise. But Ziv pretended not to notice. He really was a little shit.

Jack sat at the table, Lacroix on his left, Captain Amari on his right and to your surprise all three of them were in uniform. Overwatch blue did not complement Lacroix's skin tone. In fact, it made him look more than a little sallow. No wonder he favored suits. It was petty of you to notice, but when did that ever stop you? Blinking, you wondered where that sartorial observation had even come from. Was it Gabriel, or Amélie, or Lacroix himself rubbing off on you?

Angela was there with some complicated-looking scanning equipment. You and Genji
stayed by the door while Ziv and Hanzo walked over to provide support. Ziv would be monitoring any appearances by Zheng, while Winston would be working with Athena to analyze the tech. Hanzo would be advising Lacroix on protocol.

There was a simple porcelain teacup on the table, probably one of Captain Amari’s. Feng handed a vial of dark liquid to Angela for testing. You weren’t sure who got the DNA sample for Zheng, just like you were unsure how they just had “blood of my ancestors” sitting around on tap. It was all above your pay grade.

"For the record, I would like to say this is unsanitary and while I understand the cultural and sociological significance of the act, I would strongly recommend testing all parties for infectious disease before ingesting,” Angela said, not even trying to hide her disgust. She wrinkled her nose as she uncorked the ancestor vintage.

"Sure, I got nothing to hide," Feng said, slashing her left palm over the tea cup. The knife was sharp and utilitarian. She wiped it off on a provided cloth and Angela immediately bandaged her hand, while Ziv scanned the cup.

"DNA match. No toxins or infections. Interesting...genetic profile."

"Proprietary," Feng said. "If you want to make more like me, you'll have to pay royalties. Though I guess if you wanted to do it the old-fashioned way, you and me could reach an agreement," she said winking at Jack.

There was a long awkward pause. Captain Amari shut her eyes, exhaling deeply. Lacroix's shit-eating grin just got bigger. Ziv snorted very loudly. Shoal's eyes got very big and she turned her head to the side.

"...That sounded smoother in my head," Feng said after a moment. "Let's pretend that didn't happen, shall we?"

Fa Hai's expression was thunderous. Ms. LaRue remained impassive. Mr. Li smiled weakly.

But Jack just gave a longsuffering sigh. "What didn't happen?"

"You do have a sense of humor! I thought Mr. Lacroix was lying to me about that!" Feng beamed at them. "All right then, as a token of trust, you're welcome to examine the excess. Great Aunt Zheng made some handy modifications and honestly, I'm kind excited about Dr. Ziegler getting to look at them. You're quite the expert!"

Angela just nodded warily. "You know the ethics of these modifications are extremely questionable. I can't promise I will be able to reverse any detrimental side effects I encounter."

Feng nodded vigorously. "But you're like the second-best expert in the world. So I don't mind you giving me a second opinion." She paused. "I realize that sounds insulting, but I am morally and politically obligated to say Great Aunt Zheng is the best expert in the world ever. I hope you understand."

"...I won't lose any sleep over it," Angela said dryly.

"I'm so glad," Feng beamed. "Sleep is important. I haven't slept in three days."

"Because you're so very excited about our impending alliance?" Lacroix asked.
"No, because that asshole keeps trying to kill me," she said, jerking her head at Fa Hai. "I mean, he's slick about it, can't prove it obviously, but we all know it's you."

Ms. LaRue sighed. Mr. Li facepalmed.

"I am sorry that you feel that way, little Zhai," Fa Hai said with great dignity. "And I am sorry that our hosts must witness your ludicrous behavior. You are embarrassing our clan."

"No, I'm embarrassing you, and I don't give a fuck," she said brightly shaking her finger at him. "Keep sending your assassins, buddy. I'll keep returning what left of them in cute little wrapped packages tagged with clever, yet passive-aggressive notes. I just bought out the official Shanghai Sanrio stationary shop. I am prepared to do this all fucking year."

Fa Hai blanched. "You are insane. I have no desire to receive your grisly trophies like some kind of bizarre courtship ritual."

"You wish," she snorted. "I just don't like people trying to kill me when I'm in the bath," Feng said, and you felt a strong pang of empathy.

"I am not responsible for all the people you have angered--"

"You were adopted," Feng said, sounding like a very smug eight year old, and you weren't sure if she was joking or not. From what you could tell, Fa Hai wasn't actually adopted. She was just being a snot.

Fa Hai turned an ugly shade of red. "You are a disgrace and if left unchecked will lead us to ruin," he hissed in Cantonese. Your Cantonese was shit, but Athena was giving real-time translations in everyone's communicators. "Your family was right to abandon--"

"Young Zhai-" Mr. Li began.

"Mr. Fa," Ms. LaRue said sharply.

"Look here Fa," Feng's green eyes hardened and suddenly Fa Hai was dangling off the ground, Feng's left hand around his neck, his eyes wide. He was taller than her, but she lifted him with ease. She bared her teeth at him, looking less like a manic cheerleader and more like a rabid fox.

"Ms. Zhai-" Mr. Li started, but she only had eyes for Fa Hai.

"I humor you, because I liked your aunt. I haven't killed you yet, because I liked your aunt. I tolerate your shitty, chauvinistic, passive-aggressive comments, because I liked your aunt. But that isn't going to save you if you keep crossing me. You can talk about tradition and face all you want, but at the end of the day, I am the heir. I have Great Aunt Zheng's blessing. And I am the one who tore apart those goddamn blood-traitors and avenged your Aunt Wei. Don't mistake my mercy for weakness, Fa. You've used up all your chances. So it would behoove you to remember that you live by my whims. Be grateful that I am so damn whimsical."

There was a long, awkward silence, and you were beginning to understand that this was a common occurrence when Feng got to talk.

"Also, you wear too much perfume. It's giving me a headache. You should listen to Ms. LaRue when she tells you "cologne should be discovered, not announced." You're like, rage-screaming it into a megaphone at the library. Nobody wants to deal with that. What are you, thirteen?" She dropped him abruptly, flopping her right hand to wave away the scent. She glanced
up at Jack, all smiles again. "Sorry about the scene. We're still sorting out rank. Eventually, he'll get it. Or he won't." She shrugged.

You discreetly sniffed the air, and had to agree with her assessment of Fa Hai's smell. Just like you agreed with Lacroix's assessment of Feng's probable short reign.

"You *are* insane," Fa Hai rasped.

"No, I have ADHD. And no more patience for your dog shit." The last sentence came out firm and measured, her eyes cold. "Now shut up and go sit in the corner. You're only here as a witness. No one cares what you think." To your surprise, Ms. LaRue shepherded Fa Hai to a chair on the other side of the room, against the wall.

"Well, that was illuminating," Lacroix said as Mr. Li pulled out a disc the size of a bagel. He pressed a button.

"She's here," Athena said in your ear. Her voice was calm, it didn't even wobble. But you felt her dread.

"That's a lot smaller than last time," Captain Amari said.

"Well, it was an older model. We weren't sure how you were going to react." Feng shrugged. "And it had some extra security measures that *friends* don't need."

You hadn't seen the tech write-up for the projector, but maybe you'd look after this. She'd claimed it had used ambient backscatter to get around Overwatch's security net. But you hadn't followed up.

"Feng, you didn't kill Jing Wei's nephew, did you?" Zheng asked as soon as her hologram appeared beside the table.

"He's right there, in one piece," Feng said cheerfully. "See?"

Hanzo was watching Fa Hai. And Fa Hai glowered at Feng with undisguised hatred. Yes, there might be a regime change soon. You would have to see if you could get a more detailed workup of him. Or you could just go talk to him. Hmm.

"Is our donation to your satisfaction, Strike Commander?" Zheng inquired.

"Everything checks out," Angela said.

"Yes, it does, Ms. Zheng." Jack stood and drew a K-Bar knife. Before Angela could protest, he sliced his wrist deep, and blood dripped into the cup. You watched as the wound rapidly stopped bleeding, a little envious of his speedy healing.

"That isn't sanitary, Jack," Angela said tightly.

"I think Ms. Zhai and I are a little beyond that now," Jack said.

Feng winked. "I can't catch SEP-cooties from him, no matter how cool that would be."

"The terms of the contract are acceptable. Overwatch will enforce its edicts outside On Sing's direct sphere of influence. On Sing will refrain from engaging in blatant criminal activity and give quarterly reports about its technological advancement. And of course, there is room for mutually beneficial technological exchanges. You would retain the rights, however we would like
exclusivity in combat tech," Lacroix said, and you raised a brow.

"Is that a requirement?" Zheng asked.

"A mutually-beneficial suggestion."

"I like that direction, Mr. Lacroix. We will consider it. On Sing may request Overwatch or Blackwatch protection in the event of...unpleasantness," Zheng said. "Not as hired security, but as sanctuary."

"Granted, as long as the petitioner has good standing with us," Jack said.

"Then the terms are accepted," Zheng said. "Feng."
Feng looked around the room. "Well, it's no peach garden, but it'll do." She picked up the cup and took a drink. She swallowed it impassively and handed the cup to Jack. Jack nodded and took a mouthful, the blood smearing his chin. He didn't gag, he just downed it and put the cup on the table, expression flat. They both wiped their mouths with the backs of the hands and Angela rolled her eyes, offering them napkins.

"Alliance sealed," Zheng said. "We'll be in touch, Strike Commander. I look forward to seeing what we can accomplish together." Her figure flickered out and you wondered just what kind of mess your bosses had gotten everyone into.

"So no offense, but can I get a drink now? Pretty please?" Feng asked. "This is not how I wanted to get a taste of the Strike Commander..."

"That's what I remember. Locations, dates, those are fuzzy. But methodology, I know, I lived through it."

"Context clues, Bái Shé. You had to have some idea what region you were in. Local celebrations. Food you ate. Languages spoken. Weather patterns. Pollution index. Bodies of water." Gabriel rattled off a list, not entirely interested in her answers. That data was all for the analysts. "I want to hear about Toronto."

He let her get warmed up, talking with a flow to her words. Then he pointed out her inconsistencies, real or inflated. "Was it two guards or three? Why can't you remember? You claim you killed them all. How do you know that if you can't even count?"

He questioned her into corners, turning seemingly innocent sentences into full-blown accusations. "What a coincidence that Talon happened to order you to murder that CFO whose company prosecuted you for hacking in your pre-Overwatch days. You think I don't see the connection?"

He tore apart her excuses, valid or not, and pushed her hard, trying to keep her off-balance, though not completely overwhelmed. "You might have warned Lucky, but you still showed them how to find her. Funny how that worked. You never did make it very clear whose side you were on. Brainwashing is such a convenient excuse. It certainly lets you avoid any responsibility for your actions."

He cycled through the methods, playing hardball the entire time. And then he did the same
for Shanghai, Oslo, Cambridge, Singapore, and all the ops she tried to review. He grilled her mercilessly, because while on a rational level, he knew she was not culpable, on an intelligence gathering level, he needed to be thorough. And maybe it was just a little therapeutic to see her squirm. To her credit, she just gritted her teeth and tried to answer the questions, her temper occasionally flaring in short outbursts. That was fine, he didn't have to rush it. She would break down further, and he would be there, ready for the next step.

"I'm sure you've had a long day. Can I offer you some refreshment?" You asked, casually walking up to Fa Hai.

He narrowed his eyes at you. "Agent Strike. You are known to us, though perhaps not as such a gracious hostess. You have built quite a formidable reputation."

"You flatter me, Mr. Fa," you said, because you could lie through your teeth.

"And what do you think of this circus?"

"It's all very interesting," you said. "I'm taking it as a work-culture exchange."

Fa Hai stared at you.

"Would you like a drink? Maybe the facilities tour?"

"Unnecessary," he said after a moment.

"...I'm not trying to poison you," you said. "On Sing's internal politics are On Sing's internal politics. I'm curious, sure. But it's not my place to interfere."

Fa Hai continued to stare at you. "I see."

"Despite your differences, obviously you hold some sway in On Sing's power structure," you said smoothly. "What kind of policy advice will you be giving Ms. Zhai?"

Fa Hai sat back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. "I am happy with the alliance. I just don't like having a mentally unstable child in charge."

"Ah," you said, sympathetically. "I see."

"I am...a traditional thinker. We have a responsibility to our communities. We are better off not drawing the attention of outsiders." He stared past you, teeth clenched. "We need time to slowly rebuild our ranks."

"And then what?" Try to take over the world?

"The same as it's ever been, Agent Strike. We seek knowledge." Fa Hai waved his hand dismissively. "Politics are not our endgame. They are an unfortunate minefield we have to navigate."

"I know exactly what you mean," you said with a heavy sigh. "They get in the way of the real work."
Fa Hai nodded. "I suppose it's a universal problem."

"We aren't so different. I must say, On Sing has very impressive protocols for being such a low-key organization. Your ancestors' translation of form was definitely not something I ever expected to see. "Translation" was the best word we could come up with. There was some debate over the use of "sublimation," but the materials science people said it was grossly inaccurate and I didn't feel like fighting them. The nerds here are very dangerous."

"It is the same in On Sing. The engineers are...eccentric. Translation, incarnation, my ancestors don't seem too worried about terminology." Fa Hai shrugged. "They are powerful, but I worry that immortality will stagnate our work. Lady Zheng has always been focused, but I do not know if the human mind was meant to undergo such radical transformation. I am not...opposed per se, but I have reservations."

You nodded, trying to look pensive. "I am no philosopher, but I understand your point. Obviously, there are those here with the same reservations."

Fa Hai regarded for you a moment. "But you went ahead with the ceasefire anyway."

"Politics and practicality," you said with a shrug. "It makes sense in the long run to have less enemies. On Sing is impressive in its own right, and if it stays on the right side of the law, we have no qualms about leaving you to your own devices." That was a bit of a stretch, but you weren't here to actually argue with the man.

Fa Hai looked around the room. "Well, I have learned more than Feng has deigned to share with me. It has been most interesting Agent Strike. You should look me up if you're ever in Hong Kong again. I know a some excellent dim sum restaurants."

"So what do you think? You want to trade me for Fa? Or are you just checking out the cut of his jib?" Feng popped up behind you while you were washing your hands in the bathroom. "I guess he's OK looking. You just can't let him talk. He'll fucking nag your ear off about boring shit like personal image, adult responsibility, and stock options."

Feng began to soap her hands, her motions frenetic and too twitchy.

"I was curious about what your opposition looked like," you said.

"They're mostly like that. He's the worst. Thinks because he and my brother were childhood friends, that I should defer to his "mature judgment." Bah." She actually did the finger quotes, hands sudsy. "Anyway, he's not too crazy about Great Aunt Zheng digitalizing herself. Like he doesn't want her over his shoulder nagging him, which I kind of understand, because he keeps doing it to me!" She scowled fiercely, and you reached over for a towel to dry your hands. "I knew you were the type to wash your hands. Let me tell you, I have seen so many people who don't. You are good people, Lucky Strike." She stopped, rinsing off her hands as she reflected on your background. "Err...Well, you're sanitary at least."

"Says the lady who just drank a bunch of blood." Feng was amusing, but you weren't sure of her stability. And the fact she kept hitting on Jack... You weren't jealous, but Jack didn't like it one bit, and that put you on edge. You leaned against the sink, arms crossed.
"Yeah, that was gross." Feng nodded. "But it's official and it's an On Sing agreement, my name doesn't matter." Her smile twisted into something bitter. "So if something happens to me because of Fa, well, the alliance is still on. But I'm sure Mr. Lacroix already picked up on that."

"...Yeah," you said.

"I didn't want the job," Feng said. "But now I can't give it up, because there are too many vultures waiting to stab me in the back. So, I'm actually pretty good at running an ancient secret society. I won the war after all. I was a history major, you see. I have an eye for weakness. And I'm already spotting all kinds of hilariously unpleasant parallels." She sighed, shaking her head regretfully. "I'm talking your ear off, aren't I?"

"Every third sentence or so, you say something rather important. It's a good tactic to ensure someone's listening."

"Oh, sassy." Feng grinned at you, looking like an enthusiastic teenager. On some level, she reminded you a little of Lao. Lao ran at that speed, though she hadn't been quite as psychotic or tangential. "You have questions. Go ahead, hit me!" She paused. "With the questions. Not your fists. Please."

You snorted. "What kind of direction do you want to take On Sing in?"

"Greener energy, better omnic bodies, more responsible bio-engineering - none of that gorillas on the moon bullshit that Lucheng pulled, though Winston is super cool and I would poach him from you in a heartbeat. Like job poach, not "illegal hunting" poach. Because that's awful and oh shit, what a terrible word choice." Feng put a finger over her lips, brow wrinkling.

You blinked. "I understand what you meant."

"Great! Because I'm totally against trophy hunting. All that traditional medicine with the bear paws and rhino horns? That's bullshit and we don't do that kind of thing. In fact, I think we can probably shut down some of the Shanghai suppliers. It's all black market stuff and whose a bigshot in the underworld? ME! Plus, if I'm offering something better, people won't be going after cute wildlife for dubious cures. Which brings me to my next point."

You almost said "finally," but were too afraid of distracting her and sending her on another tangent.

"While I'm no doctor, we've been making some pretty cool advances on the medical front. Yes, I realize it stems from our questionably ethical fixation on bio-hacking and better living through genetic engineering, but still, it balances out. We have some pretty nifty things to prolong human life and the quality of it. But of course, the cousins still love making their experimental weapons. Well, we'll keep that up for a little while. I don't know how I want that to develop yet. The world is dangerous enough, you know? Maybe we could design the weapons, tie them up in a mess of patents, and only use them to test better defense systems." She tapped her cheek. "Yes, I'll look into that. Thanks for the idea. Anyway, I started White Rabbit Enterprises last week. We'll be focusing on human augmentation bio-tech." She flexed her arm. "You want a job?"

"No thanks," you said. "I've got business to take care of here."

Feng drooped a little. "Well if you know any SEP folks who want to moonlight, I'd guarantee their safety."

Which was cute, because you weren't sure Feng could keep herself alive.
"How does Fa Hai differ from you on the R&D front?"

"He's old school. Wants more weapons, weapons deals, and immortality through bio-tech. I'm not against that obviously, but he says he wants more knowledge when he just wants power. I like both, but I'm honest about it. And, I obviously have an end goal with cooler implications for humanity than his clichéd and dubiously mad scientist-style leanings."

"I see." She had a point, though Fa Hai seemed more stable. You wondered if a more altruistic bend from an ancient secret society could end well. Then you wondered why you were even entertaining the idea because Feng probably wouldn't survive the year.

"So, I heard you and Genji are kind of close. Is Hanzo still single?" She asked, batting her eyes at you.

"I don't know how he couldn't be. You realize he only has two expressions: constipated and slightly less constipated."

Feng burst out laughing. "I know. But he's not that bad of a guy, and I have a soft spot for grumpy slightly older men."

"He nearly killed Genji."

"But he didn't. And then he was really sorry. It takes a lot of work to admit when you're wrong and try to make up for it. I respect that," Feng said.

"I guess," you said, because that was an oversimplification of the situation. "It hasn't been a smooth road. And I can't tell if you're serious or just yanking his chain. You do remark on a lot of people's looks."

She gave a sheepish grin, scratching her cheek. "On that note, I know I should probably stop hitting on the Strike Commander. It just sort of slips out, you know? I don't mean anything by it...unless he's interested. But I never really got that impression. But I can't hit on anyone in On Sing territory; it'll either be misinterpreted as coercion or people will start talking about wedding bells. You should probably tell him that for me. Because when I'm around him, I just kind of start drooling and my social IQ drops twenty points, maybe more. I'm definitely too dumb to gauge it accurately."

That explanation lessened your annoyance a smidgen. You could empathize. But you weren't going to share that observation with the head of a Triad clan. "You should stop anyway."

"You're right. I'll apologize. Or try to. While drooling." She shook her head. "Not that he'll believe me at this point."

"Just tell him what you told me. Maybe read off the apology instead of looking at him in all his glory?" You tried not to sound sarcastic. You failed.

"...You're a genius." Feng nodded emphatically, apparently not caring about your tone. "I should have asked for your advice sooner. OK, so here's another one. Is Genji single?" She watched you carefully, big green eyes wide. "Because if he's not, I'm not going to make jokes about hitting on him."

It took you a moment to make the connection. You wondered how that rumor made it all the way to the On Sing. You'd have to talk to Lacroix and maybe Hanzo. "Are you looking to arrange an Overwatch alliance marriage?" You asked, even though you were damn sure no such thing existed.
"No! I guess I heard you might be friends with the Shimada brothers and maybe you could give me some insight."

You stared up at the ceiling, praying for rescue. Maybe Athena would page you. Or Captain Amari would come and ask if you fell in. Or someone would start shooting.

"C'mon, throw a girl a bone!"

"I don't think Hanzo is in the place to be dating. He's got an imperial shit ton of issues and has to sort those out before he can be a decent friend. Genji's a little better off, but..." You shrugged. "They have a lot of baggage."

"Yeah, organized crime as a family business really screws you up." Feng made faces in the mirror. "I figured we could bond over shared experiences. Like accidentally walking in on your uncle killing someone, and getting told it was all your imagination, and why would you make something like that up, you disturbed little brat? Then finding the bloodstains on your Pokémon pajamas and getting really mad at everyone for gas-lighting you. Plus, I bet he'd have some tips about reigning in the grumpy old men and reshaping an organization in your own image. Maybe not, now that I say this all out loud. Oh well. He is pretty to look at."

"You do realize Fa Hai is also a grumpy, slightly older man."

"Yeah. He's pretty too. Why do you think he's still alive?"

"I heard it was because you're whimsical and you liked his aunt."

"Oh, true. Mostly that. I would never date him though. He's too much of an ass. Sorry, no peacemaking through that route." She tapped her chin. "So, did you learn what you need to know, Lucky Strike?"

"I think so," you said.

Feng gave you a long, measured look, no mirth on her face. "Well, I guess I'm going to have an interesting year."

"Best of luck to you," you said, and were surprised that you meant it.

---

"I started tracking Hanzo Shimada in Singapore. My mission was to bring him in as soon as we had a clear shot. He was to be alive and preferably unharmed. It was never a solo operation. I worked in conjunction with the other cyborgs. Most of the ones coming out of Hanoi are under no coercion, though some have a few...mental modifications to make them more compliant."

Gabriel's lips twisted. "Go on."

"When I reported he was in Switzerland, my handlers panicked. They did not want him collaborating with Overwatch." Bái Shé slumped in her chair, hair limp, face drawn.

Gabriel had been at this for hours, but he took no breaks. This last recollection was the most important. He would make his recommendations based on the data and the veracity of the testimony here.
"I didn't expect to see you or Lucky there." Bái Shé's eyes were closed, her reading stable. "I recognized you. You're listed as "capture alive" in my protocols. But my handlers never thought I would be up to the task."

"Are you?" Gabriel asked.

"Do you want to find out?" Bái Shé scowled, her belligerent expression taking ten years off her face. For a moment, Gabriel recognized her as a kid, and then he quashed the thought.

"We both know you're not," Gabriel smirked.

She struggled with the insult for a moment and finally shrugged it off. "It's not a theory I want to test."

"A pity. I'm just waiting for you to give me a reason," Gabriel said softly.

Bái Shé paled, her lips pressed tightly together. She wasn't shaking yet, but another thinly-veiled threat would do the trick.

Gabriel forced himself to show some restraint. Terrorizing the terrorist was well and good, but he needed her talking, not curled up in a ball crying, again.

"Well, go on then."

Bái Shé took a deep breath. "As I was saying, I didn't expect to see Lucky. So far I'd been able to damage most of the recordings of our conversations. Pass it off as combat collateral. I'd claimed her name was "Lucky Shot," and contacted her via an old email address with no identifying meatspace markers. I had other ways, but I will admit, the memory degradation came in handy. I don't remember her real name. I don't know if that's because of the damage I've taken, or if it's because we all just called her "Lucky Strike." I suspect it's a mix of both."

Gabriel leaned back resting his chin in his hand. "Were you really friends with her? Because looking through your files, I was left with the distinct impression you had a thing for Lieutenant Sato."

Bái Shé flushed a deep shade of scarlet.

"I realize you were sleeping with the late Agent Valdez, but you certainly had a lot of pictures of the handsome lieutenant." Gabriel held up a shot of Lieutenant Sato drinking and laughing.

"He never- I didn't- Nothing ever happened!" She said, voice going high.

"Because Lucky was in the picture. From all accounts, he was quite enamored with her. Love at first sight, or so I hear. But then I have to wonder just how that made you feel."

Bái Shé took a few shuddering breaths. "It was a crush. That's it. He only saw me as a kid."

"What about Agent Valdez?"

"Well, I wasn't a little kid," Bái Shé blurted out. "And it wasn't some fucked up "try to make Shin jealous" ploy. Yeah, Shin was a rock star. But Julio was good for me. He was gentle and calming." Her lower lip began to tremble. "And I loved them both and they're all dead now. Why does this even matter?"
"What about Lucky? Do you love her?"

"Yes," Bái Shé snapped. "I loved all my squadmates."

"Mmm, funny reading there." Gabriel skimmed the neural signals output Athena provided, a more precise polygraph than he normally got from unaltered humans. "Did you really love Lucky Strike? Because I believe it for Sato and Valdez. Maybe even the rest of your squad. But your feelings for Lucky aren't so clear cut." Gabriel smiled tightly. "After all, you did try to kill her."

Bái Shé was silent, her teeth worrying at her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood.

"Do you hate her? Just a little?" Gabriel teased. "Come on, there's no point in lying to me, Bái Shé. My AI is in your spine, interrupting your circuits and giving me the most interesting readings. Way more accurate than the usual biometrics. And of course, I've seen your treacherous kind before. I know how you think. You do hate her."

"I don't," Bái Shé said tightly.

"Lie," Gabriel taunted, enunciating very slowly.

"I didn't," Bái Shé amended. "It wasn't some scorned woman thing. I loved Lucky. I mourned her. I mourned them all."

"But...?"

"She wasn't dead. And she fucking left me with them, Commander. She saw me several times before Lucerne. She should have saved me or killed me then. She shouldn't have made me go back. They just kept tinkering with my mind. They just kept making me forget whom I was. And she just kept on promising me that it would be all right. And it's not fucking all right, is it Commander? That bitch lied to me; it's not going to be all right. It will never be all right."

Gabriel regarded her with a carefully neutral. "So you hate Lucky?"

"Yes, I hate her, and I love her, and I can't fucking stand it. Maybe it's the kill order. Maybe my mind and feelings bent to justify the orders. I don't know any more. They programmed her death as the second highest protocol, Gérard Lacroix is primary. That was the level of combat expertise they placed me at."

She could have given Gérard a run for his money, but Gabriel suspected she would have failed. Lao Yue had not been talented in close combat. The augmentations made her stronger and faster, but she lacked the skill, reflexes, and viciousness he'd recognized in Aishani, Sato, and you.

"Do you hate Lacroix?"

"I don't know him. I don't have any feelings for him. So it makes me think that maybe you're right. Maybe it's me. I know I'm not trustworthy, sir. I know I'm a mess. But I've admitted it already. I've never denied it. That has to count for something."

"Tell me, what would you do if I left the two of you alone? Would you finish the job?" Gabriel asked, keeping his tone soft.

"Don't do that," Bái Shé said quickly. "Don't even think about doing that."

"But you hate her. What does it matter? You already stabbed her once. How hard would it
be to try again? Maybe this time you'd do the job right."

Bái Shé closed her eyes, tears starting to streak down her face. "Maybe I would. So you
better not send her in here. You better keep her far away from me. Unless you want her dead,
Commander."

"I'll keep that in mind," Gabriel said, after a long pause. "Well then. Tell me more about
Hanzo Shimada..."

Chapter End Notes

Have to schedule a phone interview with a company in a city an hour and a half away.
Maybe I'll have to move, but at this point, I'm a little desperate and from what I hear, they do offer work from home options.

Been massively productive on the fic and am approaching the rough count of 390k.
Yeesh.

Bought Final Fantasy XV the Royal Edition, but haven't had time to play it because apparently I just write stories and stare at tumblr like some kind of zombie. Blargh.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Operation Spinshot is live.

Chapter Notes

Yumi has been busy with civilian outfits.

Edit: Thanks Undead Artist for the Swedish correction. Errors are all my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You will need to know how to play baccarat, Chanceux," Lacroix said, rubbing his forehead. "And while your cheating is surprisingly good, casinos have far better defenses than private individuals."

"Uh-huh," you said, gathering up the rest of Lacroix's cigarettes. He probably had more somewhere, but you had accumulated a nice little stash. Your cleverness had been extra rewarded today.

Lacroix frowned, and studied the cards, trying to figure out how you'd done it. "Deal again."

And so you won his cufflinks too. After that, he stopped playing.

Which was fine. You were getting tired of his sulky looks. And it certainly wasn't the same as smacking him in the face.

The two of you waited in hotel room in Cologne. Ziv was working from another hotel, digitally stalking Hoffman's retinue. It'd be another day or so of feeling out their patterns before you'd make your move. So far, the intel had been good with no surprises, except for the part where you and Lacroix had to share a room. The hotel had been overbooked - a side effect of the home soccer game. Fortunately, there were two beds, and while you didn't like sharing space with the older man, this was a mission and the two of you were professionals.

You just wished he didn't sing in the shower. Or take an hour to get dressed, even though he was supposed to be keeping a low profile. Or make endless suggestions about your personal upkeep. "No, Chanceux, untuck that shirt, you look like your puritanical maiden-aunt still dresses you. No, Chanceux, those shoes with that outfit make you look like a clod-hopping peasant. Mon dieu, Chanceux, you cannot be seen in public wearing that..."

You were free to wander Cologne during the day, keeping tabs on Hoffman's team and touching base with Ziv. In fact, you were the only one anonymous enough. But Lacroix was getting antsy back in the room. He was too recognizable and so he had to limit his exposure to the public. Rationally, you couldn't blame him for acting out. Emotionally, you were out of patience.
By the fourth night, you lay on your back, contemplating holding a pillow over his face. You could make it quick and it would look like natural causes...

"Stop plotting," Lacroix muttered from his bed. He sounded drowsy, but you knew better than to ever believe that his guard was down. Still, if he was sleepy, he might be a little more honest with you.

"How do I win arguments with Amélie?"

"You don't," Lacroix murmured. "You persuade her to see your perspective and make an appeal to her better nature. The moment you try to make it contest or a battle, you lose. Even if you win, you lose."

You lay there, wondering if that just applied to Amélie or people in general. It was good relationship advice, better than you expected from a psychopath like Lacroix. In retrospect, you could see where Jack had been applying that principle. There might have been a few times when you even did it by accident. Shin had been excellent at such maneuvers.

"Amélie is very...forceful. And while her intentions are usually good, sometimes she can be overwhelming." You could hear the smile in his voice. "For example, if you were done shopping for clothing, squirming uncomfortably like a petulant child did nothing to make your case. Instead, you could have suggested taking an intermission for drinks or cake."

"...You suck," you told him.

"I am not the one who has trouble expressing herself and then inconveniences others by making them guess what she wants."

You pursed your lips, and eyed your pillow. No, you weren't going to pillow fight Lacroix, not considering how your last one ended. And while your pistol was under one of them, they made mediocre silencers, too flammable. "I was just along for the socializing. And the cake."

"Your restraint is admirable, but not conducive to good communication. How do you handle your lovers when you can't even say what you dislike?"

"That's really personal," you scowled, turning your head. "I tell them if I don't like something."

"Then maybe you aren't completely feral," Lacroix said. "Being too reticent is just as irritating as being too demanding. In case you were wondering."

"How do you manage to be both?"

"Skill," Lacroix laughed, sleepily. "You are learning, Chanceux. Slowly, but surely. I realize you are unused to a certain level of...affluence. I will repeat Amélie's advice, and remind you that poise is key. If you act like you belong, very few will try to tell you otherwise."

You stared up at the ceiling. "Maybe I don't want to belong there. Glittering people with their first world problems and safety bubbles. I have problems, sure, but I like who I am. I don't ever want to be like them."

"Maybe you are just afraid of change," he countered. "Because you are right. You do not belong in the world of wealthy oligarchs, corrupt government officials, and jet-setting trust fund babies. But you have to visit and blend in if you want to do your job. There is nothing wrong with growth, Chanceux. And if you are making good decisions, then perhaps you shouldn't worry about
what you are evolving into."

When Lacroix waxed philosophical, you just tuned him out. Wait a minute. You wrinkled your nose. "Have you been drinking?"

"I may have packed a particularly aromatic Bordeaux, and drank it rather than try to play another round of crooked card games with you."

"And you didn't offer me any?"

"Your palate isn't refined enough to appreciate it and we both know it. Also, I drank it all before you returned."

"I didn't realize you were that bored," you said.

"How could I ever be bored with you, Chanceux?" He asked so dryly you wanted to throw something at him.

"...What aren't you telling me?" Because you had been on ops with Lacroix before. He was never this anxious. Granted, you hadn't shared a room with him either, so there was that.

"Mmm, you suggested I assign someone to guard Ziv, considering he is working solo."

You rubbed your forehead. "And?"

"Amélie volunteered. I did not want her to leave Zurich, not after what happened, but I suppose I was unable to make her see my perspective and appeal to her better nature." He laughed dryly. "The two of them traveled here together and seem to be fine."

You immediately thought of half a dozen things that could have or could still go wrong. Talon ambushes, vigilant cyber defense networks, Amélie and Ziv deciding that they were going to duel for Lacroix... "Goddamnit, now I won't be able to sleep either!"

"Oh, I will be able to sleep. Obviously, that is why I drank the entire bottle, Chanceux. How will you get to sleep? That is your affair."

You went out for breakfast, leaving a snoring Lacroix in the room. You didn't even draw on his face, though the temptation had been strong. Instead, you went down to the bakery on the corner and bought some fresh pastries and coffee. You picked a few random ones for Lacroix to choose from, despite knowing that he would be too finicky to eat them, and headed back to the hotel.

When you got back to the room, Lacroix was already dressed, his suit impeccable, his hair well-groomed. You set his coffee on the table and helped yourself to an apple-filled pastry pocket.

"I think I've had enough of Cologne," Lacroix said, not touching the food. "The conference has begun, and Hoffman will be out and about."

You nodded. "All right. I'll hit the streets then." You put in your earpiece and slipped on the contact lenses for tracking vapor trails and UV tracers. Spotting for Lacroix required different gear
than a military sniper-spotter team. You had an anemometer attachment built into one of your prostheses. It measured wind speed, air pressure, angle, and other metrics closer to the objective to give Lacroix's targeting program better feedback. Captain Amari could make the shot with iron sighs and no tech. Lacroix used trajectory projection software. It was still too slow for the battlefield, taking up to half a minute to calculate and calibrate. But for a single assassination? It would work very well.

Instead of hanging over his shoulder, you would be on the ground, giving a second point of reference. The crowds in the streets made this a trickier op, and the closer you were to the target, the more accurate metrics you could provide the program. If this were a combat zone, getting that close would be a risk, but as it was just a trade conference in a peaceful city, you weren't worried.

"This is callsign Wolf. Spinshot is live. Recluse?"

"On my way out," you said, slinging your bag over your shoulder.

"Trapdoor?"

"About time," Ziv muttered. "Jammers ready. Chaff countermeasures ready. Trace-blocks live. Trajectory software has been updated, should you need the assist, boss. Bolas is in position. Her comms are turned off for signal reasons. Too much interference with the encrypted systems, the trajectory software, and her rifle's aiming tech."

So she was bodyguard and backup sniper. The risk to your support party worried you, but if you and Lacroix did the job right, Ziv and Amélie would be fine. She was there as a precaution, nothing more. Lacroix was meticulous in his planning and that reassured you.

The KölnKongress convention center stretched over a large swathe of land, offering picturesque gardens, fountains, and multiple exhibition halls. You strolled around the grounds, admiring the view, and drinking coffee. The air was brisk and the sun bright. Spring was coming and you welcomed the relief from the biting cold.

Lacroix would be leaving the hotel. Ziv and Amélie would be changing positions, as well. All you had to do was wait. Lacroix had already mapped out the route back to Hoffman's hotel. The convention center had wide open spaces and subtly-placed kinetic dampening barriers. Lacroix wanted to do the hit away from their security measures. The world shimmered briefly and time froze, a mild shielding effect that most Germans seemed used to, and then you were through them. You shook it off and continued toward the hotel.

"Her panel is done. She is returning to her hotel for lunch," Ziv said. "The entourage has more members than expected, but as long as they don't crowd her, you should be good."

"Almost in position, Trapdoor," Lacroix sounded distant.

"In position, Wolf," you told him, sitting down on a bench. It was chilly, but the sun was bright and you surveyed the area, noting the large crowds of suits. You wrapped a bland navy scarf around your lower jaw, because your anonymity was getting harder to maintain.

You'd arranged the timing of the hit to avoid the lead up to the soccer game, and while there were still a lot of people out, the density was in the Goldilocks Zone. Not so many that you risked collateral damage, but not so few that you would stick out; the amount of people was just right. You were pleased with the results. As much as you hated to admit it, having a team could make things run so much smoother, especially for a more complicated assassination.
You spotted one of her omnic guards. It was taller than you, but dressed in a well-tailored suit. Sipping your coffee, you tucked your ungloved left hand in your sleeve. Waiting thirty seconds, you casually rose, staring out at the Rhine river. Hoffman and her entourage passed by you then, the woman smiling thinly at something one of her companions said.

You yawned and checked your phone. "Eyes on the target."

"You are within my sight, Recluse."

"Well, that's uncomfortable," you said, taking another drink of coffee.

Ziv just snickered.

You began to meander behind them, absently studying your phone. "Readings coming through OK?"

"No, you need to expose the sensors more," Lacroix said, and you rested your left hand on the back of your head, fingers out. "Better."

"If you tell me to pat my head and rub my tummy I'm just going to leave," you said, discretely raising your middle finger.

"Recluse, who taught you those kinds of gestures?" Lacroix laughed.

"What do you mean? I'm just measuring wind speed with my longest finger."

You made a few route adjustments, not outright following Hoffman's party. Instead you stayed parallel to their route and took a slightly illegal jaywalking shortcut to beat her back to the hotel. It was good to be back in the field. Straight forward combat wasn't your forte and while the day spa incident had been deemed an Overwatch success, you would rather avoid such scenarios indefinitely.

This kind of thing? This was your specialty: ambush attacks, escape routes, subverting security. Even the logistics of picking hotels, accessing potential sniper nests, and finding decent food for your stay, these were all things you accounted for when you planned an op. You might never charge into battle dual wielding shotguns or wearing power armor, but you had this, and you were proud of it. And you could really appreciate all the attention to detail that Lacroix demanded. Because you were prepared for a lot of eventualities.

Just not this one.

He stood there, hands tucked in his pockets, wearing a navy blue suit. The women beside him were dressed up too. One wore a white suit, her motions military-taut. Her companion was the opposite, slouched and relaxed in a green dress, and you swore vehemently under your breath.

And then he looked over, those deep blue eyes falling on you, and even with your face covered, even across the street, he caught you staring and he fucking recognized you, because he was goddamn perceptive when he wanted to be.

"Wolf, we have a problem," you whispered as Jack narrowed his eyes, and muttered something in Jemison's ear.

"...I see that, Recluse. Trapdoor?"

"Well, shit-"
"I've been made," you said, fighting the urge to turn on your heel and run. Instead, you, subtly shook your head, willing him to stay away.

"By someone on our side. Conditions are good. Just hang tight," Ziv said.

"Idiot," you hissed, as Jack broke away from his guards and made a beeline for you. "We don't want him on the damn scene if we're doing this," you scowled.

"Maybe you should distract him," Ziv said snidely.

"Maybe you should shut up," you snapped.

"These things happen," Lacroix said, tone even. "If I took the shot now, the angle would be far from optimal. We can always start over."

Hoffman emerged from another path, and took one look at Jack and began to approach. Of course. Of fucking course.

"Our angle is good."

"What?" You gripped your coffee tightly, as Jack walked up to you, his expression questioning. "Trapdoor, abort!" You made eye contact with Jack, gritting your teeth behind the scarf. Why hadn't he just ignored you? What the hell was he thinking approaching you on an op?!

"You might want to duck," Ziv said cheerfully. That little shit-

"Down!" You snarled, as Jack opened his mouth to greet you. You lunged forward, shoving him onto the pavement even as a series of shots rang out. You kept yourself over him, arm shooting out to cushion his head. The rifle rounds cracked like thunder. Pistols returned fire. There was a lot of screaming, both from the wounded and the civilians.

"Trapdoor!" And it was the first time you'd ever heard Lacroix raise his voice at Ziv.

"We're fine! Target definitely eliminated." Ziv said, his voice shaky. "Activated chaff and jamming. Signals disruption holding. And we're off. Wolf?"

"Later," Lacroix said tightly. "Just move. Recluse, you stick with the Strike Commander. We'll regroup at home." The comms cut out, but you were pretty sure Jack had heard some of that.

You stared down at Jack, who wasn't looking at you any more, but the bloody remains of Hoffman's entourage. "You OK, sir?"

"Agent," he said, exhaling sharply. "Get off me."

"Sorry, sir," you said, and stood, offering him your hand. He ignored it and stood, his suit torn and hair mussed. An expression of pure fury twisted his features when he saw Hoffman's confetti-skull splattering the streets. There was a lot of blood, and while Amélie hadn't killed the entire entourage, the ones that were struck would not be getting back up. It would have been a perfect hit except-

You were breathing hard when he turned that look on you, his eyes glacial, jaw tight, fists clenched. You almost took a step backward. "Goddamnit agent, is this what it looks like?"

"I don't know," you said, pretty sure that it was.
You stayed with Jemison and Shoal, watching Jack's back as he handled law enforcement. Their questioning was all just a formality, but having to stand here and be scrutinized still made your spine twitch.

"You couldn't have just tipped us off that someone was after Hoffman?" Jemison groused out of the corner of her mouth. "He's been courting her on the downlow for weeks, almost had an alliance formed. Today's little foray into the trade conference was an excuse to formalize the agreement."

"I had no idea," you said truthfully. You were very grateful that you'd left the scarf around your face. The police officers kept giving you strange looks, but no one actually tried to speak to you.

"Yeah, someone's decided Epsilon Squad would make a great political pawn," Shoal sighed in your ear and you felt a very heavy twinge of guilt. "Rich Bitch was supposed to be a good counterbalance to Petr- the political shit."

_Dog-kicking, cake-thieving, motherfucking whoreson._ What a goddamn clusterfuck. How did you missed that? What a perfect example of compartmentalized UNintelligence. Did Lacroix know? How had _he_ missed that? Unless he knew and didn't tell the rest of you...

Anger welled up inside you. Because Ziv had fucking ignored orders, putting Jack at risk. Because Lacroix might be playing you. Because Jack should have said something, anything about the kind of politics he was dabbling in. If he'd just said who he was working with. If you'd just told him who your target was...

Well, no matter whose fault this cock up was, it was too late to do anything about that now. Fuck.

"Well, at least you were here to cover the Strike Commander. I'm glad you were here, and he probably is too, even if he's too pissed about Hoffman to show it," Shoal said. "He didn't tell us you were providing backup."

You could taste the guilt in the back of your throat. You just shrugged. "I'm not his favorite person at this moment."

Shoal shrugged. "I was in Belfast. I remember. You should be used to that by now." She nudged you with her elbow. "So you really killed all those cyborgs wearing nothing but a towel?"

"I had a bathrobe on for the first two," you sighed.

"I only saw the video of the last one," Shoal said. "Everyone has."

You rubbed your forehead, wishing the earth would swallow you up. "I was just trying to have a relaxing day out."

Jemison gave you a skeptical look. "A relaxing day out with Captain Amari?"

"...OK, so I was terrified for most of it," you said. "But they offered me cake and wine. How could I refuse?"
Shoal just laughed. "Oh come on, you can tell us the truth, we know better than that."

Jemison snorted. "You know, Strike, I am starting to dread your presence on ops. Nothing personal, but when you show your face, I know everything's about to go tits up."

"She likes you just fine outside of work," Shoal added quickly.

You opened your mouth to comment, but silenced yourself as Jack brushed by the three of you. His face was hard and when his eyes fell on you, his jaw twitched. He snapped his head forward, shoulders squared and stalked toward the hotel.

"...Oh he's pissed," Shoal said, giving a low whistle.

"Shut up and stay close," Jemison growled and the three of you fell in behind him.

The four of you took an Overwatch transport to Zurich. Jack ignored you the entire ride. Which was kind of a relief, because you did not need Shoal and Jemison to witness the chewing out you were going to get. You might have even deserved it. You weren't sure right now. Because you wanted to strangle Ziv. Or Lacroix. Maybe both.

You spent the trip in an uncomfortable silence, occasionally sneaking glances at Jack. But he was staring hard at the walls. He sat hunched over, hands fisted in his lap. Shoal shot worried looks between the two of you when she thought you weren't paying attention. Jemison sat with her eyes shut, doing the soldier's rest, not quite asleep, but almost.

Your knee bounced silently and you tapped your fingers against your thigh. Jack did not look up and you stared at the ceiling unsure of what you were going to tell him. Because hopefully, Ziv's false flag would hold and no one would look twice at Overwatch. Though someone might have to explain what Jack was doing in Cologne. And what if Petras found out that Jack was trying to use Hoffman to outmaneuver him? Because that would be bad.

Fuck. You'd all botched this one. Even with all your goddamn meticulous planning, you'd somehow missed that someone else was already working the Hoffman angle. Or you'd missed that Lacroix was muddying the waters. Or you'd missed that Ziv was two steps away from going rogue. Because that's what he'd done and he'd dragged Amélie with him. How much could you cover for him? How much could you mitigate this? You closed your eyes, the fear turning your stomach.

Focus. Panicking did nothing useful. It was time to plan contingencies. You would have to see how the dice fell, and react accordingly.

"Jemison, Shoal, you're dismissed. If you have anything useful to add about today's events, add it to your write-ups; black ops rules apply," Jack said tautly, as the shuttle landed. "Agent Strike, my office. Immediately."

Shoal gave you a weak smile. Jemison shook her head and they left you behind. Again.
You followed behind Jack, noting the tears in the elbows of his suit. You glanced up at a monitor as you walked through the cafeteria and blanched. They were playing footage of the assassination, your figure clearly shown tackling Jack to the ground. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. How did it all go so wrong?

"Athena, let me know the moment Lacroix and Mihret return to base," Jack said as you walked down the halls.

"They have just arrived," Athena said.

"Direct them to my office."

Jack opened the door and you followed him in.

"Sit," he ordered.

"Jack, I-"

"Not a word, agent," he growled, slamming the door shut.

You swallowed and sat down in front of his desk.

He moved behind you and you could hear the rustle of fabric as he began to change out of his ruined suit. You kept your gaze ahead, unsure of what you could say to make of this better. Jack wasn't your Jack right now. He was the Strike Commander and you were a Blackwatch agent whom he caught running an assassination op on a goddamn UN General Assembly member.

What were the fucking odds?

The Strike Commander sat down at his desk, coat over his uniform. He stared at the wall past your head, stance still rigid.

You kept your gaze on your lap, your metal fingers remaining exposed from measuring wind speeds. Sitting still was maddening, but you weren't sure you wanted Lacroix to arrive either. Because things were going to get messier. It was agony, waiting through this awkwardness for something worse to happen.

The door opened and you sat up straight, head whipping over your shoulder.

Lacroix walked in, jacket draped over his arm, looking pale. His mouth was downturned and he sat down beside you, taking a deep breath and sitting rigidly. Ziv trailed behind, his shoulders slumped. He quietly shut the door and rubbed his face, not making eye contact with you.

"Athena, full privacy mode," Jack said, proving that he knew that it existed.

"Understood."

Jack steepled his hands, his steely gaze on Lacroix.

"What happened in Cologne, Gérard?" Jack asked, his voice dangerously soft. "Because Gabriel or Ana would have told me if you'd applied for any authorization to work there."

Lacroix exhaled slowly. "Operation Spinshot." He pulled the files out from under his jacket and fanned them across Jack's desk.

Jack silently picked up the files, brows knitting together while he read Hoffman's dossier,
the mission objectives, and the reasoning behind the op. He stood up abruptly, picking up your mission plan and reading it while he paced behind his desk.

You glanced overquestioningly at Lacroix. He just shook his head. Ziv stayed hunched over, his eyes glued to his shoes.

Lacroix touched his lips with two fingers, hand twisting palm up.

You shook your head. No, you hadn't said a thing.

Lacroix nodded, approvingly and you wanted to smack him.

"Did you take that shot, Gérard?" Jack gave him a hard look. "Because according to this layout, your angles were all wrong."

Lacroix sighed. "No, Jack. But I take full responsibility for the cock-up. It was my op."

"Who was the second shooter?"

"...Amélie," Lacroix said. "Her comm gear was faulty."

Jack casually dropped the files back on his desk, papers fluttering across the floor. The veins in his neck bulged and you resisted the urge to scoot backward. "And just what was Agent Mihret doing through all this? I somehow doubt Amélie was working alone, not after what just happened here in Zurich," Jack said, tone silky. He stood, feet shoulder-width apart, hands clasped behind his back.

The choreographed calm fooled no one: Jack was furious.

"Agent Mihret misinterpreted my instructions and told her to take the shot," Lacroix said.

Jack clenched his teeth. "Don't lie to me, Gérard."

"Agent Mihret made a mistake and told her to take the shot," Lacroix said, unflinching. "But it was my op, and I take full responsibility."

"Agent Mihret disobeyed a direct order and initiated the assassination a UN General Assembly member in broad daylight," Jack snarled. "Agent Mihret has long had issues with insubordination, and despite numerous reprimands, has not changed his unsuitable behavior. Agent Mihret, you are hereby dis-"

"Jack!" You were on your feet before you realized it. "Don't-"

"Sit back down, agent," Jack said coldly.

"Jack-"

"Stop. Talking." His voice dropped an octave. The Strike Commander leaned over his desk, eyes hard, his nose almost touching yours. "Sit your ass down."

"Operation Ray," you snapped at him, hands flat on his desk. It wasn't much, but it was all you had.

He narrowed his eyes at you. "That doesn't apply here and now you've really pissed me off," he said, voice so low you could feel it reverberating in your bones. "Don't think you're off the hook either."
A hand rested on your shoulder and you startled. You looked back to see Lacroix shaking his head.

"Strike Commander," Lacroix said, calmly "It was my operation and these two were under my command. Ultimately, I am the responsible party and I understand there are consequences. Now, they can write up whatever mission reports you need, but their presence isn't necessary for this."

"Don't try to take charge, Gérard. You don't have any ground to stand on right now," Jack snapped.

"I remember we talked about something like this on the deck of the USS Saratoga..." Lacroix gave a wry smile.

Jack's lips drew back in a snarl. "You really want to go there?"

"Do you remember that starless night? It was a new moon. All those burning omnic shells, sinking so rapidly that the steam fogged up the sky for miles around...?"

"Really, Gérard?" Jack glowered at him. "You think you can-"

"Mistakes were made. I do not contest that at all. But do you remember what you said to me that night?" Lacroix asked quietly. "I have never forgotten. Would you like me to recount that story in front of them?"

There was a long silence as Jack tucked his chin against his shoulder. His shoulders shook and you fought the urge to reach out, because you understood the gesture would be unwelcome. "You two, get out."

You threw a backward glance over your shoulder as Ziv grabbed your wrist and dragged you out of the office, Lacroix settled back down in his chair, looking like he didn't have a care in the world.

"You fucking idiot!" You snapped when you were a safe distance from Jack's office. "You goddamn moron! What the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking we'd come this far, how could we turn back now?!" Ziv said tightly. "I was thinking about all the shady shit she was doing behind the scenes and how much worse it would get if Morrison lent her any support."

You nearly slapped him. That was a rookie mistake. "We could have always gone back for her!" You growled. "You don't pull that shit in front of the goddamn Strike Commander."

"I wasn't thinking straight, all right? I fucked up. I didn't mean to." The last sentence came out soft. Ziv hunched over. "The boss already let me have it, OK? Like, he tore strips off me the whole ride back. Didn't even raise his voice, just mildly told me what a fucking disappointment I was, and how unreliable I was, and how he expected better, while Amélie sat there cleaning her guns. Morrison kicking me out would just be the icing on the cake."

"You self-pitying jackass! Jack won't be fucking mild or any kind of fluffy frosting! Jack is
fucking furious." You looked around. "And I am too! That was a direct fucking order, Ziv. When you're on a goddamn op, like there in the flesh, you can't just ignore what we say! What if they'd had better tracking equipment? What if I was trying to warn you because it wasn't safe to carry out the next step? It wasn't just you at risk. Amélie is a priority target too."

"...Yeah, I know." Ziv's voice was low. "I know and I'm sorry. The boss walked me through all the possible outcomes, including the fact you'd do something stupid and get Morrison pissed at you too."

"He was already pissed," you said, pushing your hair back. "But this didn't help." You wondered if you should talk to Gabriel. Captain Amari would probably tear you a new one after she got done dissecting Lacroix and mounting Ziv's head on the wall.

"For the record, I am sorry," he said sullenly, looking away, arms crossed tightly.

"You don't sound like it and bad apologies just make people angrier. That includes me," you said, not quite ready to let this go. "Athena, where can I stash this idiot till Jack cools down?"

"I have no idea," Athena said after a moment. "Just like I have no idea what happens when my cameras get kind of fuzzy around Mr. Lindholm's lab."

"You can't just-" Ziv began.

"Are you with me or not Ziv?" You scowled. Because Lacroix was obviously calling in a big fucking favor with Jack, to fix things where you'd failed. That wasn't a guarantee that Ziv wasn't getting kicked out, but you would keep him out of sight till something could be done.

You led the way down to the lower levels, left hand gouging bruises in your palm.

"...You want me to what?" Torby boomed.

"Make him sweep the workshop floors. Make him cart scrap metal around the room. Make him cook for you. I don't care. I commend him into your tender, precise care. He just needs to be out of Jack's sight for another 48 hours or so," you said. "Athena probably can't track him here."

Ziv stared at the ground. "You don't have to. Seriously. I'll be fine. Lucky is overreacting."

"Talon has a bounty on your head. If you get kicked out, then they're going to scoop you up. Unless the Mossad pressgangs you first and given how efficiently Talon managed to infiltrate the DGSE, I don't think your odds are much better in Israel. You are full of delicious Blackwatch secrets, including Shit Spiders access. You helped develop our loveable AI, which is still a fucking high-tier secret. You are not going anywhere, Ziv. You said you were with me. Then shut up and stick with me!"

"...What did he do?" Torby asked, putting down the welding torch so he could hear you better.

You weighed your options.

"Tell me or I'll call Jack myself," Torby said, crossing his arms.
You rolled your eyes, because Torby had a lot of unpleasant traits, but he was not a snitch, a loudmouth maybe, but not the kind of guy to give you up. "You remember how someone tried to forcibly retire Rein?" You rubbed the back of your neck, wincing as your smile got really awkward.

"...How could I forget?" Torby scowled.

"Well, we killed her," you said brightly. "Unfortunately, Jack was there. And what we didn't know was that he wanted to make a political alliance with her against Petras. Plus, Jack knows Ziv was the one who ignored orders to abort the mission..." You rubbed the back of your neck.

Torby exhaled sharply. "You fucking dumskalle!" He broke into a stream of Swedish and while you were vaguely amused that Ziv had angered an evil dwarf engineer, you knew that didn't help matters. "You stupid eelhead! Now you've shit in the blue cupboard!"

Ziv stared blankly.

"You don't do that right in front of the goddamn Strike Commander, din jävla idiot!"

"Pretty much," you sighed. "Now Lacroix's trying to bargain Jack down, but it was the bitch that went after Rein."

Torby took a deep breath. "You better not tell him that he is the reason you did it." He glowered at both of you, tone hard.

"Fuck, I wasn't going to tell anybody, Torby," you said. "I was going to just check it off my list and keep doing what I do. You know, quietly. I like my work to stay discrete. I don't actually want to get ambushed at the sauna, stabbed at the bakery, or interrupted by Jack on my super secret ops."

"You have the stupidest bad luck for someone with your name," Torby told you.

"Yes, the irony is not lost on me," you agreed firmly. "So, I'd appreciate if you didn't tell Rein either. I wasn't going to advertise shit, but I'm desperate and this moron needs a place to hide while the shit storm blows over."

Torby crossed his arms. "Go make me some chili."

"And you'll keep Ziv hidden?"

"Or kill him myself," Torby muttered.

"OK," you agreed, because that was the most you could hope for.

"You any good at soldering, idiot?"

"...I'm not bad," Ziv said, hands still jammed in his pockets.

Torby uncrossed his arms. "Well he's fortunate I need the extra set of hands. He can stay. But if I have to work late with this idiot, I want that chili tonight."

"You know good chili needs to sit overnight, right?"

"Make me a big batch then," Torby said.
"Is Lacroix still in Jack's office?" You asked as you stirred the pot, adding more hot pepper.

"...Yes," Athena said.

"Shit." You closed your eyes. That was taking far too long. Jack was really fucking mad. Worst case scenario, you had ratlines and emergency bank accounts set up for Blackwatch agents. You'd planned Ziv's yourself. He had options.

"Has Gabriel been apprised of the situation?"

"...I cannot say."

"Understood." That meant yes. You were gaining a knack for understanding what Athena couldn't come out and state plainly. Was that a linguistic quirk? Was she learning crafty in-between-the-lines speech from spending so much time with Genji and you? You weren't sure, but you didn't have the time or inclination to really pursue that train of thought.

You tasted the chili. It needed more Worcestershire sauce. You kept stirring, trying not to think about just how angry Jack was. Gabriel's temper was hot, all curses and combustion that flared in a seconds and extinguished itself quickly, sometimes leaving behind vindictive burns. But you understood that Jack burned cold, his anger calculating, harsh thing. You'd only glimpsed it before today, and you had always known it was there, under his skin. But it had never been directed at you before, not like this.

"...I do not want the Strike Commander to send Ziv away," Athena said.

"Me neither." You tasted the chili again. It needed more hot pepper and maybe some honey. You added it, and packed up some bread and cheese. Cooking had become therapeutic, with the side bonus of winning you social capital with your comrades.

"What can I do?" Athena asked.

"I don't know," you admitted. "I'm still figuring out what I can do. You're limited by certain directives and Jack's pretty upset."

The news was reporting that the extremist Martel Liberation Front had been linked to the shocking and audacious shooting in Cologne today. Excellent. If Ziv had done a good job with the false flag that was one less thing to worry about. He could always go a step further and make backdoor ties to Petras from the funding of the MLF. Hoffman had been a rival after all. It was all circumstantial evidence, however, it would feed the conspiracy theorists for a few years.

Ziv couldn't get kicked out. Talon was after him. He was on Shit Spiders and an integral part of the team. He helped raise Athena. He was your awful, insubordinate, bratty hacker.

But Jack was really mad. And rightfully so.

You thought about all the ways you could mitigate this for Ziv. You did not think about how you were going to handle Jack, because you had no idea where to start.
When the chili finally tasted right, you packed it all up and carted it down the Torby's workshop.

Chapter End Notes

AO3 ate my last draft with my notes. Damnit. I have an event at work today, so wish me luck. We are understaffed and expecting a large crowd. I may have to hit people with chairs. I am promising myself cake.

Started FFXV, I like it. But I need to write, not game. RAWR.

My dogs are stupid and expensive. One has (probably benign) fatty tumor we have to get removed since it's growing. The other has a random bump that I suspect is a cyst. (All my dogs are related and one of his brothers had a cyst removed.) Not to mention Chocolate-devourer needs his glands expressed because I am not very good at it. Meh.

Phone interview is later this week and I panic during interviews. Phone ones I can usually do. Well, moving is under serious consideration. That city has a lot more opportunities, but the entire thing is anxiety-inducing. I would wait to get a new job, before moving. One step at a time, obviously.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

You have to deal with the fallout from Spinshot. Upon further investigation, it has become abundantly clear that your work life and personal life are not separate and haven't been for a long time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After delivering the chili and Ziv's bugout bag to the basement workshop, you dragged yourself back to your room. You opened your door and nearly jumped backward when you found Gabriel sitting in your chair, knees spread, arms crossed. He stared at you impassively, and you swallowed hard, stepping in and shutting the door behind you.

"Back from Barcelona, I see. How was the weather?" Gabriel asked, his tone sharp.

You flinched, because Barcelona was your cover story. "I think we both know I wasn't in Barcelona," you said, rubbing your forehead. You pulled off your jacket and hung it up, then dropped onto the bed, sitting parallel to Gabriel so you didn't have to look at him.

"It's ironic that your biggest successes are always kept quiet, but your biggest fuckups make it onto the evening news," he continued.

Lucerne was a mixed bag, but you didn't consider it one of your biggest fuckups. Cologne though? Cologne was up there. You blew out a long breath, slumping forward. "I feel like shit about this, OK? If you're going to lay into me, don't. I already got it from Jack and-"

"No, you haven't begun to get it from Jack," Gabriel said, getting up to stand in front of you. He down at you eyes boring in to your skull. "Where's Mihret?"

You shrugged, because while he was probably somewhere in Torby's lab, you weren't sure where, and that technically wasn't lying.

"Keep it that way then. You've done enough. Gérard's calling in every favor he can, but Jack is on the warpath. Better keep Mihret out of his way for the time being."

You blinked, because Gabriel had never been Ziv's biggest fan and vice versa.

"I haven't forgotten how you get about your hackers, even if Jack has," Gabriel said dryly. "I am well aware of the potential fallout. And when Jack takes a minute to breathe, he'll figure it out too."

"I'm not asking for special treatment for Ziv because we're together. I'm arguing for leniency because he's mission critical." It wasn't the only reason, but it was the one that would withstand the most scrutiny.

Gabriel nodded. "When you get the chance, make that clear to Jack."
"He knows... Oh." He meant make your motivations and reasoning clear. Not just prattling on about Ziv's value. "I'm not trying to get him off the hook. He's in trouble and deserves to be."

"Oh, no one's arguing that. Mihret's got consequences to face, baby. And you're going to shut up and not interfere next time. But kicking him out? Well, that's too easy." Gabriel gave you an unpleasant smile.

"He needs an ass-kicking," you admitted. "Lacroix already tore him a new one. I'm waiting for his skin to grow back before I take my pound of flesh."

"Better hurry up. I don't know what's going to be left when I'm done with that smarmy, insubordinate little shit." Gabriel sat down beside you and you leaned against him.

"I'm sorry," you said. "I guess I should have said something about this or I don't even know what I should have done. I didn't realize Jack was-"

"That part is on Gérard," Gabriel said. "But offing a UN delegate is tricky business. I understand you not telling Jack, but you should have said something to me or Captain Amari. Unless Gérard told you that he did..."

"I didn't ask," you said. "I just researched her to make sure she had it coming. She did. I guess I assumed too much." You didn't specifically say what, because obviously, you'd been wrong.

"Yeah," Gabriel said after a moment. "I saw your dossier. It was more thorough than the analysts' workups. Jack probably wouldn't have tried to ally with her if he knew all that. But then, maybe he would have anyway. He wants Petras gone."

"I can go back out there and off Petras if that'll make him feel better," you offered, seriously wondering if that would help soothe Jack's temper.

Gabriel snorted. "I think you've done enough today."

"How much trouble is Ziv in? Once Jack cools down, I mean."

"I think the real question is what kind of consequences will he be facing, provided Jack doesn't just expel him. At this point, it depends on how well he covered your tracks. We're Blackwatch. I don't care that he killed a fucking UN delegate. I care that he disobeyed you and Gérard."

You nodded. "OK."

Gabriel rested a hand on your back. "At this point, neither you nor Amélie are up for any official disciplinary action. In fact, everyone thinks you saved the Strike Commander from that assassination attempt. So good job with that."

You winced. Taking credit for that fuckup just made your stomach churn. Hell, you didn't even look at the variety of medals and commendations you'd earned for your service. Most of it was highly classified, and starting with the Ninth Circle, you'd just tossed them all in the bottom of your drawers and willed yourself to promptly forget about them. You were due some kind of award for the day spa incident, and that too would join the collection of ridiculous uniform decorations when you got it. You still didn't have a proper dress uniform, and you were fine with that.

"Jack's really mad," you said after a moment. "He wasn't happy after Cobblestone Dust, but that wasn't really about my actions. I've never seen him this upset.."
Gabriel nodded.

"I don't know what to do," you said. "He was pissed the whole way back from Cologne and then he was going to boot Ziv and I wasn't sure how to make him stop, so I used the kill switch and...that was probably a mistake."

Gabriel put an arm around you. "Maybe."

"I didn't know what else to do then. And I'm still not sure what to do now."

"Give him some space," Gabriel said. "You just scrapped his op. He's been working on Hoffman since you were laid up in the infirmary. So he'll need time to let go of that. And let Gérard wrangle the details about Mihret. That's not up to you, and to be honest, he's the better manipulator."

You nodded. "All right."

"And then you're going to apologize, because that's what you do when you fuck up." Gabriel flicked your ear. "Afterward, you and Jack will actually have to talk about things so this doesn't happen again."

You winced. This wasn't solely your fault. But maybe you shouldn't have got into it with Jack in front of Ziv and Lacroix. If only to keep from muddling the chain of command. You could have been smarter about it. "Normal healthy relationships" didn't require this kind of tiptoeing, but then, your situation required the three of you to assume different roles. Had you fucked up as an agent or as his lover? Both? The lines blurred too easily.

"I'm sure that if you keep making that miserable face Jack might eventually take pity on you."

"You're hilarious," you said, tucking yourself against Gabriel and he rubbed your back.

"Got any other stupid things you need to confess?"

"Cologne wasn't very fun. Lacroix and I were roommates. It was awful. He kept critiquing my clothes and trying to give me fashion advice. He's a snobby eater and hogs the bathroom. He also snores."

Gabriel stiffened. "Is that so?"

"Separate beds," you said. "I would've taken the floor otherwise."

"I'm not doubting you. It was an op. These things happen." Gabriel said, kissing the top of your head. "It took me off-guard." Because he had to realize that Ziv and Amélie had roomed together. And that led to another set of questions that were not your business.

"Jack totally blew my cover too. He saw me and walked straight up to me. I tried to signal him to stop, but..."

"...That's on both of you," Gabriel said wryly. "You should have been better disguised."

"I had a scarf over half my face!"

"You were obviously recognizable to Jack." Gabriel sighed. "If you'd just walked away..."

"He might have called out, or chased me, or drawn more attention. Plus I didn't want him
in the line of fire." You shook your head. "Wait, is Lacroix facing disciplinary action?"

"Possibly." Gabriel shrugged. "He should've run Spinshot by me or Ana. Makes me think he might have known what Jack was doing and decided to move against Hoffman anyway. But then, he's a slippery bastard and even more secretive than you. So it's hard to know for sure."

"That occurred to me," you said, dropping flat against the bed. "I don't think he did though. He was fine with scrapping the op the moment Jack made me. The caveat being, "who can know what level Lacroix is playing on?" You closed your eyes.

"I can't hold you if you're laying like that," Gabriel said and you turned ninety degrees, and scooted over, making room for him. "I can't spend the night, need to see to Jack. But I can stay for awhile."

"Whatever you have to do to make him less angry," you said.

"This time take it to the sparring mats," Gabriel murmured. "Make sure you do it when I'm free." He wrapped an arm around your waist. "I want to watch."

You shivered. "Because it turns you on, or because you're worried he'll push me too hard?"

"Both," Gabriel said, sounding strangely relaxed about the whole thing.

"Lucky, wake up." There was an unmistakable tone of command in that voice and you lurched forward, blades out. Your blankets pooled on the floor and you looked around. The lights were on and you were still in your clothes. You must have passed out after Gabriel left.

"What's wrong, Athena?" You exhaled, eyes darting around the room.

"You were yelling in your sleep."

Curling your fingers, you retracted your blades, and tucked your tanto back under your pillow. You pushed your hair back, heart pounding too hard in your chest.

"Sorry," you said after a moment. "Thanks for waking me."

"It was no trouble." Athena said. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, fine," you said, slowly climbing out of bed. You tried to remember what you had been dreaming about, but it was like grasping at fog. Maybe it was better that you couldn't recall. Real life was traumatic enough; you didn't need relive your low points.

"Were you...dreaming?"

"I get nightmares sometimes. Used to sleep in the rec room, till Gabriel got a couch for the office." And then you'd started sleeping in Gabriel and Jack's rooms. "Don't get them as often as I used to." Having other people around, even in the periphery, seemed to lessen the frequency. Your shrink said that you were subconsciously aware of other living bodies in the room, and it anchored you.

"Did I...overstep?" Athena's voice was cautious.
"With me? Not if I was yelling. Other people might not appreciate it." You vigorously rubbed your face. "What time is it?"

"0500 hours."

"I'll get a shower then. Maybe some breakfast after." You nodded to yourself. Shedding your clothes while you walked, you frowned as yesterday's events caught up with you. Professionally, the Strike Commander had every reason to be angry with you. But on a personal level, you weren't so sure that you were wrong to get between Jack and Ziv. Maybe you could have gone about it differently.

You sat in the shower and let the hot water rain down on you. You needed to touch base with Lacroix and avoid both Jack and Ziv right now. Ziv, so you wouldn't blow his cover, and Jack, because you still weren't sure how to handle him. Gabriel said to apologize, but Jack had been wrong to try to discharge Ziv. Maybe it wasn't your place, as an agent, to challenge the Strike Commander, but you weren't going to sit by and watch while-

Oh, you winced. You were doing it again. That kneejerk "protect your hacker" tunnel vision was in full effect and you hadn't even noticed. OK, maybe you needed some more time to clear your head too.

Standing up, you rinsed off. The power disparity between Jack and you was large. You and Gabriel had laid the groundwork for yourselves earlier on, as friends, not lovers. Jack's boundaries weren't so clearly defined. Hell, Jack swapped roles so much, his boundaries were kind of hard to pinpoint. It was confusing as hell.

Shaking your head, you dried off, got dressed and headed for the cafeteria. You'd eat, then you'd find Lacroix and demand some answers.

He wasn't in his office. After a few carefully worded questions to Athena, you figured out he was still in his quarters, and more importantly, Jack was off site, so you wouldn't run into him just yet.

You trudged up to the officer's quarters, trying to keep a low profile. Because your "dramatic shielding" of the Strike Commander was all over the damn base. Just like your stupid towel video. Making eye contact with people was hard enough. This just made things worse.

You went to knock on the door, but Amélie opened it before you even raised your fist.

"Ah, Chanceux. Come in. Gérard is resting his eyes, but he wanted to see you." She stepped aside, dressed in a short silk lavender robe, silky hair cascading down her shoulders, and you rolled your eyes upward, because outside of a porno, who answered the door like that? Amélie Fucking Lacroix, that's who.

You stepped inside, still amused by the plum and black color scheme. Not because it was bad, but because it was the lush opposite of the battleship gray that dominated so many of the walls in the building. Lacroix lay on the sofa, shirtless, one hand resting over his eyes. Your eyes involuntarily drifted to the abundance of hatch marks and craters etched in his skin. It was always a shock to see just how many scars Lacroix had. You expected it from Jack and Gabriel, but Lacroix presented that smooth tactician air. While logically you knew he got hurt, seeing evidence
of it was another thing.

You sat down on the loveseat across from him.

"Would you like some coffee?" Amélie asked. She gave Lacroix a wry smile. "Gérard, you are wide awake and fooling no one. Stop teasing, Chanceux."

Lacroix sighed. "I am merely resting my eyes," he drawled.

"I don't know how you live with him, Amélie. He spends hours in the bathroom, has too much nervous energy, and starts nitpicking the moment he gets bored." You crossed your arms. "Rooming with him was like babysitting a small, annoying, vicious child."

Amélie just laughed. "All children are small, annoying, and vicious. He does not get bored with me, Chanceux."

"Yeah, OK," you said, rolling your eyes.

Amélie set a cup of coffee in front of you and it was just the right shade. You tasted it and raised a brow.

"I don't even know why I'm surprised that you know how I like my coffee."

"Gérard believes in being a good host. Do not worry, I don't bother learning everyone's preferences. Just the people we like. Everyone else can take what we give them." Amélie smiled brightly just for you and you shook your head, unable to process all the charm.

"Thanks," you managed.

"How is Ziv?" She asked, sitting down on the couch beside Lacroix. "No one seems to know where he is."

"Hopefully, he's extremely penitent and thinking very hard about his actions," you said dryly, sipping your coffee. You also liked to imagine that he had a hard time getting comfortable on those hard benches last night. Or maybe Torby made him sleep in a crate. The thought made you smirk.

"Well, Gérard was very harsh with him yesterday. I understand why, but Ziv does admire Gérard so very much..."

You snorted. "You underestimate how pissed off Jack is."

"Oh no, I am well aware. Perhaps you are unaware of, how shall we say it? How cutting, Gérard can be when he is angry."

You still remembered Lacroix verbally taking you apart in that interrogation room after the Ninth Circle. He had easily found most of your weak spots and just applied pressure. "No, I think I have a pretty good idea. Yeah, all right. Lacroix's reprimands are probably worse than Jack's. But Jack can fire him."

"He probably will not oust Ziv," Lacroix said. "I am certain that I was persuasive enough yesterday, however knowing Jack, he will be petty and let us agonize for a few days over his silence."

You finished your coffee. "Did you know Jack was trying to get Hoffman on his side?"
"...Mmm." Lacroix moved his hand and slowly sat up. "I think I need some coffee too, Amélie."

"It's sitting in the pot, mon loup," Amélie said cheerfully. "You are welcome to get it yourself."

Lacroix gave a tired sigh. "So cruel."

"Get me a refill too," you said, already disliking where this was going.

Amélie gave you a sympathetic look. "I would offer you some breakfast but we haven't had a chance to restock our larder."

"I grabbed something before I came up," you said. "But your coffee is much nicer than anything they offer in the mess hall." It was also nicer than the stuff you bought for Gabriel's office. It probably cost ten times as much too.

Lacroix got up, stretching. "Would you like extra strychnine this morning?"

"Just the normal amount," you told him and handed him your mug.

Lacroix slunk to the small kitchenette.

"Did I know about Jack's ill-conceived attempt to make an alliance between Hoffman and himself? Yes and no. When we started Spinshot, I had no idea. Before we left for Cologne, I knew they were talking, and I assumed they were in the preliminary stages. I had not realized it had gone that far. I certainly did not expect to see Jack there. He normally very...hesitant to approach unsavory political figures." Lacroix returned at a lazy loping pace with two cups of coffee. He handed you one and it looked right. "If I had known, I would have discouraged Jack from attempting that alliance."

You turned that explanation over in your head and took another drink of coffee. It also tasted good. Not at all like strychnine. Lacroix's explanation was very convenient. Believable, yes, but was it probable? You could see him casually advising Jack to drop a potential ally and suggesting someone new. You could see Lacroix skipping the talking, removing the obstacle, and maybe suggesting someone new later down the road.

"You do not believe me," Lacroix wrinkled his nose at you, like he was offended by your skepticism. Which was ridiculous.

"I don't disbelieve you," you said. "But I suppose I need to think about it more." You weren't sorry that Hoffman was dead. But you wouldn't have crossed Jack to make it happen. Lacroix didn't have that reluctance. But he was smarter than Ziv. He wasn't about to off Hoffman in front of the damn Strike Commander.

"I have a meeting with Ana later today. There is no guarantee that I will return alive, Chanceux. Now is the time to ask your questions."

"Amélie, is he feeding me a line?"

Amélie arched a perfect brow. "Honestly, Chanceux, you should know by now that Gérard does not lie to you and Ziv. He may not tell you the whole story, but he will not outright lie to you. He values your trust too much."

You leaned back in your seat and lifted your cup to your mouth, not drinking, just blocking
your expression as best as you could. Because you didn't *trust* Lacroix. Not in the conventional sense of the word. Your "trust" in him had well-defined boundaries and multiples caveats. Those legalistic tendencies normally kept your interactions running smoothly.

You trusted Jack, and you hoped he still felt the same way about you. But you didn't have the same kind of borders and contingencies in place. It was an odd realization that you had spent more time defining your relationship with fucking Lacroix than with Jack and Gabriel. You just tried to *be* with them. The pressure of analyzing and planning the logistics of romantic relationships was daunting, especially when you were the plus one to their partnership. But now you were realizing that some of these issues would be necessary to talk about.

"Are you all right, Chanceux? I didn't really put strychnine in your coffee. We are out of that too," Lacroix said, amusement brightening his voice.

"Trying to figure out how to handle Jack. I know I made things worse for myself yesterday, but-"

"It would be possible for Jack to reinstate Ziv after discharging him, but that would draw unnecessary attention. It was unwise of you to interfere, but it did serve to protect Ziv better. And I think this will be an excellent learning experience for him."

"Which part? The "don't assassinate people in front of the Strike Commander" lesson or the "let's ignore the experienced agents, go rogue, and see how *that* turns out" experiment. Because he should have known that shit already!"

"Among other things, yes," Lacroix said. "But you can't tell me you've never gotten carried away in the moment, even though it was detrimental to the mission." Lacroix drank his coffee and sighed. "We've all done it. This was Ziv's experience. He will learn from it." There was no room for any other alternative in Lacroix's voice.

"Do you need to know where he's at?"

"No. We will avoid him for a few days. He can take the time to evaluate his actions. We do not need to draw attention to his hiding spot. Jack will cool down, hopefully, and he can come back. I must ask, how are you faring?"

"Jack's pissed. Gabriel says I need to give him some time and then apologize." You didn't go into any detail about the sparring.

"Wise advice. I'm afraid Captain Amari is more difficult to placate."

"Yeah, my excuse is heat of the moment stupidity. You planned a blackbag op and didn't inform her or Gabriel. She's going to be livid." You enjoyed watching him pale. "I know you can apologize and schmooze with the best of them, and she'll let you, right up till she shreds you for all the rules you broke."

"Mmm, Amélie, perhaps I should take her some of those expensive chocolates?"

"Non, mon loup. She will know you are trying to bribe her and the slight to her integrity will just make her angrier." Amélie winked at you. "Maybe Chanceux can take her some beforehand, to soften her up, and in return, you can work on Jack for her."

"...This is getting weird," you said, but didn't outright refuse.

"All is fair in love, war, and placating Ana," Lacroix said with a straight face.
"...This is still weird," you said. "And how are you going to calm Jack down? You're on the shit list too."

"Let me worry about that. Remember what I told you in Cologne," Lacroix said dryly. "Try to make him see your perspective and appeal to his better nature. Don't make it a battle; you will regret it."

You gave Amélie a long appraising look while she smiled cryptically.

Well, it was the best relationship advice you'd received, and taking into account your circle of friends, it was probably the best you were going to get.

That Lacroix was out of food, but still had coffee and expensive chocolates, did not surprise you at all. You wondered if this was a trap and that he was hoping Captain Amari would spend her fury on you first, and then forget about him. You suspected that was not likely, as she was more methodical than that and had not yet summoned you to her office.

Box of chocolates in hand, you made your way down to her office and found her drinking tea and reading mission reports.

"Is there something you need?" She asked, not looking up.

"I uh..." You wouldn't lie to Captain Amari, and expect the survive the experience.

"Advice, ma'am."

She set her tablet down and gave you a knowing look and sharp smile.

You almost backed up.

"Come in," she said, tone friendlier than you expected. You obeyed, shutting the door behind you.

"Amélie gave me some chocolates for you. She didn't want to send them with Lacroix because she didn't want to give you the wrong idea." You set the box down.

"Oh, those are the nice ones. She is definitely bribing me not to murder him," Captain Amari smirked. "I suppose I may consider letting him live."

You shrugged as she retrieved a cup and saucer and poured you some tea.

"Thank you." You took it, somewhat surprised that it was peppermint.

"Athena, full privacy please. Yes, I have already read your report. I understand your concerns about Agent Mihret. You made several valid points that I assume you were unable to vocalize to Jack."

The tea was too hot to guzzle, so you stared at the bone china for a moment. "He didn't really let me do any explaining. Made me wait for Lacroix and Ziv to arrive, then let us all have it. I might have overstepped when I interrupted him. But it was a bad call and while I stand by that, I understand that maybe I shouldn't have interceded."
“Mmm.” Captain Amari opened the box of chocolates and offered you one. You took it. 
“You obviously know the gravity of your actions. Say it was me giving the order, and not your 
lover. Would you have still protested?”

“With all due respect, of course, ma’am,” you said. You almost added a comment about 
“bad orders” and “not hanging people out to dry,” but you realized that would not be diplomatic, 
and right now, you needed to avoid stepping on any more toes.

“I see,” Captain Amari said, her placid expression betraying nothing.

“Ultimately, responsibility falls on Gérard. Agent Mihret disobeyed a direct order. He was 
already skirting the line, Lucky. His prior service does count for something, and I know how fond 
of him you are. But Gérard needs to reign him in. Failing that, someone else will have to do it.” 
She smiled thinly. “Jack doesn't have the time to break down the hard cases. And he isn't quite as 
good at it as I am. I suppose that's why I always end up with troublesome ones.”

You managed a weak smile. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“For your actions?”

“For being troublesome.” You weren't sorry about Hoffman and you couldn't quite bring 
yourself to be sorry about sticking up for Ziv. The Strike Commander had to discipline agents, and 
you understood that. But you didn't adhere so strictly to rank, and Ziv was one of yours.

She leaned forward, chin resting on the back of her hand. “So what did you want advice 
on?”

“...Ziv is one. I don't know if there's anything else I can or should do. Or if I need to let you 
and Lacroix handle it.”

“I am going to handle Gérard, and if there's anything left afterward, we will deal with Agent 
Mihret together. Expulsion is severe, but not unwarranted. That is ultimately up to the Strike 
Commander. Understand that even if he isn't terminated, he will have consequences.”

“That's fine. He deserves to suffer,” you said. “But don't kick him out, please.”

Captain Amari laughed. “Where is he, by the way?”

You shrugged. “I haven't seen him since yesterday.”

“But you know where he is.”

You took a drink of your tea. “I have an idea.”

Captain Amari raised a brow. “I see. What interesting is he's missing on a lot of the In-Sec 
monitors. Now, I realize Athena is very fond of him. Do you know anything about this?”

“Nothing about security footage. I might have...ordered him to keep a low profile while we 
lobby for him.”

“Very low. Athena doesn't even know exactly where he is,” Captain Amari said dryly. “Am I 
dealing with a rebel AI?”

“...Maybe a teenager,” you said, because it seemed Athena was growing in leaps and 
bounds.
"A teenage AI?" Captain Amari exhaled slowly.

"She's cycling through developmental stages faster than I expected. Not that I know much about children, ma'am."

"Interesting analogy. So was that all, Lucky?"

You set your tea down. "I don't know what to do about Jack."

Captain Amari sat back in her chair. "What part?"

"We have a...safe word for situations where I think they're out of line, but can't come out and say that. It was originally meant for when Jack and Gabriel get into it. I used it when he was getting ready to kick out Ziv. Jack was...incensed."

"I see." Captain Amari sipped her tea.

"Gabriel said to give it some time and apologize. I will. I just...I know it was out of line, but I still think he was wrong to move to kick Ziv immediately."

"That is...more extreme than I was expecting from him," Captain Amari acknowledged. "But dismissing an agent for insubordination, is his prerogative as Strike Commander." She poured herself more tea. "As an agent, you were in the wrong. As his lover, that gets trickier, especially given the parameters of the situation. Jack is not a tyrant. Once you get through the mess of apologies and reconciliation, you can hammer out the details."

"How?" You pinched the bridge of your nose.

"I distinctly recall how you handled Gabriel over the compromised systems issues. At the time, direct confrontation was a poor choice, though to be honest, his communication did need work. However, you managed to turn it around and prove your case without needing to engage him in a battle of wills. Granted, you were friends, not lovers then. But I'm sure you'll figure out a healthy way of making your case to Jack."

"OK," you said, because while her faith was heartening, you weren't so sure that it was helpful.

"Jack needs time. Make sure he eats before you talk to him and try not to catch him in the wake of some other frustrating incident. Other than that, I'm sure you'll be all right," Captain Amari said. "You handle Gabriel just fine and he is...moodier."

"Jack's different," you said.

"Not really. In fact, Jack's easier. You just have to wait for him to cool down before initiating. Once the cool off begins, he is far less hostile than Gabriel," Captain Amari told you. "I realize waiting is not easy, but that is your wisest course of action."

"Thank you," you said, because while you realized she was right, you didn't particularly like it.

__________________________________________

You hit the padded wall upside down, stuck for half a second, then slid down, your damp
skin making a shrill squeak against the mats. You came to rest on your shoulders, knees bent over your head, and you blinked as you stared up at Hanzo.

He glared back crossly. "Is that the best you can do, weakling?"

With his brows drawn together and his severe expression of disapproval, he should have been intimidating. But after all this time of dealing with his moodiness and constant griping, you just found his irritation funny. You started snickering even as you folded into a heap on the ground.

"This isn't funny," he scowled harder and you unrolled yourself flat on the mat, still giggling. "What is wrong with you?"

"Maybe you hit her too hard," Genji said, sitting on the sidelines. He stretched, in full splits, and you envied his flexibility.

"Are you damaged?" Hanzo snapped, bending over you.

You just laughed harder, trying to sit up. Because it was like Genji back in the beginning, all sullen expressions and judgmental sniping. At least Genji seemed to have a sense of humor underneath it all.

"I went splat-squeak!" You said when you had yourself back under control. "Like a cartoon."

Hanzo squinted at you. "What?"

"Hanzo didn't watch frivolous things like cartoons, Lucky. I once came in on him watching the weather channel naked. I never asked why. I was too scared."

Hanzo wrinkled his nose. "What?"

"Are you sure it wasn't one of those weird pornos with the hot weathergirl?"

Genji sat back on his heels. "Oh. I didn't think of that. I was too young at the time and probably blanked out the trauma."

"...You can both stop talking now," Hanzo muttered.

"Were you watching weatherlady porn? Or weatherman porn? Because that just sounds hilarious. Today is going to be soooo hot and wet."

Hanzo's brows knit together in a distinct expression of disapproval, his jaw twitching.

Genji snorted.

"Can you predict how many inches I'm gonna get? How long's it going to last? Maybe it'll all just blow over!" You didn't have very many dirty meteorological jokes, but that wasn't going to stop you from being appalling.

"...You are an uncouth pest," Hanzo said. "I don't know how you've survived this long given your mediocre combat skills."

Your smile wavered. Friends mocking your survival ability was one thing. But you and Hanzo didn't have that relationship. Your friends knew your background and understood your baggage. Hanzo was just some spoiled Yakuza punk who got the best training money could buy
along with an awful attitude. The stress of your worry over Ziv and your fight with Jack gave you a lot less patience for Hanzo's unpleasantness. You kept swallowing pointed remarks, and they cut you the whole way down.

"You did see all those dead cyborgs she left at the spa," Genji said offhandedly. "Enough to give me nightmares."

Oddly enough, you felt the same way. The memory jolted you out of your frozen anger.

Hanzo pressed his lips together tightly. "So then, it is me that you do not take seriously?"

That was a loaded question. Because if you took Hanzo's jabs seriously, you'd probably punch him in the face a lot and that wouldn't be very diplomatic. It was best to view him as Genji's annoying brother whom you were obligated to humor.

"All right, all right." You climbed to your feet. "Let's try again. You're so fast, I'm trying to track your moves to see how you do it, but then I'm flipping through the air and wondering "what happened, why did gravity stop work- oh no, there it goes." Yeah."

Hanzo's expression mellowed a tiny bit. "You can take more damage than I expected."

"That was a compliment," Genji told you.

"Really?" You wondered. "Compliments? Have I been misjudging his conversation this entire time?"

Genji's mouth didn't move, but his eyes gleamed with amusement.

"That's enough. You wanted me to spar with you. Come on."

Actually, he wanted a turn to "instruct you" after watching Genji kick you around the mats. Because Genji obviously wasn't doing a good enough job teaching you. But somehow it was all your fault. Yeah, Hanzo was going to be single for awhile. It was definitely for the best. You gave yourself a few moments to picture the glorious awkwardness of a date between Feng and Hanzo. You couldn't think of anyone less compatible.

"Hajime," Genji said lazily.

There was now a strange tension between the brothers, you reflected as you dropped into a defensive stance. It didn't surprise you; their issues wouldn't be solved by one night of conversation, no matter how heartfelt or honest. But some kind of rivalry sparked between them, a revival of old ways perhaps, and Genji was more aggressive with Hanzo than before. He probably just had his fill of all the attitude. But you weren't certain that was the only factor. Genji hadn't offered you any information on what had been discussed, and you hadn't asked. Hanzo had just continued being borderline rude to you, and you continued utilizing a combination of Lacroix-couple passive aggressiveness and Blackwatch petty.

Hanzo lunged this time. He was going slower than before, but he was still stupidly fast and you ducked under his strike, blocking his follow-up and countering with your left hand. Your knuckles hit his throat and he gasped, grabbing his neck as he staggered backward. His eyes bulged and he dropped on his ass, coughing and you tried not to smile. Because that hadn't just been luck.

"Lucky, don't break my brother," Genji said, not actually sounding upset.
Hanzo wheezed indignantly.

"Mmm, sorry," you said, trying to sound earnest. "I didn't actually expect to hit you."

"Don't believe her," Genji said, with a smirk. "She says that every time."

Hanzo gurgled, giving you a nasty look.

You just shook your head, trying not to look smug. It was good to see that after all this time, healing, and emotional honesty, Genji was still a shit.

"You know he's not going to just end things over this, right?" Gabriel mused while you lay across his chest.

"I wasn't thinking that," you said too quickly.

Gabriel just laughed. "Of course not."

You just rested your chin on his shoulder and studied the pillowcase. A few strands of blonde hair shimmered and you traced them with your fingers. Gabriel had made it clear that he wasn't going to talk about Ziv with you, and that was fair. Because as far as you knew, he was still in Torby's workshop and you weren't going to volunteer that information either.

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with you sprawled on top of me like this," he complained, one hand resting on your back.

"Lay there and take it," you muttered darkly.

"All right," Gabriel chuckled and reclined, a book in hand. "He was still pretty annoyed when we finished sparring, but less enraged."

"...OK," you said, because you hadn't asked and it was a bad sign that Gabriel could tell exactly what you were thinking.

"I'd give it another day. I'll order some pizza and we'll go up together tomorrow night, all right?"

"...OK," you said, not entirely sure that you should be relying on Gabriel to mediate. Not that he couldn't. Of course he could. But this mess was between you and Jack and shouldn't you figure it out?

"The correct answer is "thank you, papi. I'm clueless and need all the help I can get. Except I'm too busy moping to see that you're walking me through this because I'm an idiot..."

You snorted and smiled despite yourself. "Yeah, OK. Thank you." Gabriel had been here before. He and Jack had all kinds of spats. You could do worse for a guide.

"You're never this way when we fight," he said, flipping through his book.

"Used to it, I guess. Our...interactions are better defined. That first time with the intel breaches and you blowing me off, that was rough."
"Only because you were an idiot," Gabriel said, one hand massaging your scalp. "You didn't have to sleep at your desk."

"I was trying to get the work done."

"You were trying to prove a point and guilt me."

You shrugged. Maybe a little. "I guess I'm not used to having the boy scout mad at me. It's unsettling."

"You're going to tell me that you aren't peeved at him too?"

"I am. It's all...prickly and stressful. Not exactly like fighting with you."

"The difference in rank?"

"Some of it. You and I have been able to keep it behind closed doors. Ziv and Lacroix were smack in the middle of this."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Ana was right there when you went off on me about the mainframe and briefing Winston."

You chewed on your lip. "I'm worried about Ziv too. But I'm not used to fighting with Jack and it feels weird."

"After Lucerne, you needed space from me, and rightfully so. Jack needs it too, definitely not as much, but just enough to get his head on straight. This isn't a dealbreaker, baby. Stop fretting." He shifted, and suddenly you were on your back. Gabriel propped himself over you, setting his book on the pillow. "You been practicing that move I showed you?"

You blinked, and it took you a moment to follow his train of thought. "I...just with you. I don't really want to explain the handcuffs to anyone else."

Gabriel chuckled. "Anything you want to try? Because now that you've green lighted toys, I guarantee that you'll be getting more."

You swallowed. "...I have some already."

"You should bring them out some time. Show us how you play," Gabriel kissed your throat. "I know I'd enjoy that."

"OK," you agreed, a little breathless. "You seem to like anal sex a lot. Do you prefer it or...?"

"It's what I've been used to, baby. Not that I'm complaining about how your sweet little pussy feels. I like how quickly you're ready to go. I love how I bottom out inside you and you just start shaking and clawing at the bed, like you can't take it." His breath was warm in your ear. "And I keep thinking about those outfits you bought but wouldn't show me. You going to wear some for me soon?"

"You're just going to ruin them," you muttered, turning your head to the side. Your heart beat faster and you shivered.

"Maybe the lingerie," he conceded. "But I like seeing you dressed up too." He nuzzled the side of your neck. "You're beautiful. You deserve to showcase it."
You remembered how dumbstruck you'd been at the ball when he'd shown up in a three piece suit. You understood that. "Right back at you."

"That cheap shot doesn't count as compliment, baby." Gabriel slid your t-shirt down your shoulder, his mouth hot against the exposed skin.

"Maybe not, but it definitely applies to you too. Can't think when you're doing that," you muttered.

"I'll stop then," he purred, sitting back so that he straddled your hips. He didn't put his full weight on you, but you weren't getting up.

"Tease." You glared up at him.

"So I know one of Jack's fantasies is to have you working in his office one day, dressed professionally, but definitely in a skirt and heels. Stop me if you know this ends..." Gabriel continued like you weren't shooting him dirty looks.

You swallowed your smartass comment, mind momentarily filling in that blank.

"You're so cute when you're startled. Te amo, corazon."

You turned the words over in your head and your eyes widened. "Hey!"

"I told you, you're going to have to get used to hearing it. Now where was I? Oh, yes. My book. I was reading poetry." He reached for it and grinned when you snapped your teeth at him. "Something wrong? Oh no, we can't play tonight, baby. You're going to want to be in fighting shape for tomorrow. Trust me on that."

You threw one hand over your face, squeezed your thighs together, and tried to ignore Gabriel's evil laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Phone interview bright and early tomorrow morning, suspect it may run an hour. I'm going over potential questions because I frequently freeze up and say the wrong thing. Then spend the rest of the day doing that l'esprit d'escalier bullshit and kicking myself mentally. This level of performance anxiety is unique to job interviews. If they like me, I'll have to go up to their HQ for an interview (maybe two) and then do a roleplay demo utilizing their software. (I get to learn it on the fly, that's part of the demo, I've been stalking their interview reviews on Glassdoor.)

But first, I must pass the gatekeeper interview. *screeches*

Dogs are well, a little stir crazy because I have runner's knee and we haven't been jogging.

I had Boston cream pie for Pi Day. My cousin requested it, and the bakery by me does a nice (not too sweet) version. When I was in line, the lady in front of me, and the lady behind me, were both buying pie for Pi Day.

Today wasn't bad. Yesterday, I was filled with rage and torn between committing
homicide and jumping on the counter and screeching in someone's face. It was a very close thing. Both homicide and screeching.

I feel that I must add: if you want to message me on tumblr, do eeeet. You are not bothering me. Do not feel guilty and apologize profusely. It's all good. I can't promise I'll be on when you do, but I will get back to you. Also, I'm usually writing so my answers will be sporadically timed. Because writing. But don't worry that you're "bothering" me. It's all good. Unless you're messaging me 12 pages of Ugandan Knuckles memes. You know who you are. You monster. =P
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

After the verdict on Ziv, you have to deal with Jack.

Chapter Notes

W.Jaksina made a cool sketch of Gabriel and Lucky from Chapter 3. Those thighs...
Unf.

We're coming up on the 5 month anniversary and I broke 400k in the rough draft today. Sweet Jebus. I have a minor arc and a major arc to go, with heavy doses of fluff.

You loitered in the hall, arms crossed. Torby, Winston, and Jesse lingered, all pretending to look busy. Jack, Gabriel, Lacroix, and Captain Amari were all sitting in Jack's office with Ziv. You had to really fuck up to get all of them on your case. In retrospect, you were surprised this hadn't happened sooner. Because Ziv was an unrepentant little shit.

Winston kept plucking at his wrists. Torby tinkered with something metal and round and you squinted at it trying to decide just how dangerous it was. Jesse kept twirling his revolvers, and you really wished they weren't loaded.


"You're spinning loaded guns indoors," you said, one eye twitching.

"I'm always careful, sugarpie." Jesse grinned, tilting his hat at you.

You bit your tongue, because that was such a blatant lie it didn't deserve a response.

Torby grunted something unflattering in Swedish. Winston flashed a pained look, though maybe you weren't an expert at gorilla facial expressions.

"Jesse's right though," you admitted as Winston continued to rub his forearms, the hair looking a little thin. "They aren't going to get rid of him. Probably."

Time dragged. You could feel the seconds slowing down just to spite you. Your heart rate was too fast. Your nerves were too receptive. Your patience was gone.

It didn't matter. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. Thirty minutes. Forty five minutes later, Jack's office door opened, and you straightened up.

Ziv slunk out, shoulders drawn tight. You rushed up to him and he gave you a weak smile.
"Well?"

"I'm not out," he said softly, scratching the back of his head. "But...it's not pretty."

"You're not pretty," you said cleverly and hugged him.

"Mihret has passable instincts, but he lacks discipline. So it's back to basic for him. I've called in some favors and he'll be doing a special regimen in Coronado. He'll be offsite for only a few weeks, so he's not getting the full Navy SEAL training, but they'll bludgeon the attitude out of him. This program came highly recommended from Chang," Gabriel said cheerfully as he exited the office. "She picked it out especially for difficult young men in need of attitude adjustments. Mihret wasn't the candidate she had in mind, but if the shoe fits..."

You winced in sympathy. Chang on her own was scary enough. If she'd chosen a program with Michael in mind... Well, you did not envy Ziv.

"And then, when he comes back, he'll be juggling your missions, assisting Winston in integrating another tech update, and whatever else Ana wants to throw him at." Gabriel actually laughed. "I suggested a wall, but she already had some ideas. Let me tell you, her live fire exercises are a terror to behold."

Ziv shuddered.

"And then," Gabriel placed an arm around Ziv's shoulders, his gleeful smirk downright evil. "He'll be teaching Reinhardt how to best use social media for his admin work, program his cookware, and whatever other minute tech support the asshole needs. Because what better punishment for an IT guy than troubleshooting technology for the old farts?"

Torby did not look impressed, but you and Winston flinched.

"You deserve that, and more," you told him.

Ziv rested his face in his palm, unable to bring himself to look at Gabriel. "Ben-zona, Lucky, you should've just let them kick me out."

Gabriel did not actually try to talk to Jack when he was like this. They just set up the mats quickly and Gabriel steeled himself for a hard fight. It did not feel the least bit strange for him to have started the evening cuddling you, and moved on to sparring with a furious Jack. What exactly that said about him and his relationship dynamics, he wasn't certain, but he would not trade it for anything.

Jack was the faster one, and he pummeled Gabriel's abdomen with a flurry of punches. Gabriel kicked him backward, grinning as Jack's lips twisted into a snarl. Jack pushed this far was a sight to behold. Cold, efficient, verging on cruel, he was a treat to fight. Gabriel didn't have to hold back right now, and he slammed his knee into Jack's stomach. The younger man grunted, but did not stagger.

The smartest thing would be to fight defensively, let Jack wear himself down. But it was normally Gabriel having the fits of pique and he didn't have the mindset to appreciate how enjoyable it could be to stop holding back. Fighting Jack when he was angry, and not angry at
Gabriel, was actually a lot of fun. He let it all go and both of them were soon bleeding from numerous hits.

It was a few rounds of just striking before Jack finally spoke.


That had been a...bad day. Jack had ignored orders, almost gotten himself killed, and then had to come home and face the consequences. Gabriel had been so enraged, he nearly threw Jack off the damn battleship and told him to swim home. Ana and Gérard had stopped him of course, if only by reminding him that Jack had a broken arm, among other injuries, and would take forever to get anywhere.

"He's a slippery son of a bitch," Gabriel acknowledged, neatly dodging Jack's front kick. "You could probably invite him onto the mats for a round."

"I'd break his neck right now," Jack said, and gripped Gabriel's arm, using his hip as a fulcrum to throw the older man.

Gabriel hit the mats hard and winced as Jack dropped on top if him, knees digging into his ribs.

"You did fuck up with that suicide charge, Jack," Gabriel said, seizing Jack's wrists. "Me and Ana were in agreement that you were an idiot in need of a good ass-kicking."

"Not the point," Jack snapped. "I wasn't expecting Gérard to use that one against me."

Gabriel hooked his leg around Jack's and raised his hips, throwing Jack off him. He rolled, pinning Jack underneath him. "Lacroix has the advantage there. He keeps score. You're a better friend and just forget who owes whom."

"I haven't forgotten," Jack snapped, clicking his teeth. "I'm past caring how much everyone owes me and vice versa. That doesn't condone that little shit's blatant insubordination, just like it doesn't excuse Lucky for abusing the kill-switch."

Gabriel nodded, more in acknowledgement than agreement, and used his heavier weight to try to pin Jack. He dug his heels into Jack's biceps, trying flatten him against the ground.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I was going to boot Mihret. He went too fucking far and we all know it."

"But...?" Gabriel didn't agree with that decision, but he'd talk to Jack about it after he'd cooled down some.

"Lucky pissed me off so much that I know that I'm not thinking straight. And then Gérard fucking offered me his resignation. It's goddamn symbolic and I know he's bluffing, but still..."

Gabriel blinked in surprise and Jack wiggled free. His foot hit Gabriel square in the chest and Gabriel fell backward. Jack was on him in seconds, his hands squeezing Gabriel's throat.

Gabriel slapped Jack's wrists away and snapped forward, his forehead smashing into Jack's nose. It began to gush. Cursing, Jack slammed his fists into Gabriel's jaw. There hadn't been much windup, and Gabriel shook it off, jerked his hips off the ground, and unseated Jack. The blonde man rolled backward, hands raised for the counterattack.
"Warned her not to push that. That it was only for private situations. She fucking knew better-
"

"Come on, Jack. You going to talk or you going to fight?"

Jack's eyes narrowed and he gritted his teeth. "Now you're asking for it-"

"I know." Gabriel's tongue was swollen and he knew he was going to hurt worse in the morning. He tasted blood, unsure if it was his or Jack's. It didn't matter right now. They'd punch it out, and then they'd talk about what to do about you and Ziv.

Jack glared savagely at him, eyes flashing, teeth bared. He radiated violent energy with his arms up and a thin sheen of sweat coating his flushed skin. He did not resemble the composed figurehead war hero made for public consumption. This Jack was a wild thing, fierce and unrestrained.

"Bring it on, mi cielito. You're so goddamn beautiful when you're angry."

Gabriel lay on his side, facing Jack. Jack was beside him on his back. The mats were slippery with sweat and blood. Gabriel was still breathing hard and shallow, but Jack had leveled off.

"You seen Mihret?" Jack rolled onto his side.

"Nope. He's laying low. Athena isn't even sure where he's at." Gabriel had not pursued the inquiry further. It shouldn't have surprised him that you knew the AI's blindspots.

Jack growled. "Goddamnit, Lucky. She just had to interfere-"

"I'm not sure why you're surprised. You're the one who pointed out her obvious soft spot for renegade hackers and what happens when someone goes after one of hers."

Gabriel could feel Jack's scowl in his direction.

"And you know what's going on with her first one," Gabriel said softly.

Jack groaned. "Goddamnit, Gabe. I thought we were really going to try to keep these things separate."

"We are," Gabriel chuckled. "That's a tertiary reason. You know how it is. The three of us pretty much live on-duty. The wires would have gotten crossed even if she never slept with us."

Jack muttered something rude under his breath.

"Didn't catch that, baby."

"I'm still pissed."

Gabriel just lay there, waiting for Jack to expand on it.

"Two months of maneuvering down the drain, with nothing to show for it except a fucking
Gabriel didn't remind Jack that Hoffman was a bad candidate. Jack had to know it after reading your dossier. But that was salt in the wound. Jack would let it go eventually. Now wasn't the time to remind him that his hard work would not have been as fruitful as he anticipated.

"Mihret's an obnoxious little shit," Gabriel said. "But I'm hard-pressed to name anyone who is closer to her. We've all noticed how she dotes on him, like a younger sibling." Gabriel glanced over at Jack, who was staring at the ceiling.

"I can't allow such blatant favoritism," Jack said. "She knows better."

"You remember all those times we stepped out line?" Gabriel asked quietly. "And Aishani went to bat for us? She was a stickler for hierarchy. Rank dictated everything. But in those instances, she threw it out the window. It wasn't about nepotism, even if some people would claim that."

"Yeah." Jack exhaled slowly.

"We still got punished." Gabriel snorted. There were consequences, because Aishani was a hardass and she pushed them even further, because she loved them. But she didn't abandon her people when they screwed up, she just took it upon herself to make sure they learned never to do that again. "Mihret's insubordination isn't common knowledge. You're not breaking ranks by keeping him here."

"Gérard already laid out all the logical reasons not to throw him out: everything from his outrageous Talon bounty to his high security clearances and specialized tech knowledge. Still pisses me off that the bastard tried to resign. Such a melodramatic move. I mean, I've seen him pull some shady bullshit, but I guess I expected better."

Gabriel sighed, a pretty irritated that he had to defend Gérard. "It wasn't a threat, Jack. If Gérard wanted to guilt or threaten you, he has ample information to pull from."

Jack gave him a hard side eye.

"That was Gérard declaring for Mihret. Showing he was serious, that he thinks the kid is worth it. He kept referencing the Aleutians, remember? I offered to resign if they court-martialed you."

"We were fucking," Jack said tightly.

"Really? I thought we were making sweet, sweet love. I feel so used..."

That got a reluctant smile.

"My advice is let them all stew a few days. They deserve to sweat, but keep Mihret. He's a pain in the ass, but he is useful. I guess Lucky still has McCree as a backup sibling if you kick Mihret. And in a pinch, our Shimadas might be willing to adopt her. Genji could do worse for a sibling. Though I'm not sure about pushing her into closer proximity with the elder Shimada. He's obviously not good at brothering."

"I'll think about it," Jack muttered.

"Let Ana handle Gérard. She's the only one of us who faces off with him and routinely
comes out on top. I think she's the only one of us that he's actually scared of."

Jack groaned. "You're right. But Lucky..."

"She's pretty sorry," Gabriel said, keeping his tone neutral. "But I understand why you're pissed. You have a right to be."

"I'm still pissed," Jack said. "I'm just not sure if this is more a personal or professional issue."

"It's both, and we know it." Gabriel chuckled softly. "You know we wouldn't like her so much if she was the type to hang Mihret out to dry."

Jack groaned. "Not you too-"

"Just reminding you. Doesn't get her a free pass, but it's helpful to remember that no matter how much it seems that way, the intransigent jackass doesn't actually do this shit to intentionally piss us off."

You and Jack had a different dynamic and rarely fought. It was past time for the two of you to really butt heads and sort out more boundaries. Gabriel wasn't worried. The two of you had been here before. And he and Jack had fought this fight as well. It was a growing pain, and easier to appreciate when he was outside the mix.

Jack's glare was too tired to be remotely intimidating. "You're enjoying this."

Gabriel wasn't going to admit that right now. "Nah, I'm just thinking up punishments for Mihret. That little shit's been pushing me for far too long. If you need ideas..."

Jack's fingers traced Gabriel's shoulder. "I don't want to think about that asshole right now. Got to deal with her too. Going to need some time to figure out how we're going to handle this."

"I'm sure you'll come up with an appropriate solution," Gabriel purred and rolled over to nip Jack's exposed throat.

"Poor Chanceux, she's been so worried that she'll lose her lover and her "brother" in one fell swoop."

Jack's jaw tightened. He was calm. This was business. He was focused on work, and certainly not wondering what you were up to. "You're on thin ice already, Gérard. This has nothing to do with her."

Gérard just smiled that smug little smile that made Jack want to punch him out his chair again. He didn't, but it was near thing.

"She's fine," Jack said, stubbornly, even though he had not spoken to you since the confrontation. It rang false, but Jack was not going to dwell on that. Not right now.

"Of course," Lacroix said, like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "You've been most reasonable and she's so well-adjusted."
There was a moment of pointed silence while Jack counted to ten. Then he counted to twenty. Then he just gave up and glared at Gérard. The bastard looked dapper and fresh in an ivory suit with a cheerful pink carnation in the buttonhole. He beamed at Jack, and Jack considering firing Gérard and Mihret, leaking scandalous photos of Petras, and then resigning. Ana could take over. It would all be her problem. He would get a farm. Gabriel would bring you to visit, and he would get a dog and the best cake he could find, and that would make you forgive him. Somehow.

"You're not making me the villain in this, Gérard."

"It never crossed my mind, Jack. But you certainly see my point."

"Lucky and Mihret are two different issues," Jack said, sharply. It didn't help that Gérard had a point. Treating you and Mihret as separate problems worked in theory, but Jack had to admit, if only to himself, because Gérard did not deserve the satisfaction, that it was more complicated than that.

"Of course, Jack. I'm sure Chanceux will be fine. She's much better than she used to be. She's only gone a day or two thinking the worst."

"Gérard..."

"Is he giving you trouble, Jack?" Ana asked as she entered the office.

Gérard whitened, and his smile froze for half a second, before he was on his feet to pull out a chair for Ana. "I wouldn't dream of it, Ana."

"That's what I like to hear," Ana smiled wolfishly at him and Jack felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. What had Ana said to Gérard? Or was he happier not knowing? He knew that look intimately. It was like a rattler shaking its tail, or a hippopotamus opening its mouth, or lion's ears pricking up. It was a warning sign to keep on moving lest something very bad happen. Yes, he was much better off not knowing.

Ana took her seat and Gérard followed in suit, suddenly more subdued. He didn't droop, but he didn't look quite as jaunty as he had before.

"We were just discussing Chanceux as...collateral damage," Gérard said, his tone somber.

Ana just smiled that Mona Lisa smile, the patient, smug, all-knowing one that made Jack want to check to ensure he had remembered to wear pants this morning. Yes, he had, damn her.

"She is most distressed. Won't come out and say it, of course, far too proud. But after all this time, one can tell."

"Gérard, stop trying to distract Jack. Just because Lucky finally had to come to me for advice, and a refresher on policy and procedures, does not mean she's handling this badly. In fact, I think this is progress."

"She went to you?" Jack's voice came out strangled. "What for?"

"You know that's confidential, Jack." Ana's dangerously pleasant expression did not change at all. "Though I can say it would not have been necessary if you'd just talked to her before deciding to sack Agent Mihret."

"...Ana," he said, tone cautioning.
"Jack," she replied, smile sharp.

"We're here to discuss Agent Mihret."

"Of course, we are. You're the one asking about Lucky."

Jack swallowed his retort, unwilling to walk any further into that trap. He settled for giving Ana a disapproving frown.

She ignored it and leaned forward, resting her elbows on his desk. "All right then, back to business. After reviewing the circumstances of Operation Spinshot, here are my recommendations regarding Agent Ziv Mihret..."

You had not seen Jack yet today. After alternately fussing over Ziv and berating him for his stupidity, Winston, Torby, Jesse, and you took him to get coffee and dessert and let yourselves unwind. You were somewhat surprised to when Torby threw out a couple compliments about Ziv's technical skills. Actually, you were surprised Torby hadn't murdered Ziv. But that was best left unsaid.

Yes, Ziv was getting shipped off to America for a few weeks, but he was going somewhere warm, with beaches, and you were a little jealous. Not that you could bask in the relief just yet.

Because you still had to deal with Jack. So you muddled along with your subdued celebrations. Having Ziv off site wasn't the worst that could happen, but it did put a damper on things. Ziv was shaken, but too much of an ass to admit it, so he just ate too much dessert and belted out extra obnoxious comments.

To be honest, Chang's penal regimen would probably be good for him. Or at least it would be good to get him out of your hair for a few weeks. You wouldn't have to worry about him pissing off some bigger, tougher, more psychopathic operative and then have to go around smoothing things over or making quiet threats. Ziv was your hacker, but there was no denying that he was a massive pain in the ass.

You were actually relieved when you got the invitation to go out from Gabriel.

Gabriel picked up the pizzas and you tagged along, hood up, hands jammed in your pockets. You were probably going to get your ass kicked tonight. You'd been too worried about Ziv to focus on how annoyed you were at Jack, but that was rising to the surface now.

He'd threatened to boot Ziv. He'd blown you off and pulled rank instead of talking to you like a person, in private. He'd listened to everyone, but you.

"You're awfully quiet. I thought you'd be happy about Mihret," Gabriel said as the two of you made your way to Jack's quarters.

You shrugged. "Gotta sort things with Jack now."

"It's not that bad, baby." The bastard sounded amused. "The makeup sex will be worth it," he purred in your ear, and you almost dropped the pizzas.
When you got in, you had to do a double take, because the couch and coffee table had been shoved against the wall and there were thick blue practice mats already laid out. Jack crouched in the middle, stretching. He'd foregone shaving for a few days and he had visible stubble shadowing his jaw line. Most distractingly, Jack had stripped down to just a pair of shorts and no shirt. You bit your lower lip, trying not to openly stare at his chest and abs, as a flush worked its way across his pectorals.

"Hey." He greeted you both coolly, his eyes flicking to your face and then the pizza. "You want to eat first?"

"You should," Gabriel said, cracking open a beer. "You hungry, Lucky?"

"I'm good," you said, kicking off your shoes.

"Give me a moment," Jack said. He took the stack of pizza boxes from you and set them on the coffee table. He opened the top one and took two slices, eating them with the mechanical efficiency of a soldier.

You pulled off your hoodie. You had sparred with Jack enough times to know how to dress: tight compression shirt, athletic pants, and basic prostheses - nothing overly revealing. Skidding across the mats made for some unpleasant rashes, so it was better to keep your skin covered.

Stretching out on the mats, you caught Gabriel smirking at you. He seemed amused by this entire situation, and at this point he wasn't even trying to hide it. Irritation made you clench your fists, but you weren't going to pick a fight with him tonight. Not when Jack was first in the queue and had already set everything up to kick your ass. Well, he was going to have to work for it, because he wasn't the only one who was pissed off.

There was electrolyte solution on the table and an emitter already in its stand. Boy Scout was sure prepared. He finished his third slice of pizza and a bottle of the solution.

You didn't even need to ask what to expect. You'd done this enough times under friendlier circumstances.

Jack wiped his hands. "You sure about this?"

You shrugged. "Same rules apply? We stop if someone taps, uses safe words, or gets hurt."

"Yeah," Jack said, narrowing his eyes. "You don't have to do this. Give it a few days and we can sit down and talk."

"Stop being a chickenshit and let's get this over with."

Jack sucked in a breath. "Oh baby, you don't want to goad me right now."

"You obviously don't know what I want." The threat in his voice actually relaxed you. Jack was angry. You were angry. And while it seemed counterintuitive, both of you could set and follow the rules, making sparring a healthy outlet. You were venting your frustration within accepted limits.

It went unsaid that Jack had to hold back when he fought you. You weren't sure how much he was actually going to get out of this, but you didn't quite care.

You raised your hands, loose fists protecting your face. Knees bent, weight on the balls of
your feet, you watched as Jack stalked onto the mats.

"You're going to be sorry," he said. "Don't say I didn't warn you when you're hurting tomorrow." He smiled coldly. "Or you can apologize now and maybe I'll go easy on your ass."

Now he was just trying to piss you off. "You wish. Now quit stalling and let's go."

There was a trick to sparring with super soldiers. You could not fight fair. You could not pit your strength directly against theirs. You kept your distance. If Jack straight punched you or got you in a chokehold, it was over. Your best strategy was a combination of attrition and precision strikes. You had to wear him down till he got clumsy and gave you an opening, provided you lasted that long.

You and Jack circled. He gave an experimental jab, stepping forward in a blink. You slid to back and to the side, and drove your metal knuckles into his floating rib.

Jack grunted and you had to move fast, dodging a side kick that would have sent you into the wall. He stepped forward, and you raised arm against your head, barely blocking an open palm strike aimed at your ear. It did less damage than a closed fist, but if it landed, it would have fucked up your equilibrium. So you couldn't bring yourself to "appreciate" the gesture.

Too close for comfort, you jumped backward, narrowly avoiding his follow-up attack on the other side of your head.

Jack was holding back, but he wasn't playing nice. He watched you without humor, and you pursed your lips. making a kissy noise at him. The set of your mouth slanted too vicious to be considered smiling.

Jack shook his head. "Now you're just asking for it."

"See, you think you're good at communication, but you're really not," you said.

"Says the one who'd rather shoot people than talk about her feelings. Don't give me that look. We all know it's true." Jack flashed you a nasty little smile.

"Fuck you. I've been in therapy since I got here. I talk about my feelings with people who listen and don't pull fucking rank to shut me down!"

Jack bristled, eyes cold. "Well then, come over here and talk to me."

"Is that an order?" You scowled. "Because you don't seem to be learning from your mistakes, sir."

"I'll come to you then." Jack lunged and you swore as he tackled you to the mats, the impact knocking the wind out of you. He rested his weight on you, his body solid and heavy against yours. He bared his teeth at you, a cocky set to his chin. "For such big talk, you're really not putting up much of a fi-"

You slammed your forehead into his nose and his head snapped back; he should have known better than to get into your headbutt range. Arrogant prick. Grinning savagely, you drew your knees up to your chest and drove your feet into his solar plexus, shoving him off you. He staggered backward, blood dripping from his nose. You got back on your feet, and swung your leg forward, nailing him in the throat with a front kick. You pulled it, holding back some, because the throat was a delicate point. You weren't trying to cause permanent damage.
Jack coughed, but didn't fall.

"What was that, baby? Having trouble understanding you. You need a moment?"

Jack wiped his face with the back of his hand, blood dripping down his arm. Eyes hard, shoulders back, he stared at you. "That was a mistake, sweetheart," he rasped. "Should've brought me down when you had the chance. I won't give you another one."

You just curled your left hand into a fist. "You know what you didn't give me a chance at? You didn't let me explain anything. You just jumped to dismissing Ziv. I wasn't asking for special treatment, Jack. If Captain Amari did what you did, I would have gotten into it with her too. Whatever my feelings, Ziv plays a crucial role on my team. I'm not about to ignore that."

Jack inclined his head back. He took a few deep breaths. "I know."

You dropped your guard. "And?"

"And you still should have taken me down when you had the chance," he said, charging forward. He grabbed your arm, already moving to throw you. You turned into it the lock, pivoting against him so your back was against his chest. You slipped your leg between his thighs and shoved him backward, knocking him off balance. He didn't release you though, and both of you went down. You immediately dropped your elbow as he hit the mat, and were satisfied to hear him wheeze as you knocked the air out of him.

He gripped your waist and you tried to wriggle free. But he began to squeeze you in a bearhug and you couldn't get loose. The pressure grew tighter and you winced, your ribs starting to creak.

"Tap, you stubborn thing."

You jerked your head backward, aiming at an angle for the general vicinity of his nose.

Jack just laughed as you fell short, the back of your head grazing his chin. "Just tap, baby."

"You think I'll do things...just because you tell me to." You dug your metal fingers into his arm, till they found and compressed the nerve that made him loosen his grip. You slid free and spun around, your left hand on his throat. You rested your knees on his arms, acutely aware that Jack wouldn't be in this vulnerable position if he'd taken you more seriously.

He watched you with thoughtful eyes, making no move to throw you off.

"I'd start squeezing, but you look like you have something to say." You were breathing hard, waiting for him to counterattack.

"Do you honestly think you're the only one who wants to protect your people?"

You said nothing, waiting for Jack to expand on that.

"I didn't give a shit about Hoffman. But she was a means to an end."

"Yeah, I know we need to get Epsilon Squad out of the line of fire. I really do feel bad about that, Jack-"

"Petras didn't threaten Epsilon Squad. He threatened you, you goddamn idiot!" Jack snapped. "Did you seriously expect me to sit by and do nothing?"
You blinked, relaxing your grip on his neck. "You were going to discharge Ziv-"

"I was pissed off," Jack scowled. "I would have reinstated him, eventually."

"...Because that's so reasonable."

"I don't know why you think we're reasonable about this. Was it reasonable for you to ignore me and take point in Paris? Was it reasonable for you to charge into a building alone after an unknown enemy in Belfast? Was it reasonable for you to volunteer to torture the sniper after he'd already told us everything he knew? Please, tell me if I need to define that word for you. I think it's very "reasonable" to be mad that two months of work ended up splattered all over the streets of Cologne."

"...You blew me off when it was important," you said, voice small.

"I'm sorry," he huffed. "That wasn't reasonable or OK."

You looked away, gnawing on your lip.

"You still shouldn't have used the kill switch."

"You were overreacting. What else was I supposed to do?"

There was a long silence and Jack began to stroke your calves. "Use your safe word next time," he muttered. "Kill switch is for policy issues. Usually conflicts between Gabe and me."

You blinked, because while that was weirdly legalistic, you understood where he was coming from. "Firing an agent is policy-"

"This was personal and you know it," Jack said, and he was right. He scooted out from under you, and sat up. "Safe word next time. It'll put me in a different headspace."

"...OK," you said, rubbing the back of your neck. "I'm sorry I fucked up your op."

"And?"

You looked at Gabriel for help, but the bastard just grinned at you and took a big bite of pizza. It was enormous. He crammed three quarters of the slice in his mouth.

Jack lightly shoved you onto your back.

"I'm sorry I tackled you in public and tore your suit?" You wondered, propping yourself up on your elbows.

Jack shook his head, smile smug. "You're so bad at this." He picked up your left hand, and kissed your knuckles. "Thank you for not running off and ghosting me when I know that's your first instinct."

"Thank you for not firing Ziv?" You wondered, because he hadn't just done that for you. Other people had lobbied for Ziv's retention.

Jack rolled his eyes and you knew you'd gotten the answer wrong again.

"Thank you for being understanding and coming up with a solution instead of staying mad at me and making it about rank?"
Jack's face softened. "Not what I was getting at, but you're welcome." He blushed a little. "Gabe had to remind me of some of our...previous issues. It wasn't only my overwhelming brilliance that solved everything."

You stared, unsure of what else you were supposed to say. You could think of several smart ass comments about Jack's brilliance, but you were pretty sure those were not going to be helpful.

"Thank you for watching her back, even though she's too dumb to realize it," Gabriel said with his mouth full.

You glared over your shoulder at him. "Really Gabriel?"

"If we waited for you to get it right, we'd be sitting here all night."

"You're not wrong," you admitted, and that stung. "But did you have to announce it with a mouthful of pizza?"

"We don't have any popcorn." He shrugged and took a big bite out of a new slice, chewing happily.

Jack laughed, his smile lopsided.

"Thanks," you said, reaching out to stroke his cheek. "For trying to get rid of Petras for me."

Jack shrugged. "Didn't work," he said with a single head shake. "Probably wouldn't have worked out like I wanted. Still-"

You reached up and kissed him, breath catching when he hungrily returned the gesture. He pushed you flat against the mat, eyes bright.

"I'm still pretty worked up, baby. You want to do something besides spar?"

"Yeah, I could go for some chess," you said and grinned at Jack's disgruntled look.

"You don't really want to...play chess right now, do you?" Jack asked, brows furrowed. "I mean, we can but..."

"What else did you have in mind?" A slow grin crossed your face and your eyes widened as Jack gripped your collar, and then jerked his hands downward, tearing your shirt open from neck to navel. "Damnit, Jack!"

"I'll buy you a new one," he said, pushing you back down against the mat.

You swallowed as he leaned over you, tongue darting out to flick against your lips. One hand cupped your breasts through your bra and the other began pulling your pants down your hips.

"You've been so cocky today. Need to pound your rebellious ass into the mats. You up for that? Just going to hold you down and fuck you till you're screaming-"

"Hold on-" You kicked your pants off and stripped off your bra before he could destroy that too. He gave you a half second to finish undressing before flipping you onto your stomach.

"Goddamn, you're already wet," Jack growled, his tongue trailing along the side of your neck. "Do you see this, Gabe? Someone likes being manhandled. I still think about it, you know.
What would have happened if you'd stuck around for me and Gabe that night you two first sparred. I'm a little sad I missed you two playing with knives on the farm.

"Practice knives," you moaned as he ground against your ass, his cock pressing hard against the cleft. Your inner thighs were already slick, and you shivered as Jack bit the back of your neck.

"Close enough. I want a turn," he said, fingers brushing against your clit. "Look at you. Didn't think you liked being rolled that much. Should I be jealous of all the other guys you drag to the mats?"

You gave him a skeptical look over your shoulder. "Really, Jack?"

"Give how hard we both raw her, do you think she has the energy to look at other men?" Gabriel smirked from the sidelines.

Jack's clever fingers slid inside you, spreading you open for him. "You always like this after a round?"

You shook your head. "Different with you two. Don't have a reputation to protect. With you I just get to play..." You shivered as Jack's thick fingers pumped in and out of your pussy. "And when you're touching me...ah!" Jack's teeth sunk into your shoulder, his body covering yours, his bare skin hot against your back. "Love how you feel," you panted. "You have no reason to worry-"

Jack gave a pleased hum, kissing your shoulder. "I know," he purred. "I just wanted to hear you say it."

Your smart retort dropped away as he pulled his fingers out and he rubbed the head of his cock against your lower lips.

"Look at you just presenting yourself to me, all primed and ready to go-"

"Bottomed out already, and I'm not even all the way in. But your pussy just keeps trying to suck me inside," Jack groaned. "Going to have to bend you over more often. Like seeing your face, but the way you clench around me-" He hauled your hips up, your face still resting on the mat, most of your weight on your knees. "There we go." He shifted and suddenly he was deeper, and you were fuller, impaled on him.

"Damnit Jack. Wasn't ready-" your fingers dug into the mats as he began move.

"Yeah, that's it. Take it all the way-" The was a sharp slap across your ass and you jolted forward.

"Jack!" You shuddered, because while it stung, you could feel his cock twitching inside you.

"Again?" He chuckled and you keened as he smacked the other cheek, the sound sharper than the sensation. You still flinched and he took a moment to rub the area, soothing the sensitive skin.

"Damnit, Jack," you closed your eyes, breathing hard.
"I think the correct response is, "thank you, sir," he said, voice low and rough in your ear. "Look at that needy cunt drooling around me. Can't get enough of this. You're always so eager to have your holes filled. Makes up for how difficult you like to be." He pushed against your ass, sinking further inside you.

"You're too deep!" You rested your forehead against the mat, legs shaking as he stroked your back.

"No such thing," he sighed, drawing back and then snapping his hips forward. "Though if you're begging for me to go easy on you already-"

"Fuck you, Jack!" You snarled, and pushed back against him, squeezing his shaft with your inner muscles.

"That's what I want to hear," he growled softly. "You just keep being stubborn. It'll make fucking the defiance out of you that much sweeter."

"That'll take more than you've got."

"Then I'll settle for fucking you into an incoherent mess on the ground," he snapped and increased the tempo, his cock driving into you at a hard rhythm.

His skin burned hot against yours and sweat beaded on your forehead. You bit your metal fingers, trying to muffle your squeaks and moans. You weren't just taking it, you were practically bouncing off his thighs, but he kept a hard grip on your hips, not letting you get too much control.

"Stop that." He tugged your hair, lifting your head off the mats. You groaned as his fingers began to press on your clit. "I want to hear you coming apart. No need to be quiet here."

"Who says you deserve the satisfaction?" You panted, voice going high as he began moving his hips in a figure eight pattern. With each motion his cock dragged against your walls, and the pleasure of the being stretched out had you gasping.

"Fight me on this if you want. I'll just tie you up. I know you like that, but do you really want to be helpless when I'm this worked up?" He said roughly in your ear.

You whimpered involuntarily.

"-Because it'll just make things easier for me. I'll get to do whatever I want to you. Going to wreck that sweet pussy, baby. You give me as much attitude as you want. It just makes me want to fuck you harder."

He shifted his angle once more, the crown of his cock stroking your g-spot with each thrust. His fingers moved faster on your clit.

"Love watching you swallow up my cock, baby. All the smartass remarks don't change the fact you're soaking wet for my dick."

You were certain people would laugh at you if you told them Strike Commander Morrison had penchant for dirty talk and a filthy mouth.

You moaned as he pounded you into the mats like he promised, his arm around your waist the only thing holding you up. You were sopping wet, and you could hear the slick sounds of his shaft sliding into you.
"I was so fucking mad at you, baby. Still laid in bed jerking myself off, thinking about having you like this," he breathed in your ear. "This is better than the fantasy." His fingers worked frantic pattern against your clit and your channel tightened, trying to pull him deeper inside. "You're so close, aren't you? Want it harder, then?"

"Yes," you nodded even as he set a savage pace, cock battering at your walls with punishing force. "Jack, I can't-"

"That's it, sweetheart. You just lay there and take it. I want to hear you scream for me while I plow that tight little pussy. Want to watch my cum pour our of your freshly fucked hole. Want to see you lying under me, shaking and crying because you can't take it any more-"

You were wound too tight and brittle after the day's events. He broke you down, your body trembling underneath him. Your cries had him growling and thrusting wildly while you clenched around him. He was hell-bent on tearing you apart and you didn't care so long as he didn't stop. You clamped down on him, the pleasure wringing you out at a merciless rhythm. Your body tensed too hard, muscles in your calf knotting into a cramp.

Jack swore, burying his face in your hair and sheathing himself to the hilt. His cock twitched inside you, and you gave a strangled moan as his cum gushed inside you.

Mind hazy, you lay on the mat, Jack resting against you, one arm by your head keeping his full weight off your body. You were almost comfortable, but the pain in your calf became more and more insistent. You moved your arm back, trying to reach it, but the angle was all wrong.

Jack growled and yanked you up, flush against his chest.

"J-Jack." You wiggled against his lap, still impaled on his shaft.

"Shh," he murmured, pressing his mouth to the back of your neck. "Want to tell me what you thought you were doing, agent?"

"Cramp. Left calf." You said shakily.

Jack's fingers pressed against the taut muscle and you groaned as he carefully loosened the knot in your leg.

"Better?" He asked and you nodded.

"Thanks," you sighed, resting the back of your head against his chest. He stroked your hair. "I uh...mess on you-" You said as a mix of his cum and your juices began to dribble out.

His half-hard cock twitched inside you and you gulped.

"Now that we've gotten the warm-up out of the way, are you going to behave me for me?" Jack asked, tongue flicking your ear.

You shuddered against him.

"I asked you a question, agent." One of Jack's arms stayed around your waist, but his free hand began to squeeze your breasts and you panted softly.

"Yes, sir," you exhaled.

Jack's satisfied chuckle made you rub your thighs together.
"Good to see that you remember how to address me," Jack purred. "Even with my cum oozing out of you."

"Only because you like it so much, sir." You were going to have to be careful about what inflection you used in public. Because whenever you called Jack "sir" in private, you loaded it with as much innuendo as possible.

"On your back, agent," Jack said, ignoring your jibe. "I know it's hard to get off my dick, but I'll have it back inside you soon enough."

Your cheeks heated up and crawled off Jack's lap, teeth worrying at your bottom lip as you pulled yourself off of him. You rolled onto your back, eyes widening when you saw the thick streams of cum draining out of you.

"Don't worry, baby. There's plenty more where that came from, and I'll be generous with you." Jack leaned over you, his face flushed, eyes fever bright. He cupped your face, kissing you hard, tongue curling against yours, teeth grazing your lips. His skin glistened with a thin sheen of sweat and he radiated warmth.

"I won't last if you're going to go that hard again," you murmured.

"You don't have to last. Gabe's here too. I just want to mess you up tonight, agent. And with my stamina, you don't stand a chance. You don't have to go all night long, you just have to take it till I've decided you've had enough." His smile was harsh, and you rolled your eyes.

"You're just insatiable-" you managed to get out and were rewarded with a sharp bite on the shoulder. You squealed and he laughed in your ear.

"You were a pain in my ass, so I'm going to fuck you silly. Seems like a fair trade." He lifted your legs over his elbows. "Status, agent?"

"Green," you said, breath catching as a calloused finger traced your slit. Jack pressed a kiss to your belly. He cupped your ass, raising your hips.

"It's a good thing you're pretty, agent. I normally administer harsher punishments for insubordination. You keep up the attitude and you can report to my office at 0600 tomorrow morning. I'll give you something to be sore about." He said in low tones, sounding more like your CO than the man who'd just made you come all over his floor.

You still shivered at the timbre of his voice. "Is this how it would have gone if you got me alone right after Belfast?"

"Probably." Jack snapped his hips forward and you fell back against the mats as he pushed inside you. He gritted his teeth and your eyes fluttered shut as you tried to adjust to him again. He made you ache, his fullness and heat throbbing between your thighs. You arched off the ground as he worked himself in.

"Goddamnit, agent. How the hell did you get tighter after I fucked you open?"

"You're used to anal. Vaginas work differently," you said, not a little smug.

He snarled and buried himself all the way inside you. You dropped your head against the mats, grateful for the padding. They were actually a lot more comfortable than the cheap carpet.

"Speaking of which, can't do that to my ass without prep, OK? I'm not going to be able to
"Shut up, sweetheart," he said softly, and you watched him pull out, cock shiny with your fluids. "You talk like I don't know what I'm doing. Now the only things I want to hear out of your mouth are "please, sir," or, "thank you, sir," or "I can't take any more, please have mercy, sir." He kept the slow hard strokes, eyes on your face.

"Is that an order?"

"You really going to sass me right now? Because I can stop..." He pulled all the way out, cockhead lightly bumping against your clit, because he was a goddamn tease.

"Please, Jack," you panted. He grinned down at you, sweaty blonde hair falling in his face.

"Nuh-uh," he said with a headshake. "That's not how you ask."

You bit your lip and rocked back against him, feeling him slip between your thighs. You ground against his hips and he groaned, hands kneading your ass cheeks.

"Please, sir," you moaned, licking your lips. "I'll be in your office tomorrow. I'll even dress up-"

"Is that so?" Jack's voice dropped an octave. He pushed his hair out of his face, his gaze piercing.

You nodded rapidly. "Just...maybe not at 0600 hours, sir. Not with how you're looking at me right now."

"That is...acceptable, agent." Jack's voice came out strained. He slid back inside you, and you sighed in contentment.

"Thank you, sir."

A shadow fell across you, and your eyes widened as Gabriel settled down beside you, naked. He fisted his cock, slowly stroking it while he watched Jack thrust inside you.

"Do you want a turn?" Jack asked.

"I'll watch, for now." Gabriel grinned at you both. "You two are just too damn entertaining..."

You had accidentally punctured the mats with your left hand, your metal fingers digging too hard into the foam. Jack stroked your forehead as you lay sprawled against the ground, your knees jelly.

"Let's get you cleaned up," he said, nuzzling your throat.

"I can nap here," you said sleepily. "It's comfortable."

"Nah, going to rail Gabe next. You won't get much sleeping done," Jack chuckled and you
struggled to keep your eyes open. He picked you up, looking unbearably smug. But you were too tired to care. "Are you really going to come to by the office for me tomorrow?"

"Mmm, yeah. I'll help you with paperwork," you said as he set you down in the shower. Gabriel lingered in your periphery, but still seemed more interested in watching you and Jack than joining in.

"I'd like that," Jack said, turning on the water. He lathered you up, being thorough to the point of ridiculousness. You almost kicked him when he tried to soap between your toes. But he caught your leg and kissed you inner thigh. "Behave, sweetheart. Unless you want me to fuck you against the wall."

You gave short laugh. "I've got no energy left."

"I can do all the work. You can just cheer for me," Jack laughed, helping you rinse off.

"We're good now, yes?" You asked after a moment.

"Yeah, we're good," he said, touching his forehead to yours.

"OK," you sighed in relief.

"We were good before I actually started undressing you," Jack added as he shut off the water and helped Gabriel towel you off. "I just wasn't going to talk about it while balls deep inside you."

"I figured," you said dryly. "But checking on it anyway. You owe me a new shirt and a new negligee."

"I'll get you a whole new wardrobe, just make sure you show up in my office tomorrow."

Your orchid sat blooming on the sink, next to the toothbrushes, its lavender petals plush and vibrant, the leaves a glossy green. You glanced at Jack for a moment, realizing it was doing better with him than in your room.

"It's doing fine. Ana gave him some pointers," Gabriel said, when he noticed your gaze.

"Thanks," you told Jack. "I think it likes you better."

"You're welcome." Jack kissed you, looking very pleased with himself.

You limped to the bed, unable to get Jack to stop fluffing your hair with the towel. Gabriel set up the emitter and Jack tucked you in.

"I told you it was going to be fine," Gabriel rumbled in your ear.

You nodded, eyes drooping shut as you heard Gabriel swear and Jack chuckle. Jack embraced Gabriel from behind, before pushing him onto the bed beside you. It was a shame you were so tired. Maybe next time...
So I bombed the interview. Which is OK. I've mopped up my ego, had some cake, and mapped out where I went wrong. (Spoiler: I panicked and my charisma took a -10 penalty). But there are plenty of jobs in that city and I'm getting ready to weed through them and apply. I do appreciate all the good wishes though. You guys are great. Your comments give me life, and I'm not ashamed to say that I've had some rough writing days and after reading the thoughtful things you post, I'm like "Yeah! I'll write more!"
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

A day in the Strike Commander's office.

Chapter Notes

Mamimi decided to jump on the "what if they had kids together" headcanon and ride it into the sunset. I admit, that is kind of terrifying, given Lucky has just gotten comfortable with the idea of having plants and she knows she isn't around enough to take care of a pet. Though there are some pet subplots coming.

Lucky with Gabriel's daughter and Jack's son
Gabriel's daughter as an adult

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You awoke to Jack's alarm going off, your face pressed to his chest. He lay between you and Gabriel, groaning as he vainly reached for the nightstand.

"Hit snooze, Gabe," Jack muttered.

"You'll oversleep," Gabriel said gruffly, but the beeping stopped.

"Athena?"

"Yes, Strike Commander?"

"Do I have any meetings before nine?"

"No, Strike Commander."

"Then let me sleep till eight, OK?" Jack tightened his grip around your waist. "You still coming in today, Lucky?"


Gabriel just laughed, giving Jack a loud kiss. "You two are ridiculous."

You made a quick stop at the cafeteria for breakfast. You'd get coffee for you and Jack out of Gabriel's office before you went up. The cafeteria coffee was passable if you liked tarry sludge or had no taste buds. It was potent as hell, and you suspected someone was spiking it with a turbo-
charged experimental stimulant, so you only drank it in emergencies. And to be honest, Jack didn't need *that* much caffeine.

Once in your room, you were tempted to change into the Assassin Butler outfit, and while it was still cool as hell, it didn't quite suit your plans. You already had an outfit in mind, and you had Captain Amari to thank for ever so casually picking it out. When Amélie purchased the outfit, along with way too many other pieces, they had just seemed like more articles of flattering clothing to improve on your functional, but not fashionable, wardrobe. Now you were left wondering if Captain Amari had known *exactly* what she was recommending.

...Well, shit. Given how well she knew Jack and Gabriel, of course, she knew what she was doing.

Damn, you were slow. How much of this new wardrobe was tailored to...entice Jack and Gabriel? You rested your face in your palm. Not all of it. But enough.

Muttering under your breath, you fixed the garter belt, the flesh-toned stockings not quite concealing the scarring on your left leg. Whatever, everyone had seen your scars by now. You had nothing to hide. The black back seam made it easier to orient the hosiery correctly, but Amélie swore up and down that it was sexy. You just shrugged and took her word for it. She was the expert on the subject.

The fitted black pencil skirt went to your knees, but the back slit was just high enough to give you a decent range of motion. You'd tear it if you had to fight in it, but it would do for walking across the Overwatch grounds.

The white collared shirt had a lacy ruffled trim along the top few buttons. It was not something you would have chosen, but Captain Amari claimed it was flattering. She wasn't lying. It was also too transparent to wear with just a bra. You could put on a camisole, but you weren't exactly aiming for modesty.

The blazer matched the skirt, and it buttoned at just the right level to emphasize the ruffles of the shirt. You'd seen some very ugly skirt suits in your day, but this one cut a fashionable silhouette. Both Captain Amari and Amélie had impeccable taste. You fastened the ankle strap on your three inch black heels. Amélie had picked them out, saying that ballroom dancers used them and they were far more comfortable and secure than they looked.

You stood, taking an experimental step. She wasn't wrong, though you didn't want to ever fight in them. On a whim, you put in the earrings Jack gave you for Christmas and went in the bathroom to finish up your makeup. Amélie had recommended "bold" and "classic" looks with this outfit. And while that day had been trying, you had been paying attention. You chose black mascara, eyebrow pencil slightly darker than your natural color, and a dark shade of red lipstick that wasn't entirely professional. It wasn't blatantly sexual, but it was pushing the boundaries.

You put your hair back in a professional, if restrained style that required pins and some product you'd "borrowed" from your lovers' bathrooms. Taking a look in the mirror, you were slightly surprised, not that you looked good, but that you managed to appear both professional and dangerous in such a polished manner. You pulled on your leather gloves, feeling like a very well-dressed assassin.

Maybe Amélie and Captain Amari were onto something.
You stopped by the office to pick up decent coffee, and Jesse choked on his drink when
you walked in. Gabriel wasn't there and you were slightly disappointed that you didn't get to
showoff your new outfit, considering he'd been so intrigued in the first place.

"...You uh...you got some kind of event today?" Jesse patted at his face with a napkin.

"Just helping Jack out with some office work." You kept your face blank, but you knew you
weren't fooling Jesse.

"Is that what they call it nowadays, honeycakes?"

"I guess you wouldn't know," you said dryly.

Jesse dropped his head sighing heavily. "You know, you don't have to rub my nose in it, sugarpie."

"...Yeah, you're right. Sorry." You made coffee and filled up two travel mugs, adding
plenty of sugar to Jack's. You carried a black leather briefcase that locked, instead of a purse.
"You talk to her about...things yet?"

"Yeah." Jesse gave a half-hearted shrug. "She needs time to think it over. Still says she's too
old, that rank and abuse of power are issues, that she has to focus on work and her daughter... I ain't
asking her to quit, Lucky. I'm certainly not trying to get between her and Fareeha. It feels like
maybe I'm not so important to her and really, why should I keep hanging on when she don't feel the
same way?"

"Maybe you shouldn't," you acknowledged. "You deserve to be cared about, Jesse. You
can't make Captain Amari do one thing or another, but you don't have to hang on if it's hurting you.
Just like you don't have to walk away if you're not ready. Unless she's told you to. Except, I'm
pretty sure if she told you to, you already would have."

"Yeah," Jesse said, dropping his hat over his eyes. "Would've come straight to you for
whiskey and waffles."

"Don't tell Ziv, but I've still got some maple syrup left. We can have whiskey and waffles
when you need it."

"Much obliged." Jesse flexed his fingers. "Maybe I'm just bad a love, Lucky. I mean, look
at me. Sure, I'm amazing in bed, but I don't have that kind of stable background that makes people
think I'll be good at commitment or making other people happy."

That fear was a familiar one. You weren't sure about stability or how good you were at
making other people happy. But you tried, and Jesse was trying too.

"We've all got rough edges, and you're a doll. You've been at this for as long as I've been
here. So I don't think you have issues with commitment; you're damn loyal. Besides, it's not you,
Jesse. I think if Captain Amari had doubts about your sincerity it never would have gotten this far."

He dipped his head in acknowledgement.

You paused. "Though if you're on the rebound, I think Shoal was interested. Diallo's asked
me a few times about your status. Tataryn too. Hell, you could hit on Hanzo and see what
happens." Probably outrage and tons of awkwardness, but it was a funny thought.
Jesse snorted. "Not in this lifetime, sugarpie. Not after what he did to Genji."

"Loyalty, see?"

"Ain't the same, sweetpea. But I do appreciate the sentiment."

You felt the eyes on you as you passed, but you took Amélie's advice, you led with your hips, with your shoulders back and your head held up high. Your face was all business, though you kept your expression in check, shying away from being overtly threatening. Yes, you were attractive, but you were also clever, dangerous, and prone to stabbing enemies in the neck. There was no point in hiding it any more. Those Overwatch killjoys could suck it.

Except when you actually made eye contact, it wasn't scorn or hostility on their faces. There was fear and discomfort on some, but one younger rookie in combat blues had to look away, blushing a fierce shade of crimson. A few of the cockier ones winked at you and saluted, their looks admiring, but their behavior respectful.

...Well, they had all seen you almost-naked and stabbing a cyborg. Apparently, it wasn't just Jack, Gabriel, and Tataryn who were turned on by homicidal women.

It was a stark contrast to what people were saying when you first arrived.

So you walked tall, and didn't hesitate to key in the code to Jack's office. The door opened and you strode in. Strike Commander Morrison sat at his desk, posture tight, hands clasped under his chin as he glared at his computer screen. He was in full gear, and wasn't that overkill if he just had paperwork to do?

"It's about ti-" Jack trailed off as he looked up, his pupils widening as he took in your appearance. His nostrils flared, and he inclined his head back, sitting with his legs spread. "You're later than I expected, Agent Strike."

Oh, was that how it was going to be?

"Sorry, sir. Rough night," you said, deadpan demeanor locked in.

"I don't need to hear your excuses, agent," he rumbled, eyes still traveling up and down your form. "And I certainly don't care what you get up to in your free time. But I hope you don't have plans for the evening, because we have a lot of ground to cover. It's going to be a late night." His voice was gruff and while you caught plenty of innuendo in the words, his delivery remained firm verging on harsh.

"As you say, sir." You set the coffee on the desk.

He nodded curtly. "I've forwarded the bulk of the black ops post-mission reports to you. Prioritize them for me. Summarize anything Routine and lower. The shorter the better."

Well, that was irritating. The work was necessary, and something Athena or even Jesse could do, though you understood why the Strike Commander might be hesitant to make the AI his personal assistant.
You did not sit directly across from him. Instead you took a seat at one of the chairs against the wall. You crossed your legs, not missing Jack's sharp intake of breath as your skirt rode up just high enough to show off the lacy tops of your stockings. Ignoring him, you opened your briefcase, pulling out your tablet, and closed the case quickly, before Jack could see the contents.

Normally you didn't use a stylus, you didn't need to, but you rolled one between your fingers, absently resting it against your lips. Jack didn't say a word, and if he wanted to play like this, that was fine. You would focus on the paperwork first.

You focused on the screen in front of you, even though you could feel Jack's eyes on you. The work was tedious, but Jack actually needed the help, and you had offered. Though maybe this wasn't what you had in mind. Still, you were an old hand at sorting reports, and it did not take you very long to forward the important ones to him.

"Agent, why is this marked "Priority?" Jack stood and stalked over to you. He loomed over you, frown severe,

You looked up at him, chin raised. His gaze flicked to the column of your neck and then down to your swell of your breasts. You smiled politely.

He leaned over, close enough that you got a whiff of his cologne. "Since when was a scavenging-retrieval mission "Priority?" The agent in question didn't even locate anything particularly interesting."

"The agent in question is Vo Min, yes that one. And she nearly caused an international incident involving some of the salvage and her penchant for solving every problem with high-powered explosives. Personally, I don't blame Vo. She has a highly specialized skill set and probably shouldn't have been let off leash alone. The issue isn't the mission, the issue is mending fences in Finland. Captain Amari already made a trip out there, but I thought you should be aware of the implications."

Jack narrowed his eyes at you. "You failed to include that summary."

"But you told me to summarize anything lower than-"

"I didn't ask for you backtalk, agent, or your excuses. I realize Blackwatch doesn't maintain the same level of discipline as Overwatch, and I will be taking Commander Reyes to task for that. But apparently I'll have to start with you. On your feet, agent."

You were breathing harder now, giving Jack a dark look.

"Did I not make myself clear? Get up, now."

You set your tablet aside, and stood, Jack's face only inches from yours, heat radiating from his body. He did not back up, instead standing over you, a slight sneer marring his features.

"Get over there." He jerked his head at the desk. "Palms flat on the desk."

You obeyed, wiggling your hips as you bent over. You glanced up at him over your shoulder.

Jack gave you a humorless smile. "Only putting forth the bare minimum, I see. It's that kind of attitude that pisses me off, agent. You really need to work on giving it your all."

You glared up at him.
He came up behind you, gloved hand resting on your low back. "Don't like that? Too bad. Down, girl." He pushed you flat against the desk, the metal cool against your cheek. His other hand went lower, stroking your hips and you squirmed. "Cute outfit, agent. Not regulation, but you like to flaunt the rules, don't you? That takes a lot of nerve, coming right into the Strike Commander's office, dressed like this. It's almost like you're determined to keep on pushing me."

"This is professional business attire, sir. I'm afraid I don't see what your problem is," you said, struggling to keep your voice even.

His hand rested on the curve of your ass and your eyes fluttered shut. "Oh, your skirt might be long enough, but just what are you wearing underneath?" He hiked your skirt up, fingers tracing the tops of your stockings. "Are you going to tell me this is professional, agent? Because I'm going to have to inquire about what kind of activities your profession entails." He was practically growling in your ear.

"Don't like it, don't look," you panted.

"Completely unrepentant. Honestly, Agent Strike. What am I going to do with you?" Jack let your skirt fall back down. He rounded his desk, opening up a drawer. You caught sight of a familiar bottle of lube and a pretty purple egg vibrator. Your eyes widened as he picked it up. Did he just normally keep that in there? Or was he already planning on doing this today?

You swallowed roughly, as he came back around, hand resting on your ass.

"Spread your legs, agent."

Biting your lip, you obeyed, eyes fluttering shut as he shoved your skirt up around your hips.

"These definitely aren't regulation," Jack muttered, as his bare fingers stroked the crotch of your lacy black panties. "I realize they're pretty, agent, so I guess you can keep them on, for now."

You whined softly as he kept stroking you through your panties. "Sir-"

His blunt fingers pushed the fabric aside and he blew gently on your slit. "Of course you're already wet," he scoffed. "You're completely shameless."

You moaned softly as his fingertips parted your folds. "Sorry, sir-"


You rested your weight on the desk, breathing hard as you felt his tongue glide against your pussy lips. "Oh god."

Jack's laugh was mean. "Just a few touches and I have you mewling. Making you beg won't take any time at all. I'm really not impressed by Blackwatch discipline, agent. You're going to have to do much better than that." He rubbed the silicone toy against you and your legs shook. It wasn't on, but you were very aware that he could start the motor at any moment.

Once it was slippery enough, he pushed it inside you.

"Look at that greedy cunt just swallowing it up. Well, agent, you've gotten past the first hurdle." He stood, wiping his slick fingers on the backs of your thighs. "What are you just laying there for? Get back to work."

You shivered, smoothing your skirt back down as you straightened up. Jack stood behind
you, stance rigid as he watched you put yourself back together. Hands balled in fists by his side, his gaze was positively icy, his erect cock clearly outlined against his combat pants. It was good to see that he was affected too.

"Open," he ordered.

You parted your lips and he offered you his fingers, still damp with your juices.

"Clean up your mess, agent."

You licked his fingers, watching his jaw clench with every stroke. Yeah, Jack was a shit and you were going to enjoy paying him back.

"Status, agent?"

"Green, sir," you sighed as he withdrew his fingers.

"Then get back to work," he growled, stalking back to his desk.

"Lucky Lady! You look so lovely!" Reinhardt boomed as he entered the office. You sat in your chair, pretending to ignore Jack as you sorted through the reports. You were still only summarizing the Routine level ones. If Jack wanted to hit you with trumped up accusations, nothing you did would matter. So you just stuck to the original instructions.

The low key vibrations began right as Reinhardt stomped in, his greeting echoing in the office.

"Hello Rein," you said, waving. Your core clenched as the vibrations grew stronger and you fought the urge to glare at Jack.

"Indoor voice, Reinhardt," Jack sighed, shaking his head. "I've got a headache, so we have to keep the meeting short."

Reinhardt gave you a long look, his eyes darting between you and Jack. "You seem tense, Lucky. Is everything all right?"

"Jack dumped a bunch of paperwork on me. It's all the irritating minutiae that he needs to know but doesn't want to handle."

Reinhardt nodded sympathetically and you bit your lip as the egg shook inside you.

"She volunteered for this," Jack said dryly. "So I don't know what she's complaining about."

"Jack, I realize you need the help and she offered, but this is not romantic. This not how you show your lover that you appreciate her," Reinhardt said, shaking his head. "Making her do your paperwork...Americans."

Jack gave you both a dirty look.

You choked on a laugh, and the egg briefly stopped before speeding up with a vengeance. Jerking forward, you caught yourself, breathing unsteady.
"Everything all right, Lucky?" Reinhardt asked with concern.

Your legs were crossed, and that just increased your sensitivity. But you couldn't exactly shift positions with Reinhardt standing right there.

"Just tired," you admitted, trying not to squirm. "It's been a busy week."

Reinhardt nodded slowly, like he knew something was off, but he was too polite to ask. "Well, I won't keep you. She can be in here while we discuss business, yes Jack?"

Jack nodded. "She's cleared."

Reinhardt pulled up a chair, his back to you while you tried to focus on the work in front of you. But the motor in the sex toy kept running. Thankfully, it was quiet, but it moved in a pattern, strong and hard, then light and teasing, then pulsing back harder than before. It continued and you ground your teeth, willing yourself to be silent. You weren't listening to Jack and Reinhardt, and you could not actually focus on reading the reports any more. You just went through the motions, conscious of Jack's eyes on you, a satisfied smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"It was good seeing you, Lucky," Reinhardt said, as he rose to leave. "Maybe you should consider transitioning to the Overwatch side. You have a flair for dramatic television appearances and if you dressed like that..."

"My media appearances will never top "Eichenwalde: Nach Einer Wahren Begebenheit."

So what's the point?"

Reinhardt flashed you a delighted smile. "You saw it?!"

You nodded vigorously. "It was...indescribable."

"It did not really happen that way," he said, giving you a conspiratorial wink.

"You'll have to tell me the real story some other day," you said, breath catching as Jack turned up the power on the egg.

"Reinhardt, we need to get back to work," Jack said, sounding a tad exasperated.

"Oh, yes," Reinhardt shook his head. "That's what he wants to do?" He muttered something wearily in German, and sauntered out of the office.

You waited for the door to shut before uncrossing your legs, parting your thighs. You glanced over at Jack, expecting him to be watching you smugly. Instead, he was on his feet, eyes icy, remote in hand.

"Come here, agent." His voice was rough and dangerously quiet.

"I thought you needed me to work on-"

The vibrator rattled inside you, humming against your inner walls. You doubled over, panting.

"I'm going to keep turning it up. You might want to walk over here now, unless you'd prefer to crawl."

You put your work aside and stood on shaky legs. It was only a few steps, but the edge in Jack's smile sharpened as the power in the little toy increased. You panted as you reached his
desk, hands resting flat on the metal surface.

"Get on the desk," Jack ordered, words clipped. "On all fours."

You climbed on top, eyes squeezed shut as the toy shifted inside you.

"You're really pushing it, agent. Never realized you were such a tease."

"You're one to talk...sir." Your thighs shook as Jack tilted your chin up.

"I didn't ask for your opinion, agent." Jack released you and walked behind you, his fingers tracing the seam of your stockings. Your skirt went back up and he yanked your panties down around your knees.

"You put some thought into this, agent. You're wearing your panties over your stockings, almost like you expected them to come off." Jack's warm hands kneaded your ass and you moaned the toy sped up. "Did you think it would be a good idea to come here and tease me, agent? Did you think there wouldn't be consequences? I should make you accompany me while I do my rounds. See how long you can last with that vibrator running inside you."

"You'll have a difficult time walking around with that prominent hard-on...sir," you hissed.

"I have a few ideas on how to take care of that." Jack pushed a finger past your lower lips and you dropped your head, whimpering as he brushed up against the toy. "You're dripping all over my desk, agent," Jack murmured. "Such a sloppy pussy." He curled his fingers and your breathing grew ragged. "Still a pretty picture though. Is that why you came here dressed like this, agent? Did you want your commander to fuck you? Or did you just plan on provoking me?"

You clutched the edge of his desk, head hanging down while he withdrew his fingers.

He ran his hands down your flank, fingers tensing and you bit back a squeal as he slapped your ass. "I asked you a question, agent."

"Thought you'd like it, sir. Was I wrong?"

Jack gave a humorless laugh. "I like it too much, agent." His fingers stroked your thighs before he landed another blow that was more sound than force. "Well agent, as entertaining as it would be to have you come all over my desk, I think you should finish what you started. Get on your knees."

He sat down in his chair, legs spread wide. He held the remote in one hand, his chin resting on his other fist.

You slid off the desk, kneeling between his thighs. Jack running his thumb across your cheeks. "Your makeup is nice today, agent. It's going to be a pleasure messing it up. I can't wait to see your lipstick rubbed off on my cock."


Jack just flashed you a tight smile. "Go on agent, wrap those pretty lips around me. You don't get to come till I do." The vibrator whirred inside of you, stirring you up, but only holding you on edge. It was quiet, thankfully. You just had to keep yourself in check.

You unfastened his belt, your fingers digging into his thighs. Jack groaned as you carefully untucked his cock. "Say what you like about my underwear, sir, but at least I wore some."
"You know agent, the only thing I want to hear out of your smart mouth is the sound of you slurping on my cock."

Oh yes, payback was going to be so much fun. Jack’s cockhead dripped pearly fluid and you ran your tongue along the underside, palming his balls in your gloved hand, and Jack hissed. Grinning, you licked the head, gradually taking a few inches in your mouth.

"You don't want to keep teasing me, agent."

You just sucked on the crown, your eyes meeting his blue ones. Jack bit his lower lip, his expression harsh. He shook his head at you, fisting your hair, and he thrust his hips forward, pushing himself in to the base.

Gagging, you forced yourself to relax, as your eyes watered. Breathing heavy, Jack's thighs shook. Swearing, he tilted his head back. "Tap if it's too much, agent."

You rolled your eyes and began bobbing your head, conscious of Jack's grip on your hair. He didn't let you set the pace, alternately holding you in place with your hair and thrusting his cock till your nose was pressed against him. The vibrator buzzed inside you the entire time and you squeezed your thighs together.

"You've been practicing. You do this for Commander Reyes too? Do you let him throat fuck you before he bends you over his desk?" Jack's voice wavered. He pushed hard, not caring that his shaft scraped lightly against your teeth. "Damn, that's hot, sweetheart. Want to walk in on that some time."

Jack began to rock his hips faster, making it difficult to breathe. You tried to keep up, but his length kept hitting the back of your throat too hard. You tapped and Jack immediately released you, letting you settle back on your knees. You coughed, sucking in air. Your lipstick was smeared along his shaft. You blinked and eyes damp, and hoped your mascara was as "waterproof" as advertised.

"You all right?" Jack asked, studying your face.

"We actually work in Commander Reyes' office, sir," you said, voice uneven.

Jack gave you a hard look. "You just don't know when to quit, do you agent? Guess I'll have to keep using that smart mouth of yours. The real question is are you going to swallow or should I paint that pretty face of yours with my cum?"

"I'd prefer if you didn't mess up my suit, sir," you murmured. "Not if you want me to wear it again..."

"Message received, agent," Jack said dryly. "Now get back to work." The toy inside you began to rumble harder and you braced yourself against Jack's knees, hips shaking. "And if I catch you touching that greedy pussy, I'm going to put you over my knee and ensure you can't sit down for the rest of the day."

Obediently, you took him back in your mouth, his cock still coated in your saliva. He went slower this time, letting you adjust.

Jack groaned as you wrapped one hand around the base, squeezing and pumping while you worked the top half in your mouth. Your other hand lightly massaged his balls. It took some coordination to keep it neat, especially since you were drooling down his shaft.
"That's it, sweetheart. Fuck, I still remember the last time you did this. We'll call Gabe, later. Let him listen in. He'll make it up here this time-" Jack's voice grew shakier, his breathing ragged. "He hasn't seen this outfit yet, has he? Because papi would already be here, rawing that needy cunt while you choke on me-"

With a harsh groan, Jack's eyes closed, and he gave two more hard strokes as his cock started to twitch. You opened as wide, swallowing as fast as you could as his cum flooded your throat. Some of it dribbled down your chin and you cupped your hands, catching the excess as you let Jack fall out of your mouth.

He watched you through half lidded eyes as you slurped it off your gloves, his breath hitching. "Goddamnit, baby. You're killing me." You bit the fingers of your gloves, slowly removing them, because, if it was going to get messier, you didn't want to worry about cleaning the leather. The vibrator hummed insistently, but he had turned down the power. "Come here so I can give you your reward-"

A knock sounded and then the keypad chimed as someone began to input their entry code. Swearing, Jack nudged you under his desk, scooting his chair in before he had a chance to fasten his pants.

The door opened and a pair of heels clicked against the floor.

"It's happened again, Jack. I know you said that it's probably not a big deal because Athena is monitoring any outgoing traffic, and there's no evidence of an external data breach or even an upload, but I really don't like the implications."

You blinked, recognizing Angela's voice immediately. The door clicked shut behind her. Jack rolled his chair forward, and you had to scrunch up under the desk, your arms resting on Jack's thighs, his softening cock right under your nose. You licked it, experimentally, and were rewarded by him stiffening against you with a sharp intake of breath.

"I know, it's alarming," Angela said, mistaking his reaction. "Because if it's not external, someone in my division is snooping in things that they have no business in...and I really don't want to get Commander Reyes involved. Not that Gabriel is bad at his job, but he will terrorize my staff, bother my patients, disrupt my infirmary... And I'm not entirely certain this situation warrants his attention, yet."

"What kind of data was accessed this time, Angela?" You listened, and debated jerking Jack off. No, that would be too loud. You'd have to be discrete while playing with your boss's cock under the desk. Grinning, you opened your mouth. He was easier to take when soft, and you laved the salty skin. The desk creaked, and Jack gripped the edge.

"Basic medical records, for both Overwatch and Blackwatch agents, so I can't tell if they were looking for something in particular. Winston installed higher security on critical personnel files so you and others in leadership weren't affected, but I'm not sure how long that's going to hold. Not to mention, something tried to brute force the crypto on Agent Lao's files. Nothing on Candle Arc, but her pre-captivity ones."

Jack winced as your metal fingers dug into his thigh. You rubbed the spot apologetically.

"I see," he said, voice stern.

"Winston and Agent Mihret say both Genji and Lucky's files were targeted as well, but I keep those on a different server, for obvious reasons."
"What action do you want me to take, Angela? Because I would have put Gabe on this one already. He can farm it out if you prefer."

You listened, one hand idly massaging Jack's thigh as you lazily bobbed up and down on his cock.

"That should work. Just pick someone who won't draw as much attention," Angela said. "Genji, Agent Lacroix, Agent McCree, Agent Strike. They're all black ops and good at it, but they won't cause the same furor if they hang around the infirmary. Though I am personally requesting you do not let Agent Tataryn handle this. While I am not questioning his investigatory skills, he needs to sit through another one hundred hours of workplace harassment training seminars before I let him around the new nurses. That or I could chemically castrate him - temporarily of course. Sorry. I am... stressed. I am not complaining about Agent Tataryn. Formally, anyway."

Jack blew out a long breath, sounding terribly impatient. Fortunately, Angela seemed too focused on the potential data breach to notice.

Even while you were sucking off Jack, your mind connected the dots, and you did not like the picture they formed. It was all theory, and there was nothing you could do about it under the goddamn desk, so you just kept on tonguing Jack. It was better than a stress ball, because you could feel him struggling to keep his reactions under wraps. The vibrator still hummed lightly against your walls, but you were easily distracted by tormenting Jack.

"Are you all right, Jack? You're looking a little flushed."

"It's hot in here," he muttered. "I'll take off my coat in a minute."

You swirled your tongue around him and smirked when he grunted uncomfortably.

"Are you staying hydrated? I know your metabolism defies science and that you don't need someone to fuss over you," Angela said, tone sardonic. "But I have to break it to you, I've seen your medical records, and you're still human."

Very human and very warm in your mouth.

"You're hilarious, doctor. I'll talk to Gabe about it. You just keep monitoring the situation." The strain in his voice grew. "Winston and Agent Mihret have already submitted their reports. I'll take a look at it and have something in the works by tomorrow."

"...All right, Jack. Are you sure I can't get you anything? You sound funny." Her tone was accusatory and you had to really work not to giggle with your mouth full.

"I'm actually kind of tired. I was planning on taking a short nap right before you came in."

"Ohhh, sorry." The chair creaked as she rose. "Well, get some rest, Jack. We need you in prime condition."

"Thanks, Angela," Jack said. And you waited as the door opened, then clicked shut.

Jack gave a soft sigh of relief before his chair rolled backward, his fully-erect cock slipping out of your mouth. He hauled you out from under the desk, eyes hard, teeth gritted.

"You sneaky little bitch," Jack growled, pushing you back against his desk. "Enjoyed that, did you?"
"You didn't...sir?" You smirked up at him and he dragged you against him, capturing your mouth with his. He nipped at your lips, tongue slipping across yours. You moaned softly as he cupped your breasts.

You quickly stripped off your blazer, your lacy black bra visible underneath the white shirt. Jack groaned, his cock twitching against your thighs.

"Sorry, sir. I thought you would have liked it," you said, not sounding the least bit sincere.

"Don't apologize yet, baby." He spun you around, bending you over his desk. Make sure you're damn good and sorry before you even think about it."

"Fuck you, Jack," you said, cheerfully. "I'm not sorry, you liked every second of it, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"Good," he said. "Because that's going to make this all the more fun. I should let you suffer, sweetheart," Jack said, voice rough. "You don't deserve any relief from me." He hiked your skirt up and pushed your panties down. "You've made quite the mess, agent."

You panted against the desk as his thick fingers slid into your pussy, and he slowly dragged the vibrator out.

"I can feel you clenching, honey. Like your body doesn't want to give up the toy. Don't worry, I'm about to give you something much better."

He shut it off and set it on the desk right in your line of sight, the egg coated in your slickness. You squirmed as you felt him press against you.

"Is this what you wanted, agent?"

"Yes, sir." You whined as he tangled his fingers in your hair and pushed inside you, his length stretching you as it dragged against your sensitive walls. "Yes, sir. Oh fuck, this is exactly what I wanted."

Jack's thighs slapped against your ass and you rested your face on your forearms, your legs spread wide. He buried himself inside your heat, his cock stroking that sensitive spot that made your eyes roll back in your head.

You rocked your hips, pushing against him, trying to get him to speed up.

"Not yet," he said in your ear, his mouth traveling down your neck. "One more thing to do."

You blinked as he picked up the phone, dialed a number, and switched it to speaker.

"Reyes," Gabriel rumbled.

"Hi Gabe," Jack said, his tone light. Then he pulled out and slammed his hips into you, one hand on the back of your neck, keeping you down.

You gasped sharply, a whine escaping the back of your throat.

"What was that?" Gabriel asked, voice dropping even lower.

"Tell papi "hi," sweetheart. You're on speaker, Gabe," Jack said, grunting as he kept up the hard strokes.
"...No. Go get those files. Yeah, out. Get me some coffee too. Yeah, cafeteria's fine. Your coffee still tastes like raw sewage." Papers shuffled and then the door slammed. "Sorry, had to boot the kid." Gabriel's rich voice made you clench harder around Jack. "Now what are you two up to?"

"Just have our favorite girl bent over my desk. Come on, Lucky, weren't you full of smart ass comments a minute ago?" You gave a soft moan as he began to rub your clit. "Guess not, I must've knocked'em out of her with my cock. Come on, let papi hear you."

"Hi papi," you whimpered, Jack's cock hitting deep inside you.

Gabriel gave a low chuckle. "I thought you were working today, baby."

"Working my last nerve is more like it," Jack said tautly. "Showed up all dressed up in a tight little skirt and fancy lingerie. You would've like it. Got her lipstick all over my cock, but she still looks so pretty. That's it baby, shake that ass." He canted his hips, rolling them at a sharper angle. You dug your fingers into his desk, panting.

"Jack's...mean," you got out, having no choice but to ride out his thrusts.

"I don't know what she's talking about Gabe. The little sneak had the audacity to try to suck me off under my desk while Angela was in here." Jack's tone was harsh.

"Is that so? Gabriel purred. "Why don't you ever do that for me, baby?"

"It was revenge. Jack's made me sit here for over an hour with a toy inside me," you panted. "Wouldn't touch me, wouldn't let me come."

"So what I'm hearing is that you two are both troublemakers," Gabriel rasped. You weren't sure if he was touching himself. You hoped not. He needed to come over here and do something. "What's she wearing? Been hearing she looked nice."

"Stockings. Lots of lace. Her skirt up around her waist." Jack growled as he sped up. "Already watched her swallow a load, so I'm going to outlast her now."

You quivered as he pounded you, using you hard. He was right, you were close to the edge and you could last.

"She's so wet, Gabe. You know how she feels, silky and hot inside. Always looks so good with our cum dripping down her legs. Might just send her back to you like that."

Tension wrapped around your core and you whined softly. "Jack-

"Yeah, sweetheart?" Electricity sparked in your spine as he nibbled on the back of your neck.

"I'm so close."

"I know," he said smugly, and slowed down, his fingers leaving your clit.

"Damnit, Jack!" You gave a cry of frustration and Gabriel laughed.

"You know, I'm only responding to "sir." In case you want to plead for mercy." His hand stayed on your neck and you couldn't move.

"Please fuck me harder, sir. Please let me come."
"What do you think, Gabe?"

"She sounds pretty desperate, Jack," Gabriel said, voice raw. "I know what I'd do if I were there but, I'm all the way across the building..."

"Please, sir-" you begged, bucking your hips. "I love it when you raw my pussy. I need you to fill me up..." Writhing underneath him, you clenched around him, doing your best to goad him into moving.

Jack groaned and started up again. His thrusts urging you on. "She looks so good like this, Gabe. Wanton and needy, her ass bouncing while I fuck her into my desk."

It didn't take long for him to wind you up again. Each stroke ratcheted the tension higher. And his nimble fingers continued to rub against your clit.

"Come on, agent. Let Commander Reyes hear you come all over my dick-"

Eyes squeezed shut, you shook as your muscles froze for one painful second, then you began to unravel, sobbing as liquid heat flooded your body and you came on the Strike Commander's desk.

Jack kept thrusting, one arm still holding you down, the other reaching up to squeeze your tits. You gave a weak moan and to your surprise, Jack pressed against you, his lips on your neck as he spatred inside you.

"You all right, hermosa?"

"He just came inside me, Gabriel," you said, voice shaky.

"Couldn't help it," Jack murmured, kissing your neck. "She looks so good like this, Gabe."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "You know, leaving you two alone is a recipe for disaster. I've got some actual work to wrap up, but I'll be over there as soon as I'm done."

"Mmm, see you soon," Jack sighed, and ended the call. "You OK, baby?" He nuzzled the back of your neck, embracing you from behind.

"Gotta get cleaned up, don't want to ruin this outfit," you muttered.

Jack chuckled. "You're going to want to lose the panties then." He pulled out and you swallowed roughly as his cum puddled on the floor beneath you, some of it staining your thighs and panties. He let go of you and you pulled off your underwear. To your surprise, Jack took them, balled them up, and slipped them into his pocket.

"Really?"

"I earned them," he said smugly, leaning over to kiss you. He got out a hand towel and began to clean you up. The office smelled heavily of musk, sweat, and sex, and you noted the "aromatherapy candles" on the shelves. Hmm.

Once he'd tucked himself back in his pants he sat in his chair and pulled you onto his lap, hands gentle as he stroked your mussed hair.

"Thank you, sweetheart. For the coffee, the help, and the roleplay. That was...really good."
He sighed happily. "Gabe share my fantasy with you?"

"Yeah, though you did too the other night..."

Jack chuckled. "Too rough?"

"Mmm, nah. Just give me a minute." Jack rested his head on your shoulder, rubbing your back.

"Want me to light the candles?"

"Probably a good idea. Athena has a candle protocol for my office, so it shouldn't trigger the fire alarms."

You rose, noting your shirt was now missing a few buttons and your skirt was wrinkled, but your clothes were otherwise intact. Jack slumped in his chair, a content smile on his lips and you sauntered over to your briefcase, because you only needed one thing out of it.

You picked it up, even as Jack's eyes closed. You slipped the item into your waistband, and lit the candles.

"You don't have any more of those fancy French cigarettes you get from Gérard, do you?" Jack asked.

"Let's get your coat off," you murmured and Jack stood, shrugging the overcoat off one arm. You worked it down, shaking your head, because Jack was making this too easy. You freed his left arm, and reached behind you, getting the cuffs off your waistband. Then you focused on his right arm, pretending to have trouble getting the sleeve off.

It was over in two quick motions. You clapped the four inch wide cuffs around his wrists and activated the magnetic lock.

"What the-?"

Smiling, you pushed him against the desk. "Safe word?"

"...You sneaky little bitch," Jack growled and flexed, trying to free himself, but the metal held.

"Learned my lesson last time. These are the omnic-grade ones. Too tight?"

"Lucky-" he growled, tone warning.

"Jackie," you purred.

"You've been planning this," he said slowly, realization sneaking up on him like you did. It wasn't fair to ambush him after sex, but then you were Blackwatch. You certainly didn't play fair.

"You like surprises." Laughing, you embraced him from behind, pressing kisses against his back, your hands rubbing his chest.

"Give me a safe word, Jack. Otherwise, I'll take them off."

There was a long pause.

"Kandahar," he said, voice thick. You stood back, admiring his skintight black shirt, the
straps of his holsters emphasizing his broad chest and immaculate musculature.

"You got a warning one?"

"No, I'm good till I'm not." Jack shuddered. "You know you're going to pay for this later, sweetheart."

"I don't mind," you admitted.

"You will. I'm going to-"

"I know you like to talk, Jackie, but this is my game. So don't make me gag you."

Jack snarled. You peeked at his face, already well acquainted with the icy expression as he fixed his eyes straight ahead at a point in the distance.

You stroked his hair, pleased that he obeyed you. He was so much stronger and quite a big bigger than you, and it gave you a heady thrill to command him. He was right, you would pay for it later, but that thought didn't bother you in the least.

"Turn around." Your voice was soft, but there was no mistaking the order.

Jack complied, glaring down at you as he flexed his shoulders.

"Too tight?" You asked.

"I'm fine," he said stiffly.

"On your knees, soldier," you said, tasting the word. It fit. Jack glowered at you, going down slowly, bending one leg at a time.

"You look good down there," you said, scooting the chair back. Thanks to the missing buttons, your shirt no longer fastened all the way up, so you draped his coat over your shoulders and sat down in his chair, one knee hooked over an armrest. You dragged one finger over your bare slit, stroking yourself a few times before you slipped one inside.

Kneeling in front of you, Jack's eyes followed your hands, his lips parting slightly as he watched you play with yourself in his chair, wearing his overcoat. While it was too big for you, you treated it like a blanket. It was still warm and smelled like him.

"Are you just going to sit there and tease me?" Jack rasped. He inclined his head back, stormy eyes on your face. His hair stuck up at odd angles, sweat-mussed.

"Is that how you ask for something, soldier?" You arched a brow at him.

To your surprise, he began to turn an attractive shade of pink. "No, ma'am," he said, gruffly. "Sorry, ma'am." Apparently, he liked that designation. You weren't sure about him addressing you as "ma'am," like he was a recruit, but you couldn't think of a better title.

You tilted your head to the side, expectantly.

Jack lowered his head kissing a trail up your inner thighs. "I love how you taste. May I please eat you till you come all over my face, ma'am?" He kept an earnest recruit inflection while staring up at you hungrily.

"Don't call me, "ma'am," soldier." You rolled your eyes. Because when you heard him say
it like that, you had to resist the urge to check the area for Captain Amari. And that kind of ruined the mood for you.


"I don't need a title," you said.

"Whatever you say, boss," Jack grinned.

"Stop talking," you scowled, draping your legs over his shoulders. You kicked off your shoes and crossed your ankles, breath quickening as Jack dipped his head. He went in hard, nose bumping against your clit as his tongue wiggled inside you. Your right hand gripped his hair and you rolled your hips, grinding against his face.

Jack did not have much leverage, but he made up for it with sheer enthusiasm and he had always been good with his mouth. Sitting in the Strike Commander's chair, wearing his coat, while he was on his knees, eagerly giving you head, made the experience all the more potent.

"That's it, soldier," you cooed, digging your stocking-clad heels into his back.

Jack redoubled his efforts, sucking on your clit while you squeezed your breasts, lightly pinching your nipples.

It would have been easier if he could use his hands, but you didn't mind watching him work for it. Jack didn't seem to need to come up for air. He just focused on consuming you, his tongue pressing hard on your clit, and it wasn't long before you tensed, your thighs squeezing his head as you came all over his face.

Jack drew back, panting, the lower half of his face smeared with your juices. He smiled smugly up at you and licked his lips. "You like that, boss?"

You leaned over and kissed him, mostly to shut him up. "Adequate, soldier," you said. "I guess you've earned some relief. Get up and bend over your desk."

Jack rose, cheeks flushed. He towered over you, biting his lower lip, pupils too big. He looked like he wanted to say something smart, but he swallowed the comment and obeyed, turning his head to watch you as you climbed out of his chair, legs still wobbly.

"Do you need a cushion? Your desk is awfully hard."

Jack grunted as you pushed him down against the metal surface, his ass in the air. "I can take it," he said.

For a moment, you were worried that he was just humoring you, that he didn't actually like what you were doing to him. But as you reached around to unfasten his pants, you felt his erection already straining against the fabric. You rubbed lightly, and his breath hitched, hips wiggling as he tried to get more friction.

"Did I say you could do that?" You laughed and slapped his ass.

Jack swore and you felt his cock twitch, already hot and leaking against your fingers. "I thought this was a reward," he groaned, desperation elongating his words. "Please, boss. You looked so good in my coat. Nearly came in my pants feeling you ride my face. I could do that all day..."
Your hands skimmed his bare hips and you opened his desk drawer pulling out the lube. Jack took a shaky breath. "You know you probably shouldn't use the egg inside me."

"I am very aware, soldier." That was a given. Anal toys needed to have an easy retrieval method. But you didn't need to borrow any toys for Jack. You had something else in mind. You poured a generous amount of lube into your hands. Your flesh one ghosted along his shaft as you pressed biting kisses along his spine.

Jack shivered against you, his breathing already ragged.

"What do you say, soldier?"

"Please," he breathed, and he tensed as your hand wrapped around his cock, your strokes smooth, languid, and far too light.

He thrust against you, groaning as his hips jerked and he tried in vain to get more friction, more stimulation, more attention.

"Stop that," you said coolly.


"You earned it."

"Because I messed you up earlier?" Jack said, sounding too pleased with himself.

"Obviously not enough, since I'm the one whose got you bent over, cuffed underneath me, and begging for release. Now hold still."

Your metal fingers traced his puckered hole, and he trembled slightly as you worked the lube against the opening.

"You can be rougher, boss. I can take it," he exhaled. "I know we go slow with you, but I like it hard and don't need nearly as much prep- damnit!" He swore as one digit slid inside him.

"I know, it's only one finger," you teased. "I've seen your ass swallow up Gabe's entire cock, and that thing is massive." You drawled the last word and Jack gave a strangled cry as you began to pump his cock at the same slow rhythm you moved your finger.

"More," he said softly. "Please."

You laughed, watching Jack's thighs tense. He rested his cheek on the desk, eyes watching you eagerly, tongue licking those pretty pink lips. He groaned under your touch, the filthy sound so very satisfying.

You worked a second finger in, scissoring them and Jack expression shifted to ecstatic, eyes closed, mouth gulping down air. Any words were lost to a chain of staccato breaths. Your right hand clasped his cock tighter. His passage was still snug and you went slowly. Curling your fingers, you pressed against his walls and found the spot that had him panting.

"That's it, oh fuck yes..." Jack whipped his head from side to side, hips moving of their own accord. "I can take another one, baby."

"So greedy. It's a good thing you beg so nicely." Your fingers were slick enough, but you stopped stroking his cock long enough to pour more lubricant onto your left hand. Your fingers
were smaller than Gabriel's but that was no excuse not to be careful. And if he considered that to be too teasing, well, that was a plus.

"Please," he groaned. "Please go faster. Harder. Stop holding back."

"Such a shameless slut," you leaned over and nipped his ear. "All right." You fisted his cock, thrusting your three metal fingers inside him. Jack wasn't trying to be quiet any longer, his gasps and moans drowning out the slick sound of your hands working him over.

There was a familiar rhythmic knock, and then the keypad chimed.

"Damnit!" Jack swore, but you kept it up, pulse jumping as he clenched around your fingers.

"Keep it down, soldier. Unless you want the whole base to hear you begging for it" you said, coolly, because you recognized the knock. Jack should have too, but he was too distracted to focus. He couldn't hold in his noises; those sweet whimpers and heavy breaths made your pussy twitch. He shook beneath you, squirming as you increased the tempo.

The door opened, and Gabriel stepped in, wearing a tight black t-shirt, his fatigue pants, and beanie. He stared openly for half a second, mouth open, eyes comically wide, before slamming the door shut behind him.

"Gabe-" Jack moaned, lifting his head off the desk. "I know you helped her-"

You flexed your metal fingers then, spreading them against his walls. The vibrations started up, and you flexed again, increasing the power.

"What the- Goddamnit!" Jack shouted as you sunk your prostheses inside him, your right hand jerking him harder. His hips shook and he tried to thrust wildly against your palm, choked sounds escaping the back of his throat. He did not last. You felt his muscles lock up, then he began to shake against you. Jack gave a low desperate howl and as he came, but you didn't stop. You just kept going, your fingers vibrating hard as they stretched his asshole.

"You all right, Jack?" Gabriel growled as he sat down on the desk, lifting Jack's chin and kissing him.

"Her fingers-" Jack panted. "Oh my God, did you know?"

"What?" Gabriel raised a brow. "What about her fingers, mi cielito?"

"They fucking vibrate-" Jack panted. "She's jammed three inside me and, fuck, I can't...can't take it-"

You kept stroking his half-hard cock, not caring that he was too sensitive.

Gabriel's nostrils flared. "...You mean the Swede actually made them for you?"

"As a...joke," Gabriel trailed off, a slow smile spreading across his face. "You mean to say you've had them this long and you didn't tell us? Oh you wicked thing..."

"You continued to stroke Jack inside and out, curling your fingers so the pattern of the vibrations complemented the rhythm of your strokes. Hard and fast, slow and teasing. You alternated, smiling as his cock hardened and twitched again.
"Lucky, please, I can't-" Jack shook violently.

"Too much?" You didn't even try to hide your amusement. "But Jack. You like too much."

"It's true. I've heard you say it," Gabriel chuckled.

Quaking, Jack just buried his face in Gabriel's lap and babbled incoherently.

You cleaned off your hands with sanitizer and a paper towel. Jack had made quite the mess on the floor and he still lay bent over his desk, breathing ragged.

"That is a pretty outfit," Gabriel murmured, leaning over to kiss you. "I want to fuck Jack and you've done a good job prepping him for me, but maybe we should give him a breather. Why don't you ride me first, and then we can put him between us."

You rubbed Jack's back. "Your arms, OK?"

"Stiff, but I'll be fine." He exhaled slowly. "Never thought you'd take it this far, sweetheart. But I like it. I like it a lot."

"Not sure how I feel about you underestimating me like that, Jack," you said archly.

"Always knew you had it in you, just...didn't expect to be bent over my own desk the first time," he sighed. "And your fingers... Goddamnit, sweetheart. You're trying to kill me." He eased back into his chair, face red, skin covered in sweat and other fluids. "Need a moment to recover. Then you and Gabe can do whatever you want to me."

"That means the greedy bastard will be ready in like ten minutes." Gabriel nibbled on your shoulder. "Want to fuck on his desk while he watches?"

"Only if I get to be on top."

Gabriel laughed, but he did as you told him.

"You did a good job working him open for me," Gabriel said as he pushed slowly into Jack. He knelt on the floor and Jack shivered between you, arms still cuffed, his ass in the air, his face buried in your lap.

"I had good teachers," you stroked Jack's hair as he began to kiss your inner thighs. He pressed hungry kisses against your pussy lips.

"You taste like Gabe," Jack rasped, his voice raw. His tongue flicked out and you tensed. He shut his eyes, still panting as Gabriel leaned forward to kiss you. You accepted, watching as Gabriel began to drive harder, concentration furrowing his brow. Jack began to push back, and you tilted his chin up, forcing him to look at you. Quiet desperation filtered through his eyes and his mouth was curved in a silent "o." Each breath he drew came out shaky, and while you'd seen Jack
wrecked more than once, before today you'd never had the satisfaction of being the primary cause.

"Come on, soldier. Aren't you going to thank Commander Reyes for giving you all the cock you've been craving?"

"Th-thank you, papi," Jack said as Gabriel snapped his hips forward.

Gabriel gave you a wide smile, too ferocious to be polite. You liked it though, it looked good on him. "If you don't want to ride him right now, I bet he'd really enjoy feeling those vibrating fingers around his dick," Gabriel groaned as Jack squirmed beneath him. "You're not too sensitive, still? Are you Jackie?"

"Please, whatever you want, it's all so good," Jack moaned.

Gabriel hauled Jack onto his knees. Jack's abs tensed with every thrust, his skin pink and glistening. And that long lovely cock stood at attention, still willing to go.

"And this is how you fuck the defiance out of someone, Jack," you teased. "In case, you needed a refresher."

Jack's eyes flew open and his smile was slow, too confident for a man tied up between you and Gabriel. "No, sweetheart, this is how you wise up, shut your smart mouth, and enjoy what you're being given. Figured you needed me to show you how it's done, for next time."

Gabriel gave a hearty laugh and you just smiled, cupping his balls in your hand.

"All right, Jack, I'll watch very carefully." You flexed your fingers, and the motors started up. "I do so respect a man who leads by example."

Seeing his eyes roll back and hearing him choke on his own voice, was worth the taunt.

"I think we've created a monster," Gabriel said, kissing Jack's temple. Jack's head lolled back against Gabriel's shoulder. "But you certainly aren't complaining, are you?"

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You massaged the feeling back into Jack's arms, feeling very guilty. His wrists were red and his elbows creaked. "You should have said something," you scolded.

"Didn't even notice. Was having too much fun," he sighed, nestled on the floor between you and Gabriel. "It's fine, I promise."

You looked at Gabriel.

"He can take more damage, corazon. We both should have picked up on it, but as the idiot said, he's fine."

You'd taken off the rest of your suit, in an effort to preserve it. Your stockings were shredded, but you'd expected that. Gabriel stroked Jack's hair as Jack kissed his throat.

"Didn't think you were going to wreck Jack without me," Gabriel teased, reaching over to stroke your forehead. All of you were covered in a sheen of sweat, you were glad that you'd brought spare clothes.
"He deserved it," you said, kissing his nose.

Jack gave a happy sigh and leaned back in Gabriel's arms. "I hope you know I barely got any work done today, sweetheart."

"Whose fault is that?" You crossed your arms.

"...Kind of implying it's all your fault," Jack said, his attitude returning.

"Well, I finished sorting your black ops reports, so I don't know what you were doing while I was working. Also, you're welcome."

Jack sighed, rolling his eyes.

The keypad chimed. And you dove behind Jack's desk, because you had no desire to face Angela while naked.

Jack and Gabriel scrambled for their clothes as the door opened, and you would have laughed, except you didn't want to give away your hiding spot.

"...Really?" Was all Captain Amari said, as she stepped into the office. She shut the door behind her and you huddled behind Jack's desk.

"You could try knocking, Ana," Gabriel said grumpily.

"It's nothing I haven't seen before," she said. There was an awkward silence and you really wished you could see their faces. But it was best to avoid attention. "Well, anyway, I need you to review this report on omnic activity on the Mani peninsula. Cape Matapan to be specific." She paused, and your heart sank, because you knew, as the silence dragged on, that she had noticed your clothing, neatly placed on one of the chairs. "...Hello, Lucky," she said, after a moment.

Still crouched behind the desk, face buried in one hand, you raised your other arm and waved. "Hi, Captain Amari."

Chapter End Notes

Extra long chapter for you! Everyone has been asking about the vibrator fingers forever and it took me a long time to get to the scene I wanted to write. I am satisfied with this, hope you guys are too. Because damn that was a lot of smut. And while there were some tiny bits of plot here, it was mostly NSFW.

Need to figure a better way to balance this. Recently spent too long trying to churn out 1k/day, and I still haven't watched Shape of Water or played FFXV since the first time I opened it. I now feel guilty if I don't put out at least 1k day and frankly, I need to do more if I want to stick to this release schedule. I don't have set release days, but every 3-4 days is the regular rate.

Got my formal rejection from the interview. Meh. Need to go back to hunting, but it takes mental stamina and I'll admit that I'm dragging a little. My current job is easing up since they've hired 5 people (finally).

We are just past 5 months and I am at 412k in the rough drafts. Yeesh.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Playtime is over. The work continues. And nothing goes according to plan.

Chapter Notes

Yumi made skirt suit Lucky.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You sat on the bench outside the infirmary munching chestnuts while Bayan sipped his tea. He still looked rough, and you offered him a croquette sandwich. He took it, nodding his thanks.

"How was your day?"

"They're transferring her soon," he said softly.

"That's really not what I asked," you said, popping another chestnut in your mouth. You knew that already, though you didn't share that fact with Bayan. "I realize a starch sandwich might be kind of strange, but they're really good. Vegetarian too, if that's your jam." Bayan wasn't vegetarian, but he was more health-conscious than you.

Bayan unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite. It was a golden, panko-coated, fried potato croquette, with lettuce and bulldog sauce on a brioche roll, but it was comfort food. All the yoshoku-style Japanese food was, and you blamed Shin for it.

"Thanks," he said after a moment. "You don't have to do this, you know."

"I feed all my friends," you said, watching him stiffen out of the corner of your eye. "It's the least I can do for the guy who kept my plants alive. They are still living too, though I'm really terrified of the orchid. If it dies, Amélie will know, and she will give me this disappointed look that will drop me three social classes. Are there more than three social classes? I'm sorry, they all look the same from the bottom."

Bayan snorted. "And the bonsai from the Shimadas isn't pressure enough?"

"...It's actually pretty hardy," you said. "It's like they know me and they picked something Lucky-proof. Well, Genji knows me. Hanzo just expects the worst."

Bayan laughed at that. "Well, if you need help catching flies, Min might actually like feeding the flytrap. She doesn't like insects."

You hadn't known that, but Bayan had enlightened you about a lot of Vo's preferences. She preferred written messages, but her English wasn't great, so you'd taken to making French translations of your letters and were getting more detailed responses. Sure, Athena could instantly
translate things for you, but you needed the practice. It was actually odd, because you had used Vietnamese translations for her before, and she'd ignored you for a month. According to Lacroix and Athena, your message had not been mistranslated or accidentally insulting, so you really weren't sure what that was about.

You knew there was malnutrition in her past, hence her relentless food aggression, but Bayan was able to list her favorite **healthy** foods (she had an avaricious love of durian), and recommended giving her heavy blankets when she was distressed. All in all, good advice. But it struck you as odd that he mostly talked to you about Vo or Lao.

Except, you got it now. You just weren't sure what to do about it.

"You know, if something's bothering you, you can just say it." You ate another chestnut. You glanced over at him.

"You don't have to pretend to be my friend any more, Lucky. They're transferring her to a secure ward. She doesn't need medical care any more."

"I'm not pretending," you said, giving him a sharp look. Bayan usually had better social graces than this. You offered him a chestnut and he just stared at it. "We have an upcoming Blackwatch poker game. You're invited. We all cheat shamelessly, and that's the entire point, so don't bet anything valuable."

Bayan shook his head. "I'll pass, thanks. I'd like to keep my pants, soul, and what's left of my virtue."

You shrugged. "Your loss."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. That was shitty of me. I'm just really tired."

"You know, you can talk to me. I can tell Angela she's working you too hard, and that will give you a ten second head start while she obliterates me before she comes chasing after you."

That garnered a laugh.

"I like you better than I thought I would," Bayan said after he took a chestnut.

"Was Vo badmouthing me? Because I swear, she can deal with it. I clean up more of her messes than I do anyone else-"

Bayan shrugged. "Min's not like the rest of Blackwatch, and you know it. Blackwatch has a reputation. **You** have a reputation."

"Oh God, what have you heard now?" You massaged your temples, because while Athena was good at giving you trends and composite gossip, she censored some of the more outrageous rumors, claiming they were not credible enough to be repeated. Which was annoying, because you wanted to know.

"It's actually been complimentary, lately. You know "she's crazy and scary, but kind of hot." That sort of thing. You're mostly known for being...trouble. Not that you cause it, more like you're a harbinger."

You couldn't actually argue with that. So you ate another chestnut. "How do you like the sandwich?"
"It's good," he said. "Thanks. I'm sorry about being rude. I'm just stressed."

You nodded, sitting back on the bench and wondered what you would do next.

You sat in the office, Jack on the couch, Gabriel at his desk, and you read the transcripts of Gabriel's interrogation of Lao. Both of them wore grim looks and you gritted your teeth. Because Gabriel had not been kind to your little hacker. You understood why, you understood that half the shit he said he probably didn't mean. But you suspected he meant the crueler half.

Gabriel and Lao had talked about you, and that didn't surprise you, though it was strange seeing your name in the conversation. And when it got to the part where Lao admitted to her crush on Shin, you winced. It only went downhill from there.

When you were done, you set down your tablet and looked at Gabriel.

"I still want to see her."

"Not alone, for obvious reasons," Gabriel said gruffly.

"Fine." You were peeved by how harsh he'd been, though you couldn't actually fault him for it. So you took a deep breath and reminded yourself that your logic had to be in charge right now, not your feelings.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Jack asked after a moment. "Between her confessions about—"

"None of this is news to me." You looked Gabriel in the eye. "Shin and I both knew she had a crush on him. The whole squad did. But after she hooked up with Valdez, she was with Valdez."

Gabriel blinked. "You never mentioned that—"

"It wasn't important," you said dryly. "She was a teenager with a crush on a hot CO and nothing ever came of it. It's not a particularly original tale."

Gabriel pinched the bridge of his nose. "You should have still included that in the psyche profile."

"...You're right. It just slipped my mind." Because had never been important. She was a kid. She never acted on it. Shin had been with you and there was never any doubt how he felt about both of you.

"She threatened to kill you. She admitted she hates you," Gabriel said, tone mellower than you expected. "It's heavy stuff."

"She's scared, hurt, and traumatized. I wouldn't be happy with me either," you said. "And while I know it's not my fault, I understand her feelings and am taking her declarations with a whole shaker of salt. No, I won't be alone with her, but if you think I'm just going to abandon her because she isn't fawning and falling over herself with gratitude, I have news for you."

You had already discussed a lot of potential outcomes with your shrink, and to her credit, she had prepared you for this one. Maybe Lao would hate you forever. Maybe Lao would never
forgive you. Maybe she was just lashing out because after a whole day of being interrogated by Gabriel, she wasn't thinking clearly. It didn't matter. You would do what you could for her, because you loved her. But you would also have to remember where your responsibility ended. You had helped rescue Lao, and you would be there to support her during her recovery. But you could not fix her, no matter how hard you tried, and you could not make all her problems go away, and that was not your job, nor your obligation, and you did not have that power. You had to remind yourself of that over and over again. But it was starting to stick.

Jack just gave a longsuffering sigh. "All right, baby. Your gamble with Athena worked. She reacted strongly to Gérard entering the room and identifying himself, but she was unable to move. Athena "riding along" has been a good, if ethically-questionable way, of keeping her in line. I'm still not depending on that as your only form of defense. You don't go in alone."

Gabriel looked like he wanted to add more, but he took a deep breath and shook his head. "It's such a waste. I see why you liked her so much. She would've made a hell of an agent," he said after a moment.

"She still might," you told him. You paused, disliking Gabriel's skeptical expression, but there was no point in fighting about it now. "On an unrelated matter, I need authorization for Athena to monitor something else." You rubbed your forehead. "I think I have a handle on that problem we discussed earlier, but I don't want to move till I'm absolutely certain I understand the situation."

Jack cocked his head to the side. "That was quick."

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. "You aren't soloing this one."

"I just asked for Athena's backup, didn't I? That's like a legion of people."

Jack gave you an odd look. "An AI is different."

"...But perfect for the task." You realized that most agents didn't talk to Athena like you and Genji did, but it was strange to see the surprise on Jack's face, like he didn't quite realize she wasn't just a machine.

"I still want a report," Gabriel said. "There's a good chance this ties into Shit Spiders."

"...OK, but I'm going to ask that you don't take any action yet, because the situation is delicate."

Gabriel raised a brow. "That's not your call."

Jack just leaned back, inclining his head. "Make your case in the report. We'll discuss it afterward, before anyone does anything."

"But I want the report today, before you try to pull anything sneaky," Gabriel said.

You nodded, wondering how two men who openly hated paperwork so much always managed to make more for you.
"I see they already gave you the news," Lacroix said when you plunked down in the chair across from his desk.

"It's not a total surprise," you said.

Lacroix skimmed some reports and sipped his coffee.

"You've deprogrammed people before," you said after a moment. You hadn't been able to get the details, but Captain Amari had recommended Lacroix as a resource.

Lacroix blinked, and set his cup down. "Not very well, Chanceux." The bite in his words surprised you.

"Yeah, well I'm sure you made some awful mistakes and managed to learn something from them. Tell me."

He waved his hand dismissively. "There is too much to tell and I am not an expert. It is a task best left to the professionals. In that case, we didn't have the resources and I had no choice but to try. There were...lasting scars. Though to be honest, the subject would never have been classified as "normal" to begin with, so the damage is difficult to assess." He gave you a long look. "What Talon has done to Agent Lao is on a completely different level. Athena is working on some of the commands hardcoded in her cybernetics, but how the bioweb interface has affected her neural processing is still being investigated."

Meaning had the computer code actually infected her thinking, or was it just a Pavlovian leash that would fade with time?

"And she does place some blame on you, and that isn't entirely a result of the conditioning."

"That's a good thing," you said stubbornly.

Lacroix laughed. "That is uncharacteristically optimistic of you."

"They subjected her to high intensity reconditioning, but she's still in there. They didn't break her. And even if she's damaged, that resentment is Lao, not Talon's behavioral modifications. That's something she can fix on her own, if she chooses."

"And you think she will?"

You crossed your arms. "I have no idea. But it's better than if she were just a puppet."

"I think you'll find their programming more devious than that. It's not one layer that you can just strip away, Chanceux. Their modifications are interwoven with whom she is. She may some day be functional, but she will never again be the girl you knew."

"I am well aware of that," you said. "None of us have faced our enemies and walked away unchanged."

Lacroix gave you a thoughtful look and opened up a box of Gitanes. He gave you a wry smile. "If Ana catches us..."

"These are terrible for us," you agreed, taking one anyway.

"Fa Hai is moving against Zhai Feng. He's garnered a significant amount of support."
Lacroix lit both your cigarettes. "Neither of them will resort to open warfare, not after what just happened. But I suspect he'll cripple her politically before he manages to cause an "accident" and consolidate power."

"I saw the reports. You recommended that we don't interfere and that seems to be the policy."

"You disapprove?"

"Not my business. I think leaving Zhai in charge is a big gamble, but she's smarter than she acts. Still, she comes off as a loose cannon. That's not inspiring leadership."

"You like her," Lacroix said with a sigh.

"More than Fa. But in this business "like" is a luxury we don't have. It's all butterfly wings, dominoes, and probable outcomes."

"Unfortunately, you are correct."

The two of you sat there in silence, smoking. "It'd be interesting to see what kind of On Sing she'd build."

"That is true." Lacroix shrugged. "You are more optimistic about her ability than I. I think she is a little too mad to accomplish her lofty goals. But we are anarchists at heart, Chanceux, much better at destruction than creation, no matter how hard we try. That distorts our vision."

You couldn't disagree with him. But watching Zhai Feng die did not quite sit right with you. Yes, you understood the politics and dangers of getting involved. Hell, there was no guarantee she'd be any good for the world. In Blackwatch, you did things smart. Even if they were morally questionable. And supporting Zhai Feng was not smart.

For the first time, in a long time, you envied Overwatch agents for their moral superiority. You finished your cigarette, conscious that Lacroix was well aware of your discomfort.

"Heard from Ziv?" You decided a change of subject was necessary.

"He keeps sending me "last wills and testaments" in the footnotes of his reports. It is very cute. I will get his books. Agent Shimada, the younger, and Agent McCree will split his gaming miniatures and may have to engage in combat for them. And you get...nothing. He seems to still be harboring a bit of resentment toward you for saving his job."

You took a cigarette, shrugging. "As you can tell, I'm used to ungrateful hackers."

Lacroix just laughed, though it did not seem nearly as mocking as usual.

You brought wasabi peas, an assortment of vegetarian Hot Kiss snacks, and those Meiji pink and brown strawberry chocolates. For a moment you stressed about what to wear, but finally decided that your Blackwatch fatigues and a hoodie would suffice. Everything else just seemed disingenuous.

Tataryn and Captain Amari waited for you outside the interrogation room. While they
weren’t normally used for visitation, Lao’s cybernetics made extra precautions necessary.

Tataryn had his hair back in a ponytail, and with the stubble and bags under his eyes, he looked a little rough around the edges. He was dressed down in Blackwatch exercise gear, and the compression pants really hugged his ass in a distracting manner. You didn't actually want him here, but Gabriel had never rescinded Tataryn's bodyguard order and you suspected Gabriel told him to show. Captain Amari looked polished and pleasantly nonchalant in her uniform.

"Do we all need to be in there?" You asked, giving Tataryn a wry look.

"No, the captain and I can take turns visiting the girl and you can sit out here," Tataryn said with a cheeky smirk. "Much less danger that way."

"Fedya's just here in case we need another body. He'll wait outside."

Tataryn's smile flickered for a moment. "As you say, captain." Captain Amari input a code and went in first. Tataryn held the door for you.

"We still having our tea party without Mihret?" Tataryn asked as you passed by.

"Damn straight we are. He got his ass shipped off to California. We'll send him pictures."

Your grin faded as you walked into the interrogation room. There was a table and chairs, and the toolkits had been...moved, so it almost seemed like a normal, average, run-of-the-mill, government-issue, windowless room that happened to have a drain in the floor.

Captain Amari took a chair against the wall, seeming at rest. But you knew better than to fall for that trap.

Lao sat there in leg irons, wearing an orange jumpsuit with a gray jacket draped over her shoulders. The prosthetic arm was disconnected, the sleeve flat where it should be. Her flesh arm was free, and she looked at you impassively. Her cheeks were too hollow, her lips chapped, but her hair was getting longer and the scars looked less severe than before.

You studied her, she still looked young, but there was a weight to her gaze, a slump to her shoulders, that hadn't been there before. Sure, you'd seen glimpses of the brokenness when you encountered her on missions. But now, in the relative safety of the base, the difference seemed more pronounced. Lao was safe. Lao was here. But Lao was not OK.

"Hi," you said. Because that's where normally people started conversation. "How are you?"

She shrugged, staring down at the table.

You set the snacks on the table, opening the packaging for her. You took a wasabi pea.
"This is all I had on hand. Some of the other agents are always raiding my stash. I brought the fried gluten kind of Hot Kiss, because I don't think you need the konyaku version. You're skinny enough."

Lao swallowed. The burn scars discolored the left quarter of her face, but they no longer looked quite as painful and Angela said she could repair any nerve damage. Most of the circuits had been easy to disconnect, but some bits of metal still shone on the skin. It would take another few sessions to remove them.

"Ziv wanted me to say "hi" for him. He's the other hacker you met." You glossed over the
part where she tried to shoot him in Shanghai. "He's Rivka's favorite grandson, in case you were wondering."

Lao's eyes widened briefly. "I didn't know."

"He doesn't have the gravitas she did, but he's got the sharp tongue." You shook your head. "He's still smart, though. Skews more electrical engineering than software, but he'll do in pinch."

She nodded, still not looking at you.

"Do you want me to bring you anything? Books? Snacks?" You sat back in your chair, trying to coax a response out of her. "The food here is much better than the Ninth Circle. I still cook, Shin's recipes, but... yeah, I'll make you some curry ramen later."

Lao just stared at the chocolates, and you knew she wanted one, so you pushed the box closer to her. She did not move.

"Did you like the book?"
"That book was good," Lao said after a moment. "Depressing, but good."

"Yeah," you agreed.

"Is that where you got the idea to have your AI lock me out of my own body?" She sat up straight, dark eyes accusing as they met yours.

"Yes," you said, because there was no point in lying about it.

"I never thought you were that cruel. Did you figure since I've had my will stolen once, doing it again wouldn't be a big deal? Don't you think I've had enough of being everyone else's puppet?"

"I hope it's only a temporary measure," you said.

"Should've just shot me if you couldn't trust me, Lucky. This isn't home. You lied the entire time. This is a trap. I've gone from one prison to another."

You sat back in your chair, hands folded in your lap. It was a bad comparison and you knew it, but you weren't sure Lao was in the frame of mind to hear your reasoning. And now, in the face of her pain, you weren't sure your reasoning would hold up.

"We both know you're not in control of your actions. I'd rather cross into some philosophical gray areas than let you or anyone else get hurt. But I admit, my morals have always been shaky. Maybe it was the wrong call. I'm sorry."

Lao flinched. "You should have killed me, Lucky. Commander Reyes had the right idea."

You schooled your expression. "Commander Reyes is a tactician, and by his calculations, you're a threat and he has a very permanent way of dealing with threats. I'm your friend, whether you like it or not, and I don't care if you're dangerous. I want you to have a chance."

"No, you just want to clear your conscience by saving me. You think if you fix me that you'll make up for letting Shin, Julio, and the captain die. Well, I have news for you, Lucky, it doesn't make up for it. You failed them and you fucked up with me. Captain Patel should have left you where she found you."
You felt Captain Amari tense behind you. The words hurt, but once you'd read Gabriel's report, you knew to expect them. You knew Lao would lash out. You knew she would find your most obvious trigger. And you knew she would hit you hard with the lowest blow she could stomach.

Prepared as you were, it still hurt. That blow was much lower than you expected.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," you said softly. You looked down at your boots. "But we both know that's not true."

Lao made a choked growl. "I don't want you to visit me any more. Your face makes me sick. Hooray, you "rescued" me from Talon. Good job. Take your medal and get out of my life. You weren't there when I needed you. I certainly don't need you now."

You rubbed your forehead. "Can I leave the snacks?" You asked Captain Amari.

"I don't want your crap. Take it with you!" She shouted.

"You can," Captain Amari said, ignoring her outburst.

"All right." You stood up. "I'm not going to make you visit with me, but I'm not just abandoning you either. I'll try to see you next week, OK? If you're not feeling up to it, I'll give you more space. I've been told I can write and send you stuff. So I'll do that."

"You shouldn't come back, Lucky. I tried to kill you once. AI or not, I could do it again." Panic laced her voice and you looked up, her brown eyes full of tears. Underneath the anger was something broken and fearful. Seeing that look on her face did not make you feel better, but you thought you understood.

"A lot of people have tried, Lao. It didn't take." You smiled at her, your lower jaw a little wobbly. "It wasn't your fault, and I'm not sore about that, just so you know."

"Don't patronize me!"

You shrugged, knowing now that nothing you said would be right.

"Get out!" She snarled, breathing hard. She rattled to her feet and backhanded the snacks off the table, scattering chocolates and peas all over the floor. Well, it was a good thing the room had a drain.

You swallowed your clever retorts. "You take care of yourself, Lao. I'll see if I can get those rice crackers you like." You turned on your heel and quickly walked out of the room, unsure of how neutral you could keep your face.

Tataryn was gone, but Gabriel leaned against the wall, waiting for you. You looked around; Overwatch agents rarely came down here. The coast was clear. You walked straight up to him and hugged him, burying your face in his chest.

He rubbed your back, hands gentle. "That bad then?"

"It wasn't pretty," you said, looking up at him. "But I knew that before I went in there."
You took a couple shaky breaths. "It sucked. I was hoping it wouldn't go that way, but..." You shrugged.

"It's not on you," Gabriel said. "You keep extending the rope for her. She'll come around or she won't. But you don't jump in after her, you hear? That's where your responsibility ends, corazón."

You snorted at Gabriel's metaphor and how well you understood it. "I know."

"You want some food? I have the ingredients for tortas."

"Those are just fancy sandwiches," you said. You and Gabriel had all kinds of supplies in the kitchen.

"You don't like fancy sandwiches?" He asked, a little huffy.

"I didn't say that..."

You did not want to talk about it, not yet. And after Gabriel made you some tortas, filled with chicken, refried beans, pickled jalapenos, and avocado, you both went up to Jack's room. Jack had left you cake in the fridge, and Gabriel packed several tortas for the three of you. You ate in Jack's bed, and Gabriel put on a popular spy drama so the two of you could laugh at the implausibility of it all.

The sandwiches were hot and strangely comforting. Or maybe it was just that Gabriel prepared them for you and then held you while you ate.

When Jack finally got in, you were half asleep with a pillow propped against Gabriel's chest.

Jack stripped off his coat, took a cold torta and a beer, and climbed into the bed beside you.

"How'd it go?" He asked so carefully that you knew he was already aware of what happened.

"It was rough," you yawned. "Not a surprise, but... it still sucked. Meh. Just want to cuddle and eat cake."

Jack leaned over you to kiss Gabriel.

"How'd your day go, amor?"

"Had to catch up on paperwork," he said dryly and you snorted. "Also had to treat my carpet. The janitor left a sharply-worded note tacked to the break room bulletin board about cleaning up your drinks after you spill them so the stain doesn't set."

You giggled, but Gabriel just shook his head.

"You're such a slob," he told Jack.
Jack just took a bite of his torta, scattering crumbs on the comforter.

You woke up to Gabriel climbing out of bed. He got dressed efficiently and kissed both Jack and you goodbye. Curled up against Jack, you were almost asleep again when the comm chimed.

"Strike Commander Morrison, this is Aunt Zheng." The voice was familiar, and you lay still while Jack sat up, flipping on the tablet screen.

"...my devices don't usually accept calls like this, Aunt Zheng," he said quietly.

"I would not have intruded, but I have a need." Her voice was carefully modulated, and almost seemed concerned. She still sounded more distant than Athena ever did, even if she had once been human.

"I'm listening," Jack did not look back at you.

"I seem to have miscalculated on my heir."

Jack diplomatically said nothing.

"She is...in trouble."

"We agreed that Overwatch would not intervene with On Sing's internal politics," Jack said, after a moment.

"We did. But you swore a blood oath to me and Feng. I don't know if that counts for anything in your culture, but it means something to us. Even if you left Overwatch, if you called us, we would have come to your aid."

"...Is that so?" Jack asked, managing to not sound as skeptical as you felt.

"I cannot force you. I cannot even formally ask this of you, but you are the closest ally to her situation, and young Fa has gone too far."

"What'd he do?"

"Captured her brother and used him as bait to lure her in to for a "talk" about peace," Zheng said. "While Feng and her brother Li are estranged, she is still the type to charge in and rescue him. She went alone, of course, and I have not been able to break the shielding on the location. It seems Fa constructed a modified Faraday cage within the entire base as a trap, just to keep me out. It has worked. He has filled the base with shocktroops loyal to him."

"Overwatch cannot be seen interfering, Zheng."

"Which is why I am imploring you, Commander Morrison. I will owe you a great debt. Feng will too."

"Why did you let it get this far?" Jack asked.

"I do not like killing family," Zheng said. "Now more so than ever. But it seems I should
have taken care of young Fa a long time ago. Saving Feng is what matters now. I have coordinates and drones. If you can get my proxies inside, I can do the rest."

"...Where are the rest of your...group?" Jack asked.

There was a long silence.

"...They are illusions. I am the only one who made it through the transition. The other projections are programmed to act like my consort and children, but they did not survive the translation process. Feng is the only one who knows this. And she is the closest family member I still feel fondness for. She is my anchor, the one who keeps me sane. Save her, Commander Morrison, and I will do anything you ask."

Well...shit. A grieving genius madwoman with the reach of an extremely powerful AI was the last thing this world needed.

Jack heaved a deep sigh.

"Give me a moment." Jack rubbed his forehead. "Athena, can you trace the signal?"

"Yes, commander."

"That is unnecessary. I will forward you all the coordinates. I will give you everything I know."

"How is she bypassing security?" Jack asked Athena.

"She tweaked the settings on the server side of your comm-app to force your device to take the call. She has not actually hacked Overwatch security."

"What kind of opponents are we looking at?"

"At least two dozen Red Pole omnics, several Triad foot soldiers, and a few cyborgs. Not like Nguyen's," Zheng added quickly. "Ours are strictly voluntary. He lured her to a facility in the steppes of Inner Mongolia. We knew it was a trap, but we... underestimated how well-shielded it was. It runs on a completely closed network. I have no way in except physically."

"This is a terrible idea," Jack said.

"Feng just turned twenty one. She is a student, not a fighter. The only reason she got involved was because one of the Southern families tried to assassinate her parents. Her immediate family disapproves of her life choice, and her brother most of all. She ran track at a high school in America. She barely scraped by onto National Honors Society. She still sleeps with her stuffed turtle-"

"That's enough." Jack rubbed his face. "OK, let me take care of some things, and I'll go. Obviously this can't be an official Overwatch op. But I'll see what I can work out."

"Time is not on our side, commander." The call cut out.

Jack swore and stood. "I know you're awake. I need you to cover for me while-"

"Oh hell, no," you said, sitting up.

Jack shook his head. "I know Feng isn't your favorite person, but we talked and she apologize."
"Who do you think told her to do that?" You scowled. "I liked Feng just fine. But this issue is bigger than your guilt, my likes, and Feng's life."

"You want to be allied with a guy like Fa?"

"He's stable and responsible," you said, the words tasting bitter on your tongue.

"He also uses civilians as hostages and kills his own family members while lying through his teeth about it."

"...What kind of things do you think we do in Blackwatch, Jack?"

"That's different." Jack huffed angrily. "We both know her and I'm not just going to sit by and watch." He pulled on some clothes. "I'm going, and you can keep your mouth shut for a little while, OK?"

"Is that an order?" You watched him wince.

"...No, unless it needs to be, to cover for you. But at least give me a head start."

You laughed then. "What are you going to do, Jack?"

"I'm just going to get Zheng to the facility so she can break in, save Feng, and then I'm going to come back home for lunch. I'm in the mood for burgers, if you're cooking."

"You're always in the mood for burgers." You rubbed your forehead. "If I call Gabriel, Lacroix, or Captain Amari-"

"Don't." Jack looked at you, eyes hard. "Please." The stiffness in his neck and tension in his shoulders were more aggressive than pleading. It was less an request than an order.

You flinched, because suddenly you had a vision of him knocking you out and taking off. "You're not really giving me much of a choice." You climbed out of bed, on the opposite side from Jack. "Give me a moment to get geared up. I'll meet you in your hangar. But if you try to leave without me, I'll sic all three of them on you, and you and your hand will be very lonely for a long time."

Jack blinked, the corners of his mouth slowly turning up. "...OK."

"You got something to disguise the fact that the Strike Commander is riding to the rescue of a gang boss?"

"Yeah," he said, looking very pleased. "I've been putting together some gear. I think you'll find it satisfactory."

"Athena, I need you to relay this message to Genji." You thought about going to Jesse, but it was better not to depend on him to choose between you and Gabriel. You already knew where his loyalties were and while logically, you couldn't fault him, it would be a lie to say you weren't a little hurt. But there was no point in hashing that out now. What was done was done, and Jesse was still your friend.
"If you haven't heard from us in three hours, here are our coordinates and the mission details. I didn't name it. The Strike Commander classified this as priority Flash, clearance Top Secret, and compartmentalized it under BW Eyes Only, as well as Shit Spiders and Legion. Only agents with clearance for both can access it. The details are in the attached brief." You grabbed your go-bag, and hurried to the designated hangar, certain Jack would leave you behind if he thought he could get away with it.

The Strike Commander had his own hangar, usually for running diplomatic missions. He rode along with regular transport for Overwatch operations.

The man waiting in there wore black and red, his armor a modified Blackwatch variant underneath a black leather jacket. Carrying a massive assault rifle in the same colors, he looked like some kind of cyberpunk mercenary with a leather kink. He wore a black full face mask with red trim, the crimson light of the visor glowing in the dimness. You would not have recognized him, except the shock of blonde hair gave him away.

You followed him up the ramp of the small dropship.

"...That's uh...very bondage rave-night at the army surplus store."

"...You don't like it," Jack muttered, his voice more guttural behind the mask.

"...It's very edgy," you said, covering your smirk. "Like something Gabriel would wear. Or design." For a biker bondage club. You left that last part out, because you were getting better at diplomacy.

There was a pause. Jack shrugged. That was exactly it.

"It's not bad. At least it's not red, white, and blue and emblazoned with eagles or American flags."

The mask made it impossible to read Jack's expression, but from the set of his shoulders, you suspected you'd offended him. You just weren't sure if it was because he would never wear something like that, or because that was his original idea.

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering, I'm referencing Soldier 76's Jet outfit with some modifications.

Kind of meandering through right now. Very sleepy. Need to summon motivation to get back to job hunting but honestly kind of tired. Bleagh.

Hope everyone else is having happier or at least more productive weeks? Be healthy out there!
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Operation I Need Coffee is live and unauthorized.

Chapter Notes

Maya drew Ziv pretending to be a good boi.

Mamimi ran with the baby train and made Lucky with Gabriel's grownup daughter and Jack's grownup son.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jack removed the mask as the ship took off, the seals hissing when he pressed the release mechanism. It was a small craft, stealthy and fast, with a bunk, a seating area for four, a few rows of cabinets, and a partitioned off area for the pilot. You peeked around the corner and blinked at the omnic pilot sitting at the helm.

"Relax, it's Athena," Jack said. "She's in the body and the ship."

You pursed your lips, because that reasoning really bothered you. She was navigator, gunner, engineer, and pilot. You were used to having more overlap in roles. "Are you cleared to fly?"

"Technically, no," Athena admitted. "I am an authorized copilot with excellent flight sim test scores. I am aware that we do not usually place a craft in a singular individual's care. Granted, I am not subject to the usual body limits that most humans and omnis have. I realize there are also biases against letting AIs control human transport. However, I can assure you Lucky, that you are secure in my chassis. I have superior reflexes, multiple failsafes, and would never casually risk your safety," she said earnestly, like she was afraid you were going to ground her.

You sighed, realizing just how accurate the teen metaphor was. Athena was growing up, Jack had given her the keys to the dropship, and she was grounded if she so much as scratched the paint. You nodded. "It just surprised me."

Jack set his assault rifle aside. "Athena can drive and we can neck in the back."

"...Shut up," you scowled, already pulling off your hoodie. You claimed the seat across from him.

Jack grinned at you, eyes bright and pleased, and it still made your heart skip a beat. The mask rested in his lap. "The view is great."

Shaking your head, you quickly changed into your combat gear, taking a moment to swap out your prostheses. Comm unit, blade, EMP pulse. Jack said you were just dropping Zheng's
drones off. But who knew if he'd decide to charge off into battle? Or if this was some kind of elaborate trap? Because while Lacroix and the analysts were all impressed by the blood oath and the fancy ceremonial bullshit, you weren't entirely convinced of On Sing's sincerity. You didn't see how betraying Overwatch would help them in the long run, but you didn't rule it out as a possibility.

"For the record, I think this is a mistake," you said, after you'd gotten changed. You bit into an energy bar and tossed one to Jack. He caught it, brow raised.

"Noted." He did not sound offended. "I realize it's not the smartest political move. But I didn't do all this work just to play politics. What's the point of all this if I can't save the life of a stupid teenage girl?"

You shrugged, because you didn't have a good answer. You knew the logic. You'd already kind of had this discussion with Lacroix. You were also pretty sure that Feng was in her early twenties, though she certainly didn't act like it. But Jack wasn't wrong.

Jack leaned forward, his knees almost touching yours. "Talk to me?"

"We do the smart thing in Blackwatch. It isn't always the right thing, but in the long run, it kind of is." You rubbed your forehead. "I'm not a hero, Jack. I actually do like Feng and I don't want to see her killed off, but..."

"But you've gone so long doing the "smart" thing that the "moral" feels wrong," he said quietly. "And that makes you feel worse."

"I guess." You shrugged helplessly. Saving Lao had been the smart course of action, given what a good resource she would be. And it had been personal. You rubbed your forehead. You did not want to think about what would have happened if the mission objectives had come into direct conflict.

"You're wrong, you know." Jack stood up, and crossed over the aisle to sit beside you. "You are pretty heroic. Saving Gabe. Putting all that effort into saving Agent Lao. Jumping on top of me in full view of the cameras-"

"I'm pretty sure there are memes of us now," you said.

Jack just snorted. "There's a whole Overwatch-admirers subculture that you are happier not knowing about."

You shook your head as he rested an arm around your shoulder.

"So you really advised Feng to apologize to me?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, she cornered me in the bathroom and talked my ear off." You sighed. "She's a dumb kid with lofty aspirations. And I'm like "that's ridiculously naive." And she's all, "I know, but I can do it. And here's how." By the end of it I'm left going "yup, she's insane, but maybe she can pull it off." You know, if she doesn't get killed in the process."

Jack laughed. "You didn't get a little jealous?" He nuzzled your neck. "Not even a tiny bit?"

"I didn't like her making passes at you," you admitted.

Jack flashed you a smug grin. "You know, you're the only woman I'm interested in." He
leaned back. "And Gabe's the only man."

"Well, if Gabriel and I aren't enough to keep you occupied, I don't know what we're going to do," you sighed.

"You'll just have to dress up and jump me in the office with bag full of sex toys."

You wrinkled your nose. "...Those are not what I would choose to bludgeon you with. But if that's what you want..."

Jack's face lit up with delight, like he was happy you were a little jealous. That idiot. "I just look at Feng like a really unhinged Maggie. Honest."

You raised a brow. You could see that. "Guess it's hard to stand by when she reminds you of your baby sister."

Jack grimaced. "Ten years ago, I wouldn't have hesitated, neither would Gabe. Now? Yeah, I feel the same way you do. But I'm tired of it, Lucky. I'm tired of the command, the loss, the regrets." Jack sighed and you took his hand. "I know Gabe is too. He won't come out and say it. But running Blackwatch has taken a toll on him. He's a guy who'll do what has to be done: plan assassinations, torture people, bully traumatized kids. But he's got a limit. The more he does, the easier it gets, and none of us like the person he becomes when he crosses those lines. I know it's necessary, but..."

But you wished it was not.

"Things had gotten pretty bad between us before Black Base Delta. It was mostly the job," Jack said. "Some of it was my willful obliviousness, Gabe's pettiness, and both our egos. But the longer I do this, the more time, focus, and sacrifice it seems to require. I'm running out of things to give up."

You nodded, because while you were perfectly content to go on killing enemies and plotting your revenge, you understood that Jack's work took more out of him. "You know, you could always quit. Leave Captain Amari in charge and get that farm. Come out for special occasions when you feel like busting heads. So maybe once a week?"

Jack laughed. "Ana would murder me."

"...I hate to break it to you, but you're not the only amazing person in Overwatch, Jack." You began loading your carbines. "Between the leadership team, Athena, and the structures Lacroix's been implementing, I don't think Overwatch should or does depend on any one person."

You paused. "You know, in case you thought Overwatch couldn't make it without you."

Jack snorted. "Thanks, baby."

"I don't want to picture Overwatch without you. But you should know you're obviously pretty important to Gabriel and me." You closed your eyes. "And your value isn't contingent on what you do for Overwatch. Especially when you've already done so much."

Jack blew out a long breath. "Thanks." He rested his head on your shoulder. "I knew that, but it's good to hear it."

You shrugged. "It's something Gabriel's been trying to convey to me. I guess in my case, it's a little more severe. Like I have to continuously prove my worth to myself. It's not a standard I hold anyone else to, just me. And I know it's not healthy. It's just...when I survived and a lot of
other people didn't, I was left searching for some kind of justification." Revenge was the best compromise you had reached, but you didn't need to say that out loud. "I know it's not right and it certainly isn't logical, but that's a lesson I'm still trying to absorb."

"...I know," Jack said softly, gripping your hands.

You closed your eyes. Of course he did. Jack had buried a lot of people too.

"You know you can talk to me too," he said. "I'm not as good at this counseling stuff as Gabe. But for what it's worth, I'm here and you don't have to prove anything to me." He was so painfully earnest that you had to look away.

"This is how it usually goes with Gabe. I don't announce "I'm ready to talk about my issues!" He gets me comfortable, maybe asks a question, then I blurt too much, and he doesn't bat an eye, just continues the conversation like we're discussing what to make for dinner and gives out advice from personal experience."

Jack's smile was soft, gentle, and completely at odds with his outfit. "Just like this, huh? So I don't have to get out the thumbscrews or drugs. You'll just start talking about things if I ask?"

"Sometimes," you said, and realized it was true.

"I'll keep that in mind." Jack said. He leaned over, lips brushing your nose. "And I'd still like you, even if you weren't running around in bloody towels slaughtering cyborgs terrorists."

You rolled your eyes, because you were never going to live that down.

"And thanks, for coming along and not calling in Gabe or Ana."

"You know, we're both going to be in so much trouble." You didn't want to think about how either of them would react when they found out what was going on. And they would find out. You had no illusions about that.

"Nah, just me. I ordered you to keep your mouth shut and dragged you along. That's the story and we're sticking to it." Jack leaned over and kissed you. "You really don't like the outfit?"

"It's like an evil version of you, and the mask is not what I expected," you said. "Very comic book superhero style. Protecting your identity is important and no one's going to suspect that it's you under there. I hope."

"But is it a sexy evil version of me?" Jack asked.

You were unsure if there was a version of Jack that wasn't sexy. If there was, you hadn't seen it yet. "Sure."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh," you said.

"Come on. You can tell me if you don't like it."

"It's different is all."

"Gabe designed it!"

"Yeah, for like a fetish club."
"What do you know about fetish clubs?" Jack asked, sounding way too interested.

"...I've run a couple missions at some. You'd blend right in."

Jack squinted at you. "I can't tell if you're joking or not."

You almost told him to ask Jesse or Genji about those missions, but decided that would just be cruel. "You look good. Different, but good. And it's obvious Gabriel designed those pants. They look painted on your ass."

Jack sat back with a grin, vanity satisfied.

You mentally congratulated yourself for giving a good compliment. Even if he had fished for it. Amélie would be proud. Lacroix would have brought up Genji, Jesse, and made up a spicy story about Tataryn. You had taken the Amélie route, and that was the better choice in the long run.

Two slender omnics waited for you on the rocky steppes of the Yin Mountains. The day was bright and cold. Sparse wiry shrubbery dotted the ground and you blinked at the harsh sunlight. You didn't like the temperature or thinner air, but at least there was no snow. Instead the landscape came in shades of tan and brown with hints of muddy resentful green. But the sky was a pretty shade of blue, and with wilderness spanning into the horizon, the sky seemed closer than before, the clouds lower, the vault of the heavens almost within reach.

The effect was humbling: the steppes were vast, and you were so small. Not the pep walk you needed right now. You found yourself craving tea or cigarettes. This wasn't the kind of place for cake, though you wouldn't turn it down.

Jack stepped off the transport, massive assault rifle slung over his shoulder. "Stay cloaked, we'll be back soon." The visor was locked firmly in place, and Jack probably didn't have to squint to see through the glare. You considered a face mask then. It was something to look into. Maybe Gabriel could design you an outfit, with a little less kink.

"Strike Commander." The omnic on the left spoke. "I am grateful for your assistance." Their heads swiveled to acknowledge you. "Agent Strike. I did not realize you would be here too."

"She's discrete," Jack said, all business. "You just need an escort, correct?"

There was a moment of silence as the omnics regarded you. They moved in tandem, and it was a little dizzying to think that there was one person in both bodies. "I do not know if I will be able to seize control of the facility. If I can, then there is no need for further intervention." The one on the left continued to speak, and the one on the right stayed silent. You were glad you weren't getting her in stereo and that she wasn't alternating bodies. That would be distracting.

"...But if not, since we're already here, maybe we should rescue Feng?" Jack said, unamused. "Funny how you keep piling on the favors."

"Desperate times," Zheng said, not sounding the least bit sorry.
"For the duration of the mission I'm "Paladin." She's "Ranger." Since we don't want to advertise our affiliations."

"Perhaps "Ranger" should find a less distinct style of armor in the future. She is already well-known to us," Zheng said. "Not to sound ungrateful, Ranger. I do appreciate your willingness to help."

You nodded, but did not respond, wanting to keep your interaction with Zheng to a minimum.

Thankfully both omnis turned away. "The facility is about four kilometers out. It is housed inside a partially-hollowed out mountain."

You rolled your eyes. "That mountain isn't a dormant volcano, is it? Or the legendary home of a mythical demigod? Or a gateway to another world?"

"I should hope not," Zheng said, unfazed. "Young Fa is not prone to being that dramatic."

"Or stylish," you said, elbowing Jack lightly.

He remained quiet, and you wondered if he was grinning behind the mask. Maybe not. He'd been super serious in Belfast.

"Young Fa does lack a certain...flair," Zheng said.

"Did you bring your cloak, Ranger?" Jack asked.

"Of course," you said, flicking it on. Torby had made some small improvements to your gear, and you were supposed to be able to use your EMP pulse without shorting out the suit now.

The omnis beside you froze for a moment, then tilted their heads. "Interesting effect, Ranger. Lindholm's work?"

"Yeah," you said, and her omnic bodies turned to face you, using auditory sensors to zero in on your location.

"These optics cannot track you, and therefore, Fa's probably won't either. Good choice, Paladin."

You realized Zheng was a Chinese elder, used to respect and authority. You weren't sure if she meant to sound as condescending as she did, or if she even cared. Maybe it was just a rich mad scientist thing. Well at this point, her demeanor was the least of your worries.

"We cannot go in the front door, however I have acquired the blueprints and there should be access tunnels to the west."

"Lead the way," Jack said.

"...What?" Gabriel sat at his desk. It was far too early for this bullshit. "What do you mean "they're gone?" I just saw them just a few hours ago. For fuck's sake, they were still in bed when I got down here." His voice got louder with every sentence and now he was yelling, but Ana didn't
She just shrugged. "Jack and Lucky are not on the grounds. Athena has verified this. Unfortunately, while she might know their locations, their GPS tracking is locked down. Jack’s doing, I'm sure. Lucky's clearances don't go that high."

"Have you talked to Gérard?" Whenever something shady went down and Gabriel knew nothing of it, Gérard was the prime suspect.

"He claims ignorance, and I believe him." Ana paused. "You don't think they've gone to assassinate Petras, do you? Because I don't know how well we can cover that up, Gabe."

"If they did and didn't invite me, I'm going to be pissed," Gabriel muttered. "No, not Petras. Not yet."

Ana uncrossed her arms. "I have a few ideas, none of them good."

Gabriel yawned, confident you had not gone to off Petras without him. Jack normally wasn't that spontaneous and you would at least leave a note. "What, you don't think they snuck out to plan a surprise party for me?"

"...Jack isn't that considerate and Lucky isn't that civilized."

Gabriel narrowed his eyes, maybe just a little defensive. "Ana."

"We both know it's true." She shrugged. "Give them a few years, maybe they'll learn. Lucky, anyway."

Gabriel sighed. "He's getting better."

"Yes," Ana agreed. "He isn't hopeless. Having both of you is good for him."

Gabriel could feel his expression softening. "Yeah."

"It's good for you too," Ana said. "And her as well. But maybe not Jack's office carpet."

Gabriel didn't mind Ana's smug look. He certainly wasn't ashamed. And if she didn't like it, she could knock next time. "I know."

There was a knock at the door before Jesse walked in carrying two mugs of coffee and a letter. "So...Genji gave me this and told me that my eyes would explode if I tried to read it." He nodded at Ana and handed the paper and a cup to Gabriel.

Gabriel unfolded the paper and read the note. "Operation I Need Coffee. What the..." Swearing, Gabriel took the op name and pulled up the briefing on screen. As he read the contents, he switched over to lengthy diatribe in Spanish. Ana came behind his desk and let loose a stream of curses in Arabic.

"That...idiot!" Ana exhaled sharply.

"I'm going to kill him," Gabriel said, when he had recovered his ability to use polite words. "Maybe both of them."

"I'm going to help," Ana said.

Jesse took a step backward, a conflicted expression on his face.
"What is it?" Gabriel asked, recognizing that look.

"Uh...well...you see, I don't know what's going on, but..."

Jack remained silent as the two of you followed Zheng's omnics through the rocky steppes. The cold dry air made the inside of your nose burn.

"We're here," Zheng announced, and the four (three?) of you stopped before a large sheer cliff face that went up a few hundred feet.

You eyed the small mountain with skepticism. "How can you tell?" You asked.

"This spot is a blackhole of signals emissions," she said, seemingly unaware of your sarcasm. "It's not a good concealment technique, but it does serve to keep me out. There's a tunnel this way. I can sense the digital cover programs to the west. It isn't hardlight tech, simple reflection projections. Very handy illusions that don't take much effort to maintain."

You glanced at Jack.

"Are you saying On Sing has a functional invisibility cloak?" Jack asked.

"Not quite. The projections don't work as well for objects in motion, but they can be programmed to blend in with all kinds of weather and light conditions in set locations. We're still working on the personal optical cloaking devices. The processors have to be lightning fast to change pigment and texture."

"Does it fool wildlife better than more primitive version of camouflage?" Jack asked.

"Creatures whose sight stays within the visible light spectrum buy into the illusion. But insects and other invertebrates don't seem to be fooled. It's a minor weakness," she acknowledged.

You filed that away for future reference, wondering if Winston or Torby could design insect-based omnics as countermeasures.

"I admit, I tried bioengineering it, mimicking chameleons and cephalopods. I could replicate the effect with living tissue, and it was thin enough to make suits out of, but it required a neural interface and the feedback loop left a lot of users oversensitized. Basically it became too painful to wear after an hour or so. I suppose I could always pick the project back up, given what I've learned about neural processing algorithms and tweaking brain chemistry..."

"I'd like more information about the resistance we'll be facing. I will admit I've skimmed your blueprints and notes," Jack said. "But I assumed the "Mongolian Death Worm Project" was a faulty translation."

Zheng's talkative omnic fell silent for a moment. "Aiya. I'd forgotten about that one. Well, it's not as bad as you think. It's more an experiment than a security measure. Still, don't try to pet them."

You rubbed your forehead. "Wait, what?"

"I don't even know if that project is still active. Honestly, it's the least of your worries. Fa
has stationed a fair amount of Red Pole omnics here. He was supposed to get rid of them, but falsified the reports. There are a few cyborgs loyal to him. The unenhanced humans won't be a problem. They are weak and Feng can probably clean them up on her own."

You rolled your eyes, because apparently Zheng had forgotten what you were. Or she just didn't care. Though it made you wonder what kind of add-ons Feng had.

"You seem awfully certain Feng is alive," Jack said.

"...This is not the first rescue party sent after her," Zheng said after a moment. "But I lost contact with my other bodies once they made it a quarter of the way into the facility. I suspect it was a controlled EMP, though I am not entirely certain. The maps are accurate, Paladin. I know from firsthand experience."

Zheng's silent omnic reached through the rock face and something beeped. An airlock hissed, and metal hinges groaned, all out of sight. The omnics disappeared first, and Jack followed. You shook your head and stepped through the illusion.

The narrow metal tunnel was tall enough for Jack to stand up straight, but you had to walk single file. Emergency LED lights dotted the walls. The air was stale and you caught whiffs of death and melted plastic. It was hard to tell if that was because of poor ventilation or if this was a murder scene. You did not shut the door behind you.

"We originally came in a different route," Zheng said. "But that way is closed to us now. This part of the facility is not actually in use yet."

"Comm units on. Zheng. Can you transmit directly to Red Channel?"

"Of course," she said, now a voice in your ear, her omnic bodies both silent. "The perimeters guards will be sparse. Fa has not sent reinforcements. But the Red Pole omnics here have been upgraded."

Jack tensed beside you.

"Swords still?" You asked.

"They have yǎnyuèdāo as well. Reclining moon blades. They are polearms, like glaives."

"Great," you said, not holding back the sarcasm. "Because those giant killer robots just needed a little more range."

"If you can lure them into the tunnels, it will reduce their mobility."

You'd just be up close and personal with a few tons of homicidal articulated metal. That seemed so much safer. You were grateful for the high metal collar that blocked off half your face. Because you knew your expression wasn't very polite.

"I read Winston's workup on the one you brought back. My rifle should do the trick, Ranger. Yours won't, but you're more than equipped to handle the cyborgs." Jack's voice was dry, all business, and yet you recognized the playfulness of his last comment. Oh boy.

"Just don't be stupid and try to punch one to death, like someone else we know."

Jack actually laughed. "No promises, Ranger."
"Is that a pulse rifle?" Zheng asked Jack.

"Yes," Jack said.

"That should do well against the Red Poles," she said. "They were constructed to withstand kinetic small arms fire and some ordnance."

"Reach Feng is priority," Jack said. "We can shoot our way out, unless this facility has a self-destruct option or Fa is capable of orbital strikes."

"Neither of those will be a problem. Fa is trying to be subtle, and I have a handle on all his works now. Except for this one. Anyway, who builds self destruct mechanisms into their own homes?" Zheng asked. "That's ridiculous."

"It's an understandable mad scientist trope," you said. "Especially if they have Mongolian death worms just lying around."

"I am aware. It is foolish. We have well-tested containment procedures for that. And they actually work. This isn't Jurassic Park, Ranger."

You stood there, for a moment, wondering if On Sing would bring back dinosaurs. Or any other prehistoric life forms. Or even engineer dragons. If you saved Feng, maybe she would be amenable to making you a-

What the hell? Was there something in the air? Because that was an insanely stupid idea. Awesome, but incredibly stupid.

"So we only need to worry about ground troops, not air support," Jack said. "Where do you think Feng is?"

"Feng planned on holing up in the panic room. We are on the first level. The finished panic room is on the fourth level. This facility has seven aboveground levels and several more beneath the surface. Those are still under heavy construction though."

Jack nodded. "Was it wise to build so many pneumatic tube transports?"

You blinked, because apparently you were old school. You just took the stairs most of the time. Elevators were too vulnerable. You'd done so many elevator ambushes. Whooshing freely through tubes to get around? That was cool in theory. But you could poke a lot of holes in that theory, starting with all the things one could do to compromise the tubes.

"...that was not my idea," Zheng said, somehow sounding embarrassed. "The younger generation was enamored with the idea of "zooming" and "slides." I strongly recommend not using any of them. Both sides have left unpleasant traps in them. Caltrops, focused plasma beams, proximity mines, dead fish, itching powder..."

"Those last two, those were Feng, weren't they?" You could not stop yourself from asking.

"...Yes, on top of the caltrops and proximity mines." Zheng's omnic stopped in front of another large circular sealed door.

"This time, I will stay out of the firefight. These bodies are not ideal for combat. We will work on breaching the mainframe from a few access points. We would be more efficient if you wished to advance in search of Feng."
You gave Jack a look. Because it went from "get me in" to "maybe we could look for her" to "you go ahead and get shot at while I play video games."

"We will scout ahead. Can you monitor incoming omnic forces?"

"There are a few ahead, but they may start attacking once I start my assault on the system."

"Do we need to defend you?" You asked, not liking the idea of making some kind of last stand against a mad scientist's hive.

"You need to find Feng," she said. "We are better situated to take control of the system this time." She opened the door, the seals hissing. You advanced into some kind of server room, several lights blinking red at a slow pace.

"What is this?"

"Backups," she said, no longer facing you. The silent omnic knelt unfolded itself, like an origami figure. It went from vaguely humanoid to a modified console, joints splitting, chest opening up, and head blooming like a flower into a satellite dish. It was all very artistic, efficient, and unsettling. Zheng's verbal omnic plunged both hands into the contact point inside the transforming omnic's chest. "We will begin here. Good luck, Paladin, Ranger."

You stared for a moment, shaking your head.

"Let's move," Jack said. "There are stairs along the western perimeter."

You'd gotten a look at the facility blueprint. The facility was dome-shaped within the mountain, stairs running along both eastern and western sides, pneumatic tubes crisscrossing in central locations, and freight elevators on the northern and southern points.

You took one last look at Zheng's omnic bodies, a cool blue light suffusing them both, and went out the doors.

Jack took point. You didn't argue, instead studying the metal hallways. It wasn't so much futuristic, as unnatural and claustrophobic, but there were still exposed wires and half the hall LEDs did not light up.

"...You knew this was going to happen, right?" The hall was wide enough that you could walk next to him, but you stayed behind him, keeping an eye out for trap doors or slithery shadows. The ceilings were high enough that neither of you were going to bump your heads. Reinhardt might, but that was normal everywhere.

"Yes," Jack said. You passed through another doorway, the lights brighter now. "Doesn't change what we're here to do."

"I'm really not liking some of the implications." Mostly about Zheng's sanity.

"...We'll deal with that later," Jack said. He raised a hand and you fell silent.

He drew his gun, and you had to back up because it was massive. Probably weighed half as much as you did. Jack handled it with thoughtless ease.

You bit your lip and continued down the hall, ducking to avoid loose cables dangling from the ceiling. You held your carbine in your right hand, wondering what you would encounter first: Red Poles, cyborgs, Mongolian death worms? Well, it was an excuse not to think about Lao.
You went through another door, and the quality of the area continued to improve: finished rooms, working lights, decorative plants and scrolls placed along the walls. You admired a silk hanging portraying koi eating jellybeans. How untraditional. And probably bad for the fish. This area was obviously no longer under construction.

"They are not yet aware of my presence." Zheng's voice sounded in your earpiece. "But I suspect that will change in another two minutes."

"Understood." Jack nodded at you. "Try not to get yourself killed."

"That is usually what I'm doing," you scowled.

To your surprise, Jack leaned down, the metal of his mask brushing lightly against your bare cheek. "This is worked better in my head."

"So much for the sexy kiss while blowing up tons of enemies," you shrugged.

"Maybe later."

Something large and metallic clomped in the distance, closing in on you. Jack stood in front of you, blocking your sight lines.

"Stop man-spreading and pick a side," you said, kneeling. Jack shifted slightly to the right.

A familiar red-armored omnic entered the hallway. Jack shot first, the assault rifle nowhere near as loud as you expected. You lay down cover fire, EMP rounds flaring as they struck its chassis. Jack fired another energy bolt and the Red Pole dropped its polearm, before staggering backward. Another blast of red energy cut through its thick plating and it fell, the clatter deafening. The floor shook and you rose, with serious gun envy.

"What do you think?" Jack hefted the gun over his shoulders, head tilted at a cocky angle.

"It only takes Gabriel two shots," you said, smirking behind your metal collar.

"...I have better range," he said, sounding just a wee bit defensive.

"And the bigger gun. Not feeling...self conscious, are we?" You winked at him.

"...You're going to get it on the way home," Jack growled. You weren't fooled. You could hear the amusement in his voice.

"It's OK, sir. Size isn't everything." You patted his shoulder.

"Keep it up, agent." He shook his head. "I've got a long memory."

"And a longer gun, one that certainly isn't any kind of psychological compensation for anatomical features." You chuckled as Jack gave an exasperated groan and turned on his heel.

You examined the fallen Red Pole, the yānyuèdāo taller than Jack. You shook your head. You were staying very far away from those things. Jack could shoot them and you'd provide immoral support and gun innuendo.

"They know we're here," Zheng said over the comms. "But they can't pinpoint your location. Unless you stand around and chat for an inordinate period of time."

"Why are we stopped, agent? Let's move."
Jack picked up the pace and you had to shift gears to keep up. Even carrying that massive gun, he was still faster than you. The two of you sprinted through the hall, Jack's heavy metal boots clanging against the floor. You could hear the omnis in the distance, but Jack got you to the stairs without further incident.

"Hold up." He raised a hand and opened the metal door. "Watch out for the tripwire. Crude, probably allied work."

You glanced down at the thin wire glistening a foot over the threshold. You followed the path until you spotted a sealed metal pipe. You'd seen enough of Vo's "party blaster specials" to recognize that there could be anything in there: ball bearings, nails, probably not hard candy, but she'd done a less combustive version of that at the Blackwatch New Years potluck and you'd never realized Everlasting Gobstoppers could hurt so much.

"The steps are clear," Jack said, and you wondered what other things that visor could do. The two of you went up the first flight of stairs, Jack keeping an eye out for traps. Did he view you as more of a hindrance than a help, given the fact he kept looking back over his shoulder to make sure you were behind him?

"I'm not going to wander off," you said.

"You're real quiet, agent."

"Well, I thought we were supposed to cut down on the banter-"

"No, you walk quietly. You breathe quietly. Guess you've picked something up from the Shimadas. Didn't expect it was all."

That was an odd compliment.

"Especially considering how loud you get when I've got you under me," he added, taking three steps at a time.

You felt your face heating up. It was probably all the cardio. Yeah, that was your story and you were sticking to it. "You want to talk about that, now?"

"We could talk about Agent Lao instead, if you like," he said, as you cleared the third flight of stairs.

You glared at his back. "It's not necessary." You realized you'd told him that you would talk about things when he asked, but now was not the time for you to think about Lao.

"Sure, that's why I came back to you bundled up against Gabe, looking like someone kicked your dog."

"I'd actually be super pissed if someone kicked my dog. That I don't have. My hypothetical dog. Who fucking kicked my hypothetical dog? This was just a hypothetical kick, right?"

"...You know what I mean, sweetheart." Jack did not sound amused by your panic-babbling.

"...Do you and Gabriel usually talk about feelings during combat?"

"You recall all that sparring we do, yeah?" Jack sounded smug.
Oh, yeah. Duh.

"I appreciate it, but I would rather focus on finding Feng and not walking into any traps."

"You're good at multitasking." Jack stopped in front of the entryway to the fourth floor. "Humor me too while you're at it."

"Don't I always?" You glanced down, still looking for tripwires.

Jack cleared his throat. "Would you rather talk to Gabe about it? I know he's better informed on the subject, but...this is important to you and so it matters to me." Even when you couldn't see his face, you could fucking hear the rueful expression he was wearing.

"...She said some shit. It hurt." You shrugged. "Honestly, I haven't processed it yet. I wasn't exactly surprised, but it still put me off balance and I didn't know how to react. So I just made polite face and left. I'll figure it out over time. Or I will once we've rescued Feng. It's honestly too much for me to think about while I'm on a mission, Jack."

"...That's fair." He sounded slightly sheepish. "You've got me and Gabe to bombard you with questionable advice. Just ask away. Even if I'm not a genius about feelings, I can make you laugh at what not to do. That counts for something right?"

"You're being ridiculous."

"And, I'll have cake and beer on hand, just for you."

That was an offer you couldn't refuse. Equal parts honest support and self-deprecating humor, what really clinched Jack's delivery was the overwhelming sincerity of it. Amélie and Jack probably attended the same damn charm school. Jack just went to the rural satellite location, less polish, but the same curriculum.

"We can talk about it later, promise," you said, relenting.

"You're getting pretty good at compromise." Jack chuckled and opened the door.

You grumbled under your breath, fully aware that Jack had finessed you, and that you let him.

The door led you into a wide hallway with a vaulted ceiling, cracked plaster and scorch marks covering much of the area. You eyeballed the large furrows dug into both the walls and floors, pretty sure that it was a damn omnic polearm that did the damage. You sniffed the air, catching whiffs of cordite, smoke, and rotting flesh. The hall curved. Around the bend, a badly-burned cyborg corpse lay ripped into quarters. The parts removed were all metal, but when you squinted, you saw the skull had been caved.

"Feng could do something like this," Jack said, kneeling beside the body. "I think your methods are more efficient and restrained."

"...I should hope," you scowled. "I have more restraint most of the time."

"You can have more restraints any time," Jack chuckled and you rolled your eyes so hard, the inside of your skull chafed.

"Spare me," you muttered. "I think I miss the stick-up-his-fine-ass Strike Commander."
"That can be arranged too, agent," Jack growled at you. "I owe you a great deal of payback. Complete with restraints and up-the-butt stuff." And then he had the audacity to laugh.

You shook your head. This wasn't a date. This was a rescue mission. But despite omnis, crime lords, and alleged Mongolian fucking death worms, Jack was making time to flirt. Worse, you liked it.

He rose and you both continued down the hall, checking out cracked walls and alcoves.

The hall opened up into an enormous, circular, multilevel chamber, with terraces and overhead walkways. A reflecting pool gleamed from the bottom level, an assortment of plants spilled down the graduated terraces starting at the top of the room and going all the way down to the reflecting pool, the greenery mimicking a waterfall. There was a skylight of some sort letting in the familiar harsh sunlight, though the air remained warm and slightly humid.

You looked down, calculating at least a forty foot drop. You saw red metal moving below, and watched the half dozen omnis patrolling the first floor, their motions almost clockwork.

The halls ran in circles, rooms and exits built along the way. The panic room was up ahead, but you already had a bad feeling about this.

"I don't think she's up here," you said after a moment. "We've encountered so little resistance."

"Noticed that." Jack stayed in the front. You hadn't heard from Zheng, though you hesitated to reach out and inquire.

"Wild goose chase?"


You came upon the location of the safe room, and your heart sank. The heavy vault door had been smashed in, rubber seals scorched, locks melted.

Jack entered first, half crouched, his gun raised. You followed, keeping a careful eye out for ambushes.

A Red Pole lay sparking on the ground, its chassis torn open by some kind of piercing weapon. The room itself bore the same style combat scars as the hallways. The once expensive furniture lay scattered across the floor, a mash of splintered wood, burnt fabric, and crumpled metal. You and Jack cleared the room, finding no signs of life.

"She's not here," Jack said into the comms.

There was no reply.

You sighed. Because it figured. "Next move?"

"Follow the omnis," Jack said. "We can try to rendezvous with Zheng and back her up."

"Back down then?"

"Yeah," Jack sighed. "Some of the lower levels had decontamination rooms and isolation chambers. She could have holed up in one of those too."
You and Jack headed back out. Jack bring up the rear. You examined some gouge marks in the doors, like someone had just dug their fingers into the lock system and just pulled. Wires hung out of the broken metal.

"Down!" Jack shoved you to the ground, one arm wrapped around your head as he covered you. You heard the shots strike the walls, plaster and fragments of metal raining down on you.

A bullet pinged off Jack's armor and you cursed. Given the angle of attack, they were shooting from a higher level.

"Go!" Jack ordered and yanked you to your feet. The two of you rushed out of the open area, heading back to the relative cover of the enclosed hallway where a trio of Red Pole omnis waited.

Your stealth field was up, but they had lined up shoulder to shoulder, polearms raised. You could sneak by, but Jack's heavy steps would give him away. You raised your gun.

"Maintain suppressing fire. I'll work my way down the line" Jack said and you started shooting. Your carefully-spaced EMP rounds slowed the line down as you backed up, trying to keep a safe distance between yourself and their wide swing range.

This time Jack went for the red light near the main optic sensors, and it only took two shots for him to bring down the first one. "Did you see that?" He called out.

"Are you trying to impress me?" You snorted.

"Is it working?" He laughed, having way too much fun.

"Ask me when they're all dead," you shouted, as you jumped backward, narrowly sliding out of the path of the yānyuèdāo strike. It was wrong for something so big to be so fast. One hit would obliterate you.

But you had to keep backing up, well aware that the moment you left this stretch of hall, you'd be in sniper range once more.

Jack took more shots for the second one, and you concentrated fire on the third one, watching it skitter to a halt.

"Hold fire!" Jack rushed it from the side, and swung his gun like a bludgeon. You winced at the sharp clang of metal on metal, but the Red Pole dropped and Jack sent a bolt of energy through its processing panel. With every omnic he brought down, your gun envy got a little bit stronger. Why was he such a damn showoff?

"And stay down."

His gun smoked, as did the remnants of the vaguely humanoid piles of scrap metal on the ground. Jack unsealed his mask, as you knelt over your enemies, looking for anything out of the ordinary. The armor patterns were the same as the ones you'd encountered in Hong Kong and maybe Belfast. But there were dents and char marks that you were pretty sure had not come from your guns.

"Hey."

You looked up, Jack's bright blue eyes on yours.
"What's wron-?"

Jack's gloves gripped the back of your head, his fingers working your collar loose, and you gave a startled gasp as he leaned in, kissing you hard. He nipped at your bottom lip, tongue slipping into your mouth. You moaned softly as he ran his gloved fingers across your cheeks.

"I realize it's not a sexy mid-battle kiss, but maybe you can make do with this little victory celebration," Jack chuckled, even as he slid the mask back on.

You stared at him for a moment, before slowly adjusting your armor. "Damnit, Jack."

"So, impressed yet?" He preened under your astonished look.

"...Yeah," you said, begrudgingly.

"Well, don't lose your panties yet sweetheart, I'm just getting started." He swaggered to the stairs and you seriously contemplated shoving him.

There were three more Red Poles waiting for you on the landing of the second floor. You were tempted to just turn around and go back to the third floor, but Jack lowered his pulse rifle and began firing.

They charged this time, three massive yǎnyuèdāo wielding robots moving too fast for you to use grenades. So you had to retreat up the stairs, shooting over your shoulder.

"We can lose them on the third floor," you said, holding open the door.

"We can take them down," Jack said. "No point leaving them for later." The two of you spun around the corner. Jack raised his rifle, put three energy bolts into the first omnic. The door was only wide enough for them to emerge single file, but the second one used its smoking companion as a shield, and the third one rushed forward, swinging the polearm in an arc.

You flattened yourself against the wall, but Jack ducked under the strike and slammed his gun into the omnic's chassis. Swearing under your breath, you lifted your carbine and began firing.

The omnic ignored you, spinning its weapon. It swung again, the pole part striking Jack across the shoulders. He staggered, and the omnic, probably judging the distance by sound, lashed out, metal arm punching Jack in the gut. He dropped to his knees with a grunt.

Your EMP bullets shattered the red plate and the omnic began to jerk erratically as it lost control of its body.

The second omnic attacked then, its yǎnyuèdāo stabbing through the air, past Jack's ear. When it found no purchase, the omnic rushed forward, slamming Jack through the wall, and into the main fountain chamber.

"Jack!" Your mind flashed to the sniper, but the Red Poles were the immediate threat. You followed, hoping the omnic you had been facing was down for good.

The Red Pole dropped its weapon, lifted Jack over its head, and threw him off the parapet.
Snarling, you bit into the finger your left glove, yanking it off, shut off your stealth field, and slammed your middle finger into the omnic's back. Your fingers twitched and you brought up your carbine in your right hand, firing point blank into its processing panels.

The omnic shuddered, and teetered there. You rammed into it with your shoulder, knocking it off walkway. Oh shit, what if it landed on Jack? There was a crash of metal hitting the ground and you cringed, hoping Jack hadn't been in the middle of that.

Swearing, you leaned over the edge, almost afraid to look.

"Jack!" You searched the ground vainly for any sign of him. You saw his enormous gun on the ground, but of course, you wouldn't be able to see him if he was buried under a goddamn Red Pole... "Answer me!"

"You're so loud, agent."

You looked down and to the left. Jack dangled from the edge of the second floor railing. He waved with one hand and then hauled himself over the low wall with ease.

"Goddamnit, Jack!"

"You need to be careful about throwing omnics off ledges, agent. That is way more serious than tossing coins off skyscrapers." He laughed and you sagged in relief. "Get back into cover," he said, as if he only now remembered the sniper.

You headed back to the stairwell, taking a moment to put a few more rounds in the still-twitching omnic on the ground.

Jack waited for you on the landing by the second floor. You gave him a quick once over, taking a moment to poke his ribs. He just shrugged. "I would've been fine from that height. Not if you dropped an omnic on me afterward, but the fall itself wouldn't have killed me."

You exhaled slowly. "Next time don't let them get so close."

"Mmm, I think I recall telling you something similar." He nodded to himself. "Yes, this all sounds very familiar..."

What a dick. "I definitely remember telling you that we could lose them. No need to engage every enemy we see. What if that sniper had taken a shot at us while we were fighting?"

Jack took off his mask, his grin wide. "I'm fine, sweetheart. Stop fretting."

"No, stop taking stupid risks. I realize you don't normally get to just be an agent in the field but-"

He kissed you hard, tongue prodding against yours and it was a few seconds before you shoved him off.

"Quit using your sneaky sex-wiles on me, Jack! I'm telling you to stop being so damn reckless!"

"Oh yes, we've definitely been here before, baby. Sucks being on the other side, doesn't it?" His voice dripped with smugness, and he crossed his arms. "But unlike you, I can take the damage. So you just stay behind me, OK?"
"I should have dropped that damn omnic on your smarmy ass."

"Kinky," Jack murmured, leaning over to nip your ear. "You don't mean that."

"Every word," you said through clenched teeth.

Jack just gave a low, pleased laugh. "You're so sexy when you're angry, sweetheart."

"Does that line ever work for you?"

"Gabriel usually just punches me after the first time I say it," Jack admitted. He flicked your nose. "And then we roll around and fight for awhile. And after that, yeah, it works." A silly grin spread slowly across his face. "It works just fine...."

You flung your hands into the air and shook your head. "Jack-

"I'll be more careful. You use up your EMP attachment?"

"Yeah." You flicked your suit back on, happy to find that it still worked.

"I'll be a lot more careful then," he said, one hand resting on your waist. "I'm afraid I have to be. My rifle ended up on the ground floor."

"Your gun looked intact," you said.

"I'm sure it's fine. Unless you dropped that omnic on it."

You took point, entering the central fountain area of the ground floor. It was built to impress and you took half a second to admire the architect's aesthetics. Greenery and water flowed from the terraces overhead. The floor, the parts that weren't burnt out, or cracked, or smashed up because of irresponsible jerks dropping omnics from high up, was a mosaics of glass and colorful stones, forming a pattern you'd probably have to be high up to appreciate. It had a very "expensive greenhouse" vibe. You half expected to see colorful birds flying around. Maybe there had been, until someone shot them down and possibly ate them. You could see Feng getting hungry and doing just that.

The omnics that had been patrolling the ground floor were gone, probably the same ones that attacked you. You kept an eye out for the sniper, hugged the walls, and stuck behind pillars. Cover was essential. Jack retrieved his gun with no issue and gave it a test fire. It still worked and took a hefty chunk out of the masonry.

"Let's go find Zheng."

You backtracked, and came upon her omnics, still linked in their user/console formation. But the lights had gone dark, and you studied the server room.

"Zheng, are you still here?"

"That question is difficult to answer precisely," a voice said over the comms. "But I am present and slowly penetrating the system mainframe. The omnic shells are no longer necessary. You'll want to head for the lower levels. There's fighting down there."
"What kind of opposition are we facing?"

"A rough estimate is about a dozen Red Poles. I can't track the cyborgs, and I believe all the unenhanced human personnel are dead."

"We got sniped at earlier," Jack said. "Red Poles carry guns?"

"No." There was a pause. "...Perhaps it was a case of mistaken identity."

"What?" You crossed your arms, unsure of where to aim your disapproving look.

"You may encounter a pair of mercenaries," Zheng sounded all too calm. "I did not call them. But Feng is not without allies. Please try not to kill them. I would ask them to extend the same courtesy to you, but they are out of my range of influence."

"Who are they?" Jack pressed.

"I am honestly not certain. I have suspicions, but I would hate to give you inaccurate information. I will try to reach them before you. I will be in touch when I know for sure."

"Really?" You scowled.

There was no answer.

Chapter End Notes

So Costco has this large tres leches cake for like $13 and it's pretty damn good for the price (and the fact I don't have to make it.)

Prior has kindly pointed out to me that "Chanceux" should be "Chanceuse" because French adjectives have genders and yeah. Duh. Facepalm. After much deliberation I'm leaving it for the moment to maintain continuity. I planned to edit the finished work (keep finding grammatical errors, etc, and going back and editing right now is not on the agenda, not with the word count I'm trying to maintain). So for now, it is going to be incorrect, and I am sorry.

Working all Easter weekend, which is kind of annoying. Meh.

Nothing interesting to report. Will try to be more productive (with IRL stuff) next week.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Wrapping up Operation I Need Coffee.

Chapter Notes

I think Jack's sister Jane is paying Mamimi to make children art. Easter outfits!

I got thrown on the angst train headed for Destination Tragedy and Heartbreak. Fine, I'll write an angst AU later on. It'll be a (long) oneshot. But seriously, I am bad at juggling writing projects, so I'm going to finish this first. Not to mention it would have spoilers for later events in IAL. Angst!anons are dangerous.

You took a different staircase downward. Aboveground, most of the facility was actually quite spacious and well-decorated. Belowground, you could see the framework of what could become a habitable space, but that's all it was. It resembled the maintenance tunnel, more functional than welcoming. The halls had been carved out of stone and reinforced with some kind of composite. Metal panels lined parts of the walls, covering pipes, wires, and ventilation ducts. Harsh LEDs sat recessed in the ceiling and the air grew cooler and staler as you descended.

"You think we need a secret mountain base?" Zheng had given you the blueprints. You were sure that Winston could make some cool improvements to the design. You just had to pick a mountain and not a dormant volcano.

"...I'm pretty sure we don't have one in the budget," Jack said. "Unless you have suggestions on ethical ways to make money."

"We could let Athena start playing the stock market or partner her with Tataryn to rip off casinos. Most of them are tied to organized crime and Tataryn would get a kick out of it. Hell, I think half of Blackwatch would be up for it, provided we got a cut."

Jack stopped. "...I said "ethical ways." Though I suppose investing isn't a bad idea. Winston, Torby, and the rest of the technical department already market some of their modified inventions for civilian use. Overwatch gets a percentage and retains partial rights for everything they do using agency resources."

"You're asking me about "ethical" methods, Jack. I'm kind of shaky there." You rubbed the back of your head. You didn't bring up that Blackwatch sometimes confiscated ill-gotten gains for funding. Jack knew that of course, and maybe he even saw the real budget numbers.

You and Gabriel kept a couple sets of books. Official. Semi-Official. And a coded actual tally, because Blackwatch agents needed ratlines, just in case, and that's one of the things you loved about Gabriel. He took care of his people, even if they were more than a little questionable, like
Safehouses, escape methods, new identities if the heat got too strong. It wasn't always unethical stuff. Genji and Tataryn needed new civilian identities when they joined Blackwatch. And you, you'd need one too if you ever had to disappear, because of politics or worse.

"You actually have a pretty good idea of the difference between right and wrong, even if your actions are morally gray," Jack said, not sounding judgmental. "Anyway, what would we do with a secret mountain base?"

"What wouldn't we do with a secret mountain base?" You laughed, because you hadn't really thought beyond the cool supervillain factor. Maybe it was a bad idea. Lacroix and Ziv would get really into it, and the next thing you knew, they were holding the world hostage until the UN outlawed fanny packs and socks with sandals.

"I'd like more sunlight," Jack said. "You know, if we're talking about living there."

"Pfft, you just want a bunch of flat land for your corn." You began to reload as you walked. You were down to half your ammo reserves. Not a problem if it was Jack's gun you were relying on.

"I wouldn't mind some forest, maybe a lake. I don't actually want to grow acres of corn, Lucky," he said, sounding a little annoyed. "Just enough to grill and have at cookouts." He looked over his shoulder at you, and you wished he wasn't wearing that mask. "Is a mountain fortress your ideal house?"

You shrugged. "It'd be secure and pretty cool. But no, I haven't really thought about it."

Jack fell silent. You kept walking, and it felt like these stairs went on forever. Your ears had popped a few times and you were at least three stories underground now.

The silence was not quite comfortable. You wondered if it was something you said. "There's nothing wrong with what you want, Jack. I know I give you a lot of crap about corn, but--"

"You just want a big bathtub," he said. "Maybe a bigger kitchen, so you aren't always bumping into Gabriel or whoever's in there with you."

"I..." You stared at his back, heart beating a little faster. "Yeah, I guess."

"A treehouse maybe? You know, one of those hexagonal expensive models with the wraparound porch and a spiral staircase?"

"Now you're just being silly; how am I going to get a big bathtub up there?" You touched your tanto. "Anyway, property prices in Zurich are ridiculous. I thought about an apartment for awhile, but I couldn't justify it. I get what I need on base, I don't mind people popping by my room to visit, and I spend half my time in you and Gabriel's rooms anyway."

"I guess you do," Jack said, sounding oddly satisfied. "About Athena: you don't just see her as a facility caretaker, do you?"

"We talk," you said, unsure of where he was going with this.

"You just sit there and talk to the AI?" Concern permeated his words.

"She asks me questions. We have conversations. You don't?"

"No." It came out slow and deliberate. "What do you talk about that isn't work-related?"
'Boundaries, human behavior, our mutual friends. Like "Winston needs to get out more."
"Oh Lucky, I agree, but you do too. Might I suggest Capri. I hear it is lovely this time of year.
You should take Winston and confiscate his computer." "Ha, ha, ha. You know a full-grown
gorilla can rip off my arms and beat me to death with them, right?" "Oh Winston wouldn't do that.
Probably. Unless you took his peanut butter." Stuff you talk about it with your friends." You shrugged.

"...She helps you plan vacations?"

"Well, she can. I take her recommendations with a grain of salt. I once told her I wanted to
go somewhere warm and quiet, and she recommended Centralla, Pennsylvania. You know, that
place where the coal fires are still burning underground and have been for decades? Yeah. I think
she was trolling, because she mentioned the dangerous levels of toxic gas, but I'm really not sure. I
got the feeling she wanted to see it up close."

"I didn't realize she had developed that strong of a personality," Jack said, thoughtfully.

"Problem?"

"I hope not," he said. "She knows to keep her sentience under wraps. That's a PR disaster I'd
like to put off for the next Strike Commander."

The two of you lapsed into companionable silence. The quarantine chambers were closer,
and you thought you heard the rhythmic thumping of metal battering against metal in the distance.

"Looks like we're up. Can you hear us, Zheng?" Jack asked.

Radio silence, big surprise. You were starting to suspect that she was doing this on purpose
so she could eavesdrop. You couldn't feel her ghosting along your prostheses, but your paranoia
was acute enough that the idea did not seem like an outlandish ploy.

You pushed open the metal door, and the sound grew painfully louder and more strident.
Jack went through first. The area maintained the half-finished evil laboratory feel. Exposed wires
hung from the ceiling. The lights were too bright, and everything was covered in a combination of
plaster dust and soot. Keeping an eye out for Mongolian death worms, you followed the clatter as
it grew louder.

You and Jack rounded a corner, that opened into a wider corridor. About six yards out,
gathered around another sealed vault door, were six more Red Poles. Three in the front had left
their weapons on the ground, and battered at the metal door with their shoulders. The hall was too
narrow for them to generate much momentum, but they didn't seem to be tiring either.

"Grenades?" He kept his voice low.

"EMP," you said. pulling one off your belt. "I've got three. I think two will do to slow
them down."

"You stagger, I'll break. We have to be fast. Take out the armed ones first. They're closest."

"Got it." That was your instinct, but it was wise to coordinate before you went in guns
blazing.

He rested a hand on your shoulder. "Behind me."

"Your stupidly tall body messes up my throw. I'll use you for a shield, afterward."
Jack was silent for a second. "All right. Time to get on it. No one else is going to do it for us."

"Sir," you said, infusing the word with as much insolence as you could.

"I am going bend you over the seats on the ride home, agent," he said calmly. "Now let's finish this up."

Your opening salvo was the EMP grenade, it sailed between the two rows of omnics. You backed up as soon as it left your fingers, and began firing at the closest Red Pole. Jack started shooting, his pulse rifle giving off a higher whine than before. The first omnic went down without a fight. The second made it halfway down the hall before you felled it. The third one hefted its yānyuèdāo and threw it at you, like a giant javelin.

Jack slid to the side and slammed his gun into the pole midair, and shifting its trajectory away from you and into the wall.

Sparks flew as the massive polearm embedded itself in a nest of wires and the lights flickered. You threw the second grenade, and resumed shooting. Your EMP rounds sparked and pinged when they struck a chassis. Jack advanced, putting more energy bolts into the third Red Pole.

The ones focusing on the door had already turned. One flipped its sword into the air with its foot, caught the blade in one hand, and charged you. You backed up, maintaining a steady rate of fire.

"Shit, get down!"

Jack squeezed the trigger of his gun, but nothing happened. Of course. There was delicate tech in there. It wasn't supposed to get slammed around like a hammer. Or thrown off a balcony.

Swearing under your breath, you ducked the first swipe, wondering if you should risk a grenade at this proximity. Your pulse finger was dead and your gun lacked the power to stop a Red Pole in its tracks.

The omnic swung the sword downward and you threw yourself sideways, and rolled across the floor. It was on you in a flash, sword descending.

Jack was faster, and he blocked the stroke with his rifle.

"You OK, sweetheart?" Jack asked, breathing heavy.

"Fine!" You yanked the grenade off your belt. "We need to put some space between-

The Red Pole disengaged and swung again, the sword striking Jack's rifle and smashing it into his face, shattering his mask. Time slowed. The blade flicked forward, not a full sword stroke, but a whippy flourish that could still quarter Jack's skull. Your mind blanked, as Jack staggered into the wall, blood leaking down his face. For a few agonizing seconds, you were back in the Ninth Circle and you were frozen in place while he went down and you were too late, too late again. Your voice withered in your throat and you squeezed your left fist so hard, your bones creaked under your metal fingers. The pain drove the moment away, and you could feel your legs again.

Mask fragments crumbled away. You couldn't see Jack's face through all the bleeding. But you could see that he was still breathing, and you had to move fast if you wanted to keep him that
Climbing to your feet, you took a running jump and leapt onto the omnic's back, hands gripping its textured armor, metal fingers sinking into its cooling tubes. It swung its sword, but could not reach you. You searched frantically for a crevice of the right size. You found one between the shoulder plates and the articulated joints on its back. Metal clanged as it dropped the sword and began swatting at you. Its palm hit your right hip hard, and you winced. Pulling the pin out with your teeth, you wedged the grenade into the slot and jumped off, landing on your feet, then stumbling because of the pain in your hip.

There was a moment of silence, and then the grenade went off, catching you in the small radius, and shorting out your suit and fingers. The Red Pole teetered and fell, and you stood over it, firing one-handed into the glass panel where its optics were and then into the processing area, just to be sure. The other two were still frozen in place from multiple consecutive EMP blasts, and you walked up to them, and gave them the same treatment.

You turned to see Jack slumped against the wall, ruined rifle sparking, the remnants of the mask only covering the lower half of his jaw. Blood still flowed down his face.

"Jack!" You were at his side immediately. He was still breathing. There was a long slash that started over his left eye and slid down his right cheek. You fumbled one-handed with the seals, carefully prying the broken headpiece off. "Jack, come on."

"Not dead yet." He wheezed, hand reaching up to pat your cheek. "Did you get them all?"

"I think so." You tried to wipe the blood up, but head wounds always bled heavily. It wasn't deep, but it was long. "That's going to leave a mark. Think you're going to need stitches-"

"Don't care," he rasped and leaned forward, and kissing you, his aim off, and his lips pressing a bloody stain to your metal collar. He laughed at his clumsiness and wiped the blood out of his eyes. "You OK?"

"Bruised, but fine," you said. He adjusted your collar and yanked you down for a real kiss this time, one that tasted like copper and desperation. You let him, too relieved that he was alive.

"I'm concussed," he admitted. "But give me a second. I can power through it. Think my rifle is done for. Torby's going to bitch me out so hard..."

"OK, we just need to find Feng and get out of here," you said, kissing his cheek.

"I'm right here!"

You blinked and turned your head.

Feng crouched on top of the nearest busted-up omnic, her hair slightly mussed, her face smeared with grime. She wore ragged black fatigues and a green tank top coated in black stains. Her tattoo went from wrist to shoulder, spiraling green and black lines vanishing under her clothes. Feng's green eyes were huge and gleaming, and her delighted smile stretched from ear to ear.

Oh fuck. How much had she seen?

"So you and Jack?" She held up both hands, index and middle fingers twined. "I don't care about formalities, I'm calling him "Jack" now. It's just weird to use titles after you've drank someone's blood and vice versa, you know? Actually, you probably don't know, because you don't have to go through stupid archaic rituals for reasons." She stood up. "I'd heard rumors, but there
are all kinds of rumors about you Lucky, and the majority seemed to think you were with Genji. Oh shit, you're not cheating on Genji, are you?"

"Genji and I are just friends," you sighed, helping Jack to his feet. Your hip ached and you did not look forward to taking the stairs.

"Wait...I kept hitting on him in front of you. You're not mad, are you? I'm really sorry. I didn't know," Feng said rapidly. "Because that wasn't cool and I would never try to break up a happy couple. You are a couple right? This isn't one of those finally-resolved sexual tension moments that I interrupted, because if so I am really sorry. I can go back into the vault and give you fifteen minutes-"

"Feng, shut up so we can rescue you," you said.

"You came to rescue me? Oh my God. That is...touching. I'm touched. But I've also been stimed up for the last 48 hours and am super extra hyper-focused. Like you are all vibrating rainbows and it's really distracting. Plus, I've just realized that you must not be that mad at me for hitting on him in front of you if you came all this way to rescue me. I always knew you were cool. Like, awesome, but relatable. Captain Amari is amazing, but she scares the shit out of me. You and me, we could get drinks, and it would be fun!"

"Do you have any spare weapons?" You were out of grenades now, and while Jack probably had a sidearm, a pistol wasn't going to do enough against the Red Poles.

"Yes!" Feng grinned and disappeared into the open vault. "Do I have weapons? Do I have weapons?!" She paused dramatically. "Yes, yes I do! Let me show you! Come on!"

Jack leaned over and kissed your cheek, nuzzling your neck. "You smell good."

"Jack, focus." You stiffened as he stroked your waist.

"I am, but this isn't hard. I can do it with my eyes closed." He grabbed your butt, chuckling softly in your ear.

"Jack!"

"Can't wait to get you home-"

"Are you coming? Like following me in here, not like-?" Feng popped her head out, and gave you both a speculative look.

"He's concussed," you scowled, pushing his arm off your shoulder.

"She's really shy," Jack grinned and followed you.

"This is adorable! I ship it! I do!" Feng giggled as she entered the vault. She went to a rack tossed you each a five foot long spear and you stared very hard at her. "Don't look at me like that! This is cool, I promise."

She picked up and went back out to the omnic body. She held it overhead, and squeezed a button. The head shot out like a harpoon, punching a neat hole through the armor. She hit another button and electricity arced along the metal, sizzling as it came in contact with the Red Pole.

"Black button is extend. Red button is electrocute. White button is retract. Keep your
hands on the rubberized grip and you won't get shocked!" She yanked the spear out with no trouble. "Should have about an hour's worth of zapping power. They cornered me when I retreated in here to resupply, and I realized that six on one was not good odds."

"Zheng said your brother was hostage," you said, wincing as Jack spun the spear, his expression too gleeful.

"Yeah, I locked him in a specimen habitat for his own safety. He's useless in a fight." Feng shrugged. "He's probably not too happy with me, but the Mongolian death worms aren't that bad."

"...You locked your brother in the Mongolian Death Worm containment cell?" You asked, voice going oddly high.

"Oh, you haven't seen them. They only do a little bit of elecroshock, and we took away the spitting venom feature. That was corrosive as fuck. One of the techs got his arm melted off. But he was an omnic and modular parts made it an easy enough fix." Feng shrugged. "As long as Li stayed put, he'll be fine."

"...I'll take your word for it."

"Really, they're not that bad," Feng said.

You watched Jack do a lunge, and the spear extending another two feet as he thrust it forward, throwing in a fancy baton twirl at the end. Oh boy.

"He's not normally like this, is he?" Feng asked, clapping her hands together.

"No," you sighed. "He's not."

"Can I keep this?" Jack grinned at Feng.

"Totally! Now let's get Li and get out before Zheng does something drastic." Feng paused. "She didn't so something drastic to get you to come here, did she?"

"She emotionally-blackmailed Jack into rescuing you," you said.

"That's better than what she could do," Feng said, shaking her head. "Not that I'm excusing her behavior. I'm just trying to gauge if we've reached DEFCON 2 yet. She's really...attached to me. In an obsessive mom way." Feng shuddered. "And yet, she's still nicer than my mother. That is an alarming realization..."

"She admitted her consort and the twins are illusions. Claimed you were the only thing keeping her sane," you said.

"She told you that? Shit." Feng narrowed her eyes. "You two stick really close to me. OK?"

"Because Zheng guards her secrets zealously?" Jack stopped twirling the spear, his face serious.

"...Yeah, that's an understatement," Feng said grimly. "It could be nothing. We're all a bunch of accomplished, yet charming badasses here, but I'd still rather not risk it."
Feng led you up a level, her demeanor completely different. She still smiled at you and Jack, but there was worry etched in her brow. Jack stayed close to you, reaching out to pat your head, or rub your neck, or grab your ass, when he thought Feng wasn't looking. She was looking. She'd start giggling and Jack would sheepishly paste on an innocent grin, and it was everything you could do not to hit them both with your electric harpoon.

You came upon another sealed door, and Feng pressed a palm to the reader.

"Try not to make any sudden movements, and please don't hurt them, OK? They can't help it. They're good babies," Feng said.

You stared as the door opened into a sandy habitat, the UV light raising the temperature by at least ten degrees.

"Li! I'm back! And I brought friends!"

"Fuck you! Fuck your stupid lizards! And fuck your friends!"

Feng grinned at you over her shoulder. "He's a little pissy. I promise he's not always like this. Just most of the time."

Li was slender young man, with the same fine bone structure as Feng. He wore his hair in a long ponytail, and his blue business suit was torn, stained, probably unsalvageable, unless he was going for the post-apocalyptic look. He huddled on large rock formation and surrounded by half a dozen blood red creatures. They ranged from four to six feet long and you squinted. They were not worms, rather some kind of fat snake-like reptile with no visible neck and little skinny vestigial limbs you were certain could not carry their weight.

"Come on, Li. We're getting out of here. We don't have all day!" Feng yelled through cupped hands.

"Fuck you and fuck your giant electric skinks! I'm telling mom about this and I'm done letting her think that it was me who broke that urn in sixth grade! That was you! The tea set was you! The burnt quilt was you! The gym teacher's car was you! And I'm telling her so!"

"Quit your bitching, narc-y-pants. No one took the fall for the car! No one else knew! And I did this to save your ungrateful life! Now come on!" Feng marched in there and lifted a smaller "Mongolian death worm" under her left arm. It hissed and electricity started to spark off its skin. Feng just ignored its obvious displeasure and set it aside, clearing a path for Li.

"You need help?" Jack asked.

"Nah, they bite strangers. It's septic as fuck, and the med wing got blown up yesterday, so we don't want to mess around with that."

Zhai Li stumbled down the rocks, glaring daggers at his sister. Feng just ignored him and reached over to pat a death worm. It snapped its teeth at her, but she was too quick and scratched the top of its head while it hissed at her.

"Who's a good fat lizard baby? You are! Yes, you are! Don't you worry, I'll bring you back some camel meat, I know it's your favorite!"

Li was drawn and pale, his face an uncomfortable blotchy red, and you wondered if Feng had remembered to leave him any water. That seemed like a detail she would overlook. You pulled your canteen off your belt, and handed it to him. Li stared at it for a moment.
"Dehydration sucks," you said.

"Thank you," he said, taking it. He gulped it down, wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve. "I've been in there for over a day. She just shut me in and shouted 'Don't make any sudden movements! The babies are easily startled!' And then slammed the door, startling the goddamn mutant skinks." Li glared at Feng in disgust and finished draining your canteen.

"There were hostile Red Poles coming. I'm sorry. They didn't even bite you," Feng said, not sounding sorry at all.

"I'm not talking to you." He handed you your canteen back. "Thank you."

"If he's not talking to me, than how is he telling me he's not talking to me?" Feng asked you, sotto voce. "Or is he using telepathy? Am I the only one who heard that?"

"I'm not getting paid enough to mediate this," you said, reattaching your canteen.

"Mmm, you want a Death Worm? They don't do much besides eat, though..."

"Make it a small feathered dinosaur, preferably tinier than they originally came, and housebroken, and I'll think about it."

Feng gasped. "You're a genius! I loved Jurassic Park, the original one, not the remake! Oh my God. Mini-designer dino pets. Way less chance of them eating everyone alive! We can do all kinds of pretty colors and patterns, like shiny Pokemon. We'll make a goddamn fortune!"

Jack coughed. "Really sweetheart?"

You shrugged. "Well I don't have room for a full-sized one."

"Maybe if you got a house," he said.

You rolled your eyes.

Feng glanced between the two of you, her smirk all too telling. "Well, let's get out here before the rest of the Red Poles find us. Until Zheng gets the facility locked down, we're on our own," Feng said. "I'll go first and Li should bring up the rear."

Li was too weary to converse. He just shot dirty looks at his sister and you wondered if you would eventually have to save her from him. Probably not, he looked too weak and wrung out to be a real threat.

Jack held a spear in one hand, and gripped your immobile prosthetic fingers in the other. Feng sneaking hysterically amused looks at you, her cheeks puffing out as she smothered her laughter.

For one dizzying moment, you remembered when Lao used to look at Shin and you that way. Feng and Lao looked nothing alike, but that manic amusement, that cheerful openness, that was deja vu. It hurt, because you doubted Lao would ever look at you like that again. The memory was a shock to the system, and you nearly yanked your hand away from Jack.

Jack raised a brow.

You shook your head, and left your hand where it was.

You made it back to the stairwell without incident. Going up the stairs after all the combat
made you groan internally. Your right hip ached. And would Li be able to make it? The four of you climbed, Li huffing, puffing, and muttering angrily in Mandarin under his breath.

In contrast, Feng practically skipped up the stairs.

You were only one floor away from the ground level, when Feng stopped cold. "Spears out. Li, you might go down a floor."

"No. I'm not climbing this damn staircase aga-" He froze.

Another dozen omnis stood at the top of the stairs, swords and polearms angled down at you.

You sighed, because Zheng had not given you an accurate count of the Red Pole population. You folded your metal fingers to better grip the spear. "How's your shooting?"

"He's shit at it," Feng said.

"Shut up."

"Wouldn't trust him not to shoot us on accident. Well, you on accident, me on purpose. If he could shoot."

"You can provide cover fire. Slow them down." Jack took your spear, leaning over to kiss your forehead. "Feng and I can work through them."

"You're concussed." You eyed the slowly advancing phalanx of omnis.

"I'm still stronger and faster than you, sweetheart." He gave you a cocky grin. "And we both know I can take more damage."

"Quit showing off and let's finish this," you said, with more confidence than you felt. "I'll focus on the left." You pulled your carbine off your back and began to shoot, bracing the gun against your left arm since your fingers were out of commission.

Jack and Feng took the two on the right. Feng and Jack lunged forward, their speeds comparable. Jack slammed both spears into his target and you could hear the crackle of electricity as he fried their circuits.

Feng wasn't as graceful but she brought hers down at a sharp angle, then struggled to yank the spear loose. Jack tossed her one of his and kept going.

"I'm invited, right?" Feng asked.

"To what?" You switched places, giving Feng and Jack a chance to take down the ones you'd stunned and keeping them out of your line of fire. You went to the right, aiming at the next row.

"The wedding, duh."

"Feng, you can stop talking right now!" You gritted your teeth, bullets bringing down another omnic. You'd moved to your next target when you carbine clicked empty. "I'm out!" You scowled at your gun. You'd packed for a blitz rescue mission, not a miniature Omnic Crisis.

"Then stay back!" Jack ordered, parrying two strikes. "Looks like we might have to hole up again-"
Feng cursed a blue streak as the flat of a sword blade knocked her down the stairs. She hit the wall with an unpleasant crack. Jack fell back, holding a defensive line, as you tried to help her up.

"We need to move, now!" You shouted.

There was another crash, and you stared as an omnic flew into the air, bounced off the ceiling, then crashed back to the ground.

"The dragon becomes me!" A terribly familiar voice shouted.

"They fall before me!" Another far more unwelcome voice announced. And goddamn arrows flew through the air, thunking as they struck the metal chassis.

"You're in my way, Yakuza scum!" A woman snarled and you wracked your memory for a name. Nope, you didn't know her.

Beside you, Feng paled. "Oh no."

"Oh shit," Li said, crouching beside his sister. "Shit, shit, shit."

Feng drooped, closing her eyes.

"Are you OK?" You patted Feng's cheek.

"Shh, don't make any sudden moves. Also, I'm unconscious," Feng whispered, cracking open one eye and then quickly shutting it.

"What?"

"It's better this way," Feng said out of the corner of her mouth.

You and Jack stared as Genji and Hanzo cut through the remaining Red Poles from behind. A petite Chinese woman in red martial artist pajamas leapt overhead, driving her spear into a Red Pole's optic sensor.

You sat down and just watched as Genji, Hanzo, and the middle-aged mystery woman decimated the Red Poles. Jack leaned against the wall beside you.

"Did you-?" Jack raised a brow.

"Yeah, I wasn't running off on some crazy rescue mission for On Sing with the damn Strike Commander, and not telling someone where we went."

"...Gabe's going to kill me, you know. Ana too," he said, suddenly sounding very tired.

"Well, better you than me." You stood, moving in front of Jack as you watched a Red Pole drop for seemingly no reason. Then you caught sight of the dark bullethole in its back.

"Yeah, they would have found out anyway," Jack said, shaking his head. He wrapped one arm across your chest, resting his chin on your shoulder. "Goddamn, look at them go."

"They have a sniper," you said, because he hadn't noticed.

Jack stiffened behind you. "You're not my shield, Lucky." He released you stepping forward to stand beside you.
You waved at Genji and to your surprise he waved back. The angry middle-aged woman thrust her spear through a still twitching omnic then stalked down the stairs, her eyes on Feng.

"Li? Are you all right?"

"Fine, mother. Thank you for asking," Li said demurely, all the attitude gone.

"What have you done to my daughter?" She snapped at you, and you quashed the urge to back up. She was small, angry, and looked too young to have children in their twenties.

"She got thrown. She's alive, probably concussed," you said.

The woman crouched down and glared at Feng. "Wake up, you stubborn brat!"

"Hi, Ma..." Feng said weakly, her feigned feebleness actually quite convincing.

"You should have called us, you idiot!"

"Relax, Shi," a reed-thin, red-headed man, slinging a long rifle, sauntered down the stairs. "We can berate them later. Let's just get out of here before your creepy aunt starts issuing orders."

"Wayne, don't you start making excuses for her! She should have-" Shi snapped.

"I love you too, bunnycakes," he said cheerfully. "But we all know your aunt is batshit insane. So let's go before she decides to off all the witnesses." Wayne gave you an easy smile, freckles dotting his boyish face. But the mirth did not reach his eyes. He took a long look at Jack, smile fading. "Is that-"

"Yes," Feng sighed. "It's a big secret and they did me a huge favor."

"Wait...what?" Li glanced between Jack and Feng. "Holy shit, you mean "Jack" as in "Jack Morrison?!" Feng what have you been doing to get Overwatch involved?"

"Jack and me are buddies. I'm invited to the wedding, right?" She beamed at you both.

"...Feng, I'm not having this conversation with you," you said flatly.

"Wedding?" Hanzo glanced between you and Jack. "You're engaged? But...Are you two-timing Commander Reyes? With the Strike Commander?!" His voice got higher with each perceived outrage. "Genji, did you know about this?"

Feng's eyes got even bigger. "Wait, whaaaaat?"

You looked at Jack whose shit-eating grin just widened. He would be no help to you. So you buried your face in your hands and prayed for a Mongolian death worm to drop on your head.

"We're in a relationship, all three of us," Jack said, putting an arm around your shoulder. Was that the concussion talking? You weren't sure, but Jack was definitely bragging. And that annoyed you, because you had worked very hard to keep things under wraps, especially since not everyone here was confirmed as friendly. "And yeah, Gabriel and I are together too, if that's what you were wondering."

"That's amazingly hot. I ship it," Feng said immediately. "I ship it all across the world. I ship it to the fucking moon."

"Watch your mouth," Shi snapped, but she turned to give you and Jack a disapproving
"I can do that for real, you know. Ship things to the moon. But it's not worth it." Feng turned her speculative look upward. "Yet."

Hanzo just gaped at you.

Genji patted his shoulder. "Yes, brother, of course I knew. You mean to say that you didn't?"

Introductions made, relationships revealed, and rescuers thanked, you and Jack stepped over the smoldering heaps of expensive scrap into the main chamber. Feng led the way, followed by her parents. You and Jack went behind them and the Shimada brothers brought up the rear.

"Ah, Feng. There you are." Zheng's voice echoed over the loudspeakers. There she was. Right in time to do nothing helpful. "You are intact?"

"Yeah. Until Mother gets a hold of me," Feng said that last part under her breath.

"Our parents are private personal defense contractors with highly-specialized skills, something they hid from us till recently," Li said quietly. "And yet, we were far less surprised by their news than they expected."

"Mother is too terrifying to be a convincing housewife," Feng said. "I guess I'd be crazy pissy too if I had to pretend to like children, clean the house, and go to PTA meetings, instead of swaggering around smashing heads and stabbing things."

You blinked. "Wait, why did you call us if her estranged parents are fucking mercenaries?"

"They're retired," Zheng said. "And they aren't speaking to me."

"My daughter was not supposed to be a crime lord, Auntie!" Shi said loudly. Wayne just rubbed her shoulders, shaking his head. "I sent her to college! She was supposed to be respectable! Instead she picked a useless major and now she's a Triad boss!"

You actually thought that was a pretty impressive career move on Feng's part.

"Feng, why don't take your parents and go? I have business with the Strike Commander and his entourage." Zheng sounded mild, almost harmless. You bristled.

"Oh no, Auntie, you aren't pulling a fast one now. You swore-" Feng said.

Zheng said something sharp in what sounded like a Wu dialect.

You tensed beside Jack and noted that both Genji and Hanzo had their hands on their weapons.

"-a blood oath," Feng said, sounding disgusted. "We both did. Also, they totally saved me and Li. I'll adopt them all if that's what it takes. I'm serious. Nothing better happen to anyone here, my family included. Because I know you're sneaky and you-"
"Zhai Feng." Zheng's voice was hard.

"Auntie, you're acting crazy. Now why don't you take a moment to think about what you're proposing, and what you told me to do if you were being crazy. Should I leave you here to cool off? Because the Faraday cage is still up, and you can't leave here without some help."

There was a long silence.

"Maybe...maybe it would safer," Zheng said without inflection.

There was a long moment where you could feel Feng's parents communicating silently. Genji and Hanzo's eyebrows and fingers moved in rapid signals, planning a full-out ninja strike through elaborate nonverbals. Jack casually shifted his grip on the spear and you knew he was considering the backup server room and how much damage he could do.

"Nah." Feng began to laugh. "You'll go really bugnuts crazy on your own. Come on. Get back in your omnics. We'll have a long talk on the way home and you can apologize to our friends later, OK? But first, we need to take care of Fa and then figure out how to make friendly, miniature dinosaurs."

"Fa's dead. Elevator accident," Zheng said, sounding oddly regretful. Yeah, those seemed to happen a lot in your line of work. That's why you took the stairs. And you decided then that you really didn't like Zheng. Oh sure, be sorry that you killed the guy who started this shit with your favorite family member. But also plot to kill the people you asked to come in and save said family member from his machinations. Crazy bitch.

"Please tell me you lit up all the floor buttons before you dropped him. So he died in a state of extreme frustration," Feng said.

"I actually overloaded the circuit panel he was standing beside. Less civilian casualties."

"Well, OK. Guess that was responsible of you," Feng sighed. "I was gearing up to make falling jokes, but now I'll just have to express my regrets on this shocking turn of events."

You groaned inwardly. There was a very awkward silence, broken by Jack, and Jack alone, snickering.

Feng beamed at him. "Thank you, I'm glad someone appreciated that. Anyway, I'll have to write a really genuine-sounding letter of condolences and then laugh a lot at how terrible it will be. Oh Hell, I'll probably have to go to the funeral, and do all the bowing, and burn offerings. How am I going to do that with a straight face?" Feng began to laugh hysterically. "Killing Fa won't get me in trouble with the cousins, but laughing at his funeral? Breaking that taboo? They'll all rally against me. Damnit!"

It was not lost on you that despite her tangential babbling, Feng had backed Zheng down, and that in itself was something you weren't sure anyone else could do. You and Lacroix had not factored into your assessment of the On Sing political situation. That was fine, in this case, you didn't mind being wrong, especially since you'd had a chance to rectify your mistakes.

"Anyway, I'm going to help Auntie Zheng get back into her omnic bodies and then we can all go home, all right?" Feng didn't wait anyone to agree, she just started walking, and you wondered if she knew where she was going.

"Feng, after you're done with Aunt Zheng, we are going to have to sit down and talk about some things," her father said to her retreating back.
"Sorry, can't hear you, I'm not wearing my glasses!" Feng shouted back.

"That excuse did not work in high school, it isn't working now!" Her mother shouted. "You don't even wear glasses!"

"No glasses!" Feng sang out, walking faster.

"This is your fault," Shi said, turning to her husband. "You spoiled her."

The red-headed man just smiled, not at all disturbed by Feng's diatribe or his wife's accusations. In fact, he looked exceptionally proud of Feng, which while sweet, kind of explained her cheerfully dubious morality. "Of course, dear."

"Were you the one who took the shot at us earlier?" You asked as you walked behind Feng's father.

He chuckled. "There are omnis all over this mountain. Why would you think that?"

"I've only seen Red Poles and they don't carry guns." You didn't quite make it an accusation, but Zheng had already confirmed your suspicions.

Wayne, no-last-name-mentioned just shrugged. "There were cyborgs."

"Long dead," you smiled thinly.

"...Well, if I had taken a few shots at some figures scrambling around hostile territory, it would have been because I was unaware that we were allies." There was a hollowness to his pleasant expression, like the mask had stretched too thin. "And if I had actually been trying to kill you, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now." He tilted his head to the side. "Do we understand each other?"

"It's interesting that you would choose such an undiplomatic tactic with my friend," Genji interposed himself between the two of you, his face mask still on. "I remember you having better manners."

There was a pause as the men looked each other over. It wasn't quite a challenge, more an open examination.

"Soujiro's younger son would remember me. Of course." Wayne groaned.

"You brought such nice candy when you visited," Genji said lightly. "And you always remembered to take off your shoes. It surprised the uncles."

There was an awkward pause. Did everyone in the criminal underworld know each other? Did they have parties? An exclusive social media network? Or was Feng's father an infamous hitman that you were going to have to research?

"I've been awake for 48 hours," Wayne grumbled. "Makes me mean. Sorry. I appreciate you coming to my daughter's rescue and if I shot at you and the goddamn head of Overwatch, it was an honest mistake, because that's a fight I don't want to pick." He gave you a curt nod and walked faster, to catch up with his wife. It wasn't lost on you that he still hadn't admitted anything
and that his apology was crap.

"Don't let his friendly face fool you. He's wanted in about twenty countries for all kinds of tricky assassinations. If Captain Amari knows you let him go, she'd cut off your ears," Genji said casually. "So if I were you, I would pretend this never happened."

"What?" You facepalmed then. "I can't go after Feng's dad. Not now!"

"Mmm, that sounds problematic," Genji said. "For you anyway."

"I guess you've maxed your helpfulness quota for the week," you sighed. "But thanks for backing us up and for defusing that confrontation."

"I will forever cherish the look of confusion and outrage on Hanzo's face when Morrison announced your relationship status. He kept adding one plus one plus one and trying to make it equal two."

You snorted. "Jack's concussed. He really shouldn't have done that."

"Too late to worry about it now. And from what I hear, Commander Reyes and Captain Amari are furious."

Oh. Well. Shit.

"You should start planning your exit strategy now. Maybe consider changing your identity," Genji continued. "Or perhaps you could move into Lindholm's workshop for a week or two. I hear Ziv's crate is up for grabs." He sounded far too amused and you couldn't even be mad at him because he'd come all the way to Inner Mongolia to save your bacon and dragged his stupid brother along for the ride.

"Fucking hell." You rubbed your face and tried to ignore Hanzo's deepset frown. You had gotten out of bed for this?

"-And then Great Aunt Zheng and I are going to have a long talk about boundaries and not doing shady shit to our allies because that devalues the worth of our word, and really, what social capital is worth more than your reputation?" Feng took a deep breath.

"...Just, try to keep her in line," Jack said, probably deeming this a bad time to make threats about what you would have to do if Zheng went crazier. You weren't entirely sure that this was an indication of madness, just ruthlessness.

"Also, I'm really sorry about waking you up, mucking up your "no meddling in the On Sing politics" rule, and that whole thing where she was planning to permanently silence you keep her secrets safe, even though I suspect Lucky probably filed that information in a report before she left the base, and it wouldn't have done any good, but obviously she wasn't thinking clearly, and we won't be having a repeat incident, and we owe you big. Plus, I will be having a talk with my dad about how he treats my friends." Feng had a fist clasped in one hand and raised it to her forehead.

"Apology accepted," Jack said. "Just...we're not going to be able to get away with doing this again, so please ensure it's not necessary."
"Got it!" Feng said. "Hey, we are friends, right? Because you totally just saved my life, and met my whole family, and if you were single I would buy you dinner and proceed to flirt with you till you poured your drink on my head and left in huff. We can still do that part," she said, smiling brightly at Hanzo.

Hanzo angrily pretended not to notice.

You knew Genji was enjoying this. Something about the tilt of his head and the slight angling of his hips gave him away. At this point, you knew you weren't projecting; Genji’s body language spoke volumes.

"Umm...our relationship status isn't common knowledge for a multitude of reasons. It needs to stay that way," you said.

"For now," Jack added.

"Got it. My family knows how to keep secrets. In fact, my parents lied to Li and me for most of our lives! So don't worry, we are so good at secrets and lies, we probably wouldn't recognize honesty if it bit us in the ass!"

For some reason, that did not reassure you.

The sun was setting now. Feng had driven you through the motor pool exit to where Athena's cloaked craft waited. Genji and Hanzo had also left their transport in the area. Feng family's remained at the base, and Zheng was keeping a low profile. Which was fine. Because you were really contemplating how one could strangle an AI. Granted, Zheng wasn't an AI, but the lack of an organic body made the classification close enough.

The five of you stood outside. The sun was starting to set, and Feng watched you all sheepishly.

"Who designed that base?" Jack asked, after a moment.

"It was a group effort. I picked out the artwork. And designed the great hall. And sponsored the Mongolian Death Worm program," Feng said. "That's partially why I was so pissed. Like Fa totally hijacked my project. Why? Do you want one? Because I could sell this one for pretty cheap..."

"...Tempting," Jack said, nudging you with his elbow.

"You wanted more sunlight," you said.

"I can knock out part of the mountain and make a skylight!" Feng said enthusiastically.

"Mmm, it's probably outside my price range," Jack said. "And I'd have to consult Gabe."

Feng's expression grew shrewd. "So invitations...?"

"Earlier you were talking about dinosaurs," you said, hoping that would send her racing in another mental direction.

"Yeah! I haven't forgotten the dinosaurs! Lucky, you have the best ideas. Are you sure you don't want to come work for me? Not like quit Overwatch. Just consulting on weekends or something? Or maybe we can just drink tea and eat...whatever you like to eat, and hang out?" Feng trailed off awkwardly. "I'm not hitting on you, but I'm making this really awkward, aren't I?"
"Yes, Feng. We can hang out some time," you said, wondering what kind of grievous mistake you were making. But then, Feng was right. You had come to her rescue, met her family, and given her personal advice. You were kind of friends now. "I'm sure Genji and Hanzo would love to come."

Feng's face lit up and she turned to the brothers. "You're invited too!"

Hanzo muttered something under his breath. You suspected it was rude.

"I think that's a marvelous idea," Genji said. "Hanzo needs to get out more."

You nearly choked on your tongue. Hanzo started sputtering.

"Look, he's speechless with delight," Genji continued in a flat, almost disinterested tone. "We better get going, before he embarrasses himself. Keep in touch, Feng." He gave her a nod. "And he likes strawberry cake best."

Hanzo stalked off to their transport, while Genji strolled behind him.

Feng's smiled covered half her face. "We're going to go out. And we're going to eat food. And we're going to talk shit. And it's going to be great!" She chanted in a sing-song voice and hugged herself, making gleeful high-pitched noises. "You're coming too, though, right? Because this isn't a date. And I'm not going to try to bang either of them! Pinky swear! This is just a friendly...friendshippy friend-thing of friendliness. OK?"

"...Hanzo is terrible at social events," you said, because he was out of hearing range. "And Genji is kind of a shit."

"I don't care! This is going to be awesome!"

Jack patted your back gently. "We should get going."

"...You're invited too, Jack, though I guess, it's hard for you to go out and stuff, so I understand if you can't. We'll figure something out though! Anything for my blood-brother guy who is way more reliable than my actual brother. The moron."

"Thank you," Jack said solemnly, he extended his hand and Feng shook it enthusiastically. The air was cold, and his face was smudged with blood, but the sunset lent him a golden glow. "Just make sure Lucky has fun, all right? She doesn't get to go out enough." Then he smiled at you, eyes soft, hair blowing with the wind, just looking happy to be there, you felt your breath catch.

"Definitely!" Feng's voice got squeaky and she turned around. "...Why is he so hot?" She asked, somehow vocalizing your thoughts to herself. "How is he so hot? I can't even look directly at him. Can't breathe. My brain is seizing up. My chest is going to explode. It's like a flaming ice cream headache in my ovaries! Now it's spreading through my tubes to my uterus! Ugh..."

You could empathize, but you could have really done without the graphic description of the state of her reproduction system.
I have very little motivation right now. Ugh. I blame all the angst.

I do enjoy all the comments. You guys give me life. Except when you give me buckets of angst and leave me to cry alone in a corner. Need more cake and time to cook. Seriously crave karaage and it shows in later chapters...
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Feelings and some of the fallout from Operation I Need Coffee. More like "I need a place to hide."

Chapter Notes

In celebration of Retribution and the new skins/map, here's the chapter a little early.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Get over here and heal up," you said as soon as Jack boarded the transport. You set up the emitter and got out electrolyte solution, your hands starting to shake.

"That's my line," Jack said, dropping into a seat.

"I'm not the one who nearly got their face cut off by a giant omnic." You opened up the first aid kit and examined his face, knowing you were too unsteady to try sutures one-handed. The wound had stopped bleeding, but it hadn't closed. "I'm not sure I should be using a needle so close to your eye. Not with one hand out of commission." You looked at the medical stapler. Also a bad idea so close to the eyes and nose.

It was annoying that you could do so little for him now and you had to take deep breaths, reminding yourself that the damage was cosmetic. That Jack was going to be OK, that you hadn't let him down. Jack wasn't Shin, though you felt the echoes in your bones. The situation had only the faintest similarities, but the fear had been identical.

You could keep the mask up in front of your enemies, but now that it was just Jack and you, the reality was starting to sink in. Jack had put himself between you and a Red Pole's sword. Jack had gone down. You could have lost him there. You stared at the wound, swallowing roughly.

"I'll be fine," Jack said, touching a ragged edge of the cut.

"It's going to scar if we don't-"

"It's fine," Jack peeled off his gloves. "Unless you won't like me if I'm not pretty any more?"

"You're still too pretty," you scowled and he laughed.

"Angela can fix this when we get back. If not, then Gabriel doesn't get to be the only one with cool facial scars."

You cleaned the wound silently, trying not to think about what would have happened if that blade went an inch deeper or if the Red Pole had swung just a little harder. It was not hard to imagine the outcome and you shuddered, knowing that Jack had been fortunate. Steadying
yourself, you soaked in the soothing heat of the emitter, and tried to will yourself calm. The cut was about five inches long and grooved deeper along his forehead.

Jack nudged you, breaking you out of your reverie. "You got hit a few times too. Let me see."

"You got hit way more times-"

"Accelerated healing, sweetheart. Now stop arguing. Let me see your right side. You've been limping since we rescued Feng." He reached up, already loosening your armor. You shrugged it off along with the rest of your gear. Torby was going to be pissed about the suit. But then Jack had wrecked the pulse rifle and left it at the mountain base. Torby would probably overlook your comparatively minor sin.

Stripped down to your underwear, you hissed as Jack rested his hand on your hip, a large greenish bruise already formed along your side and thigh. He frowned, and ran his hands over you, picking out sore spots you hadn't yet noticed. He was thorough, fingers pressing lightly along your body as he checked you for injuries. It was a firm professional examination, despite the heat of his skin against yours.

"I'm fine, Jack."

"I need to see for myself," he said. "You can look me over next." His voice was low and rough, and you shivered.

"...Places besides your dick?"

"My eyes. You can't really see my dick when I'm balls deep in you."

Heat flared between your thighs. "Jesus, Jack."

"Look at you, already unwrapped for me." Jack drew you into his lap, your knees resting on either side of his thighs. He was hard against you. You shook your head. "You have a concussion."

"Not a bad one. I've still managed myself through the bad ones." He pressed his lips against your throat. "And as you can tell, my cock is just fine."

"Yeah, I'm sure your massive ego cushioned your skull pretty well-"

He raised a brow. "You're upset."

You scowled down at him, pulse quickening. "You are so damn reckless. Running halfway across the world at Zheng's behest. Engaging those omnics in the stairwell. Jumping in front of a giant sword-"

"Were you worried, sweetheart?" Jack leaned back, his smile easy.

You bit your lip. It was a struggle not to lash out. Jack had been reckless, and while he deserved some of your ire, your scathing comments would not actually help the situation. "Yes."

"It's no fun watching your lover get hurt, is it?" He didn't quite sound smug, just certain.

You almost climbed out of his lap and got dressed right then. But he cupped your face in his hands, eyes locked on yours.
"That wasn't a dig, just a reminder. I've had to sit out a lot of missions while you ran into danger."

You glared at him.

"I'm sorry I worried you," he said. "I never trusted Zheng and you're right, engaging those omnics in the stairwell was a mistake. Shielding you wasn't. You're not going to change my mind on that."

"You can't just-"

"Tell me I'm wrong," he said, suppressed smugness finally leaking out.

"You're an idiot, Jack Morrison," you snapped.

"You're welcome," he said, smile widening. "Just like you're welcome to show me exactly how frustrated you are."

You bit him then, your teeth clamping down on the base of his neck. He growled, fisting your hair.

"Don't want to throw you down right now, sweetheart. Not with all those bruises. You're going to be sore enough tomorrow."

"Who says I'd let you?" You unbuckled his belt while he unzipped his jacket. You slid your panties off, and rubbed the crown of his cock against your slick entrance.

"You're awfully wet for someone who isn't interested," Jack chuckled, slipping the jacket off.

"Oh I'm interested, just not in a yielding mood right now."

"I got that." He pulled off his shirt and you did not like the look of the bruise on his chest. "Eyes up here, sweetheart," he tapped between his eyes, then winced.

"Idiot, you're a walking contusion," you said sharply.

"You have a funny idea of sweet talk." Jack ran his hands up your ribs and under your breasts, never losing that easy smile.

"Athena, privacy mode, please," you said through clenched teeth. "Stop pushing me, Jack. Too raw for that right now."

"Ah." Jack placed your right hand on his shoulder. "Then let me put you in a better mood." He raised his hips, pushing straight up inside you, his shaft stretching you out. "Oh sweetheart-"

You rolled your hips and he buried his face in your breasts. "Fuck," you whined. He filled you so well, and you ground against him, unable to stop yourself.

"That's it, baby. Look at those tits bounce." He took a nipple in his mouth, sucking hard, while he stroked your hips. You took him all the way, savoring how he felt against you. He was an idiot. But he was here. He was alive.

"You're a reckless jerk-"
He just grinned up at you, panting. "I'm not going to argue with you, not while you have that sweet pussy clenching around me."

He was so smooth, and relaxed, and infuriating. You knew on some level that you weren't being entirely reasonable, but you couldn't think straight enough to care. He was beautiful, and aggravating, and such a damn shit. So much that you couldn't stand it right now. You gave a cry of frustration and Jack reached over to stroke your clit.

"That's it, baby. Let it all out." He nuzzled your neck. "You're so beautiful. Don't want you to hold back."

Your thighs shook as you rode him. A jumble of feelings knotted in your belly, and maybe, just maybe a good hard fuck would dislodge the tangle. Jack's fingers rubbed tight circles against your clit, the sensitive bundle of nerves throbbing under his touch. You sped up, lifting yourself up and dropping back down to the hilt.

"Look at you thrashing in my lap," he groaned. "You need it that bad? I know how it is. Every time you come back, bruised and smiling, I just want to hold you down and fuck you till you're too exhausted to get into trouble. Have to see for myself that you're OK. Need that extra control because you've left my head spinning-"

"You talk too much!" You snarled, kissing him hard, teeth worrying at his bottom lip. You had him inside your body already, you didn't need him inside your head.

"Gabe gets this way too. So fierce and brittle I have to cling to him to make sure he knows I'm still here with him. So come for me, sweetheart. Know that I'm here for whatever you need."

You bit him again, feral and shaking.

He shivered, one hand stroking your back, the other firmly pressed against your clit. "Come for me baby, and after this, it'll be my turn to show you how much I need you. I promise you'll like it."

You were too tightly wound to last. And you came hard, right hand clawing at his back and your orgasm tore through you. Muscles weak, you nearly fell off Jack's lap, but he pulled you against him and you clung to his chest, trembling.

"Feel better?" He asked when you stopped shaking.

You nodded, words not coming out properly.

He lifted you and carefully laid you back against the seat, before resting your knees over his shoulders.

"My turn," he said, and snapped his hips forward, his cock filling you once more.

You threw your head back, eyes squeezed shut, a muffled whine coming out of the back of your throat. You were too sensitive, and he went so deep, hitting your cervix.

"You OK?"

You nodded, eyes still shut.

Jack paused, dragging his knuckles across your cheek. "Look at me, sweetheart."
You opened your eyes, meeting his worried gaze.

"Want me to stop?"

You shook your head. "Need you."

"You have me," he murmured, and kissed you again. He went slow and hard, a small smile on his face as you writhed beneath him. The angle was almost too much, each stroke bottoming out inside you while you clawed at his arms.

"Jack, harder, please-" It hurt, but it was a good pain intertwined with the pleasure. Sex as catharsis you could do in good conscience.

"Since you asked so nicely." He slammed his hips into you and you shrieked, composure already shattered. "You like that?"

"Don't stop. Please, don't stop. Need you to fuck me," you sobbed.

"Whatever you want, sweetheart," he growled, and suddenly he shifted angles. One leg was still over his shoulder, but he lowered the other. Now he was grinding against you, his balls slapping against your ass.

He wasn't gentle, and you didn't want him to be. You just took it, chasing your release once more.

"Want me to come inside you, sweetheart? Remind you who you belong to?"

"Please, Jack-"

"Love how you say my name, so desperate and hungry. You're mine," he chuckled in your ear, voice raw with lust. "Mine and Gabe's. And since he's not here, I'm going to have to fuck you twice as hard, to make up for it."

"Jack-"

"Scream for me," Jack ordered.

And you did. You screamed as he fucked you into the seat, his grip bruising, his cock going so deep. The force and the friction drove you over the edge and Jack came with you, his mouth on your throat leaving bite marks and hard kisses.

You lay there, feeling his seed pour inside you, and you hugged him tightly.

He pulled you against him, sinking onto the floor, with you on his chest. You sniffled, eyes watering from the intensity of it.

"Are you all right?" Jack's hands rested on your back.

"I think so," you said, hoarsely.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No." All your pain was your own, and Jack's touch soothed the sting.

"OK," he said. His gaze was gentle and you understood Feng's last comment all too well. Right now, it hurt just to look at him, but you couldn't let go either because that thought was too
"Everything's hitting me now," you said, burying your face in his chest.

"I noticed." He tilted your chin up. "There's nothing to be ashamed of." Those bright blue eyes stayed on your face, hypnotic in their focus. "Just let it out. We're both here. We survived. It's going to be fine."

You curled up against him, still having trouble looking at him. He was too much and you were too vulnerable. You ached all over, muscles battered, insides a jumbled mess of broken glass. You took slow deep breaths, your core stretched so thin that even air felt like too much. Jack rubbed your back.

"I'm sorry," he told you. as you tried to calm yourself. "Tell me about it?"

"Shin," you said, not looking up. "I got there too late. In time to watch, but too late to do anything. Today..."

"Oh." Jack's voice was quiet. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I...didn't think about that."

"Not your fault. My baggage," you said, talking to his nipple. It was easier than looking him in the eye. "You were saving me. I can't complain."

"But you can tell me that it upset you." Jack stroked your hair, his warmth so comforting, and you sighed softly, your heartbeat gradually slowing down.

"The recklessness bothers me. And that close call, that really put me through the wringer," you said, hating that you had been on the receiving end of this talk so many times before. Hating that maybe you'd made Gabriel and Jack feel this way. Hating that everything was complicated and multi-faceted, and you were just a simple person who didn't know how to navigate this storm of feelings, responsibility, and guilt.

Jack just leaned over and kissed your forehead. "Hey, I get it." And to his credit, he didn't remind you that you'd put him through this too. Maybe he didn't have your issues, but you understood that this kind of anxiety and helplessness wasn't fun for anyone.

You raised your head, meeting his concerned gaze. "I'm a mess. Sorry."

"Only because I fucked you silly," Jack said, running a finger across your cheek.

"Thank you for taking care of me."

"Thank you for protecting me," Jack said. The soft press of his lips against your cheek shot your heart into your throat. There was a tenderness on his features that choked you up and made you think of Gabriel. "You shouldn't have to, but I'm not arrogant enough to think I can do everything on my own. Wish I could. Wish I didn't have to put you in these situations."

"Shocking as it sounds, it isn't all about you," you muttered

He laughed. "You know what I mean."

"We should've brought Gabriel," you said, after a moment. "He'd have kept you in line."

Jack laughed at that. "Wishful thinking, sweetheart."

"Yeah, I know. Just feel like he would've...done a better job."
"Having another person on site would have made this mission easier, and I still think the three of us should go out together. But I'm grateful you came with me." Jack kissed your forehead. "And you did a good job. There's no question about that."

"OK," you said, relaxing just a little. "Having Gabriel would have been fun."

"Yeah. But I'm glad you were here."

"Me too. Just..." You trailed off, not sure how to add to what you said without sounding pathetic.

"You climbed onto an omnic's back, wedged a grenade under its armor, then proceeded to single-handedly, pun not intended, execute the other ones, and keep me alive. You're being silly and Gabriel would say the same thing."

"Yeah, OK." When he put like that, you were kind of ridiculous. "Just...you got hurt. I don't like that."

He laughed softly. "Me neither." He stretched out, shifting beneath you. "But you didn't let me down, baby. When Gabe eventually calms down, he'll tell you the same thing."

"It should be weird that we talk about him so much after sex. But...it's not." You folded your forearms and rested your chin against them, looking down at Jack's face. You didn't want to talk about your insecurities, and baggage, not when he was holding you like this.

"We talk about you too," Jack said. "And I know you and Gabriel talk about me." He rubbed your back. "It's natural to think of the one who's missing."

"...Yeah." You reached up and brushed Jack's hair out of his face. "Gabriel's pretty awesome. This is all his fault."

"He instigated, for sure, but I think we each did our part to get here." Jack gave a contented sigh. "Can't give him all the credit. You punched me in the face, and I won you over with my thick-headed blundering. It makes me irresistible." He whispered the last sentence like it was a big secret.

"Huh. That's uh...that's not how I remember it. Maybe that's how you got Gabriel. But you are concussed after all."

"I would have to be very confused to mistake you for Gabriel. Our relationship is a little different than his and mine or yours and his."

"Yeah," you said hesitantly, because you were unsure of what he was getting at.

"What we have is important," Jack said quickly.

"Definitely. And we both adore Gabriel. That's a critical common interest."

Jack's expression softened. "Gabriel is the air I breathe. He's my anchor and my rock. He has a goddamn mortgage on my soul, and I love him with everything that I am. But you've got your fist around my heart. And I-"

Your eyes widened, pulse hammering in your throat. "You're concussed," you said rapidly, pressing your fingers to his lips.
A flash of hurt crossed Jack's face and you flinched. You dropped your gaze, realizing that you had made a mistake.

Jack drew a deep shuddering breath.

"I'm sorry," you said.

"No. I am concussed." Jack rubbed your back gently. "I...It's OK."

"I'm sorry," you repeated. "I'm still..."

"It's OK," Jack said, sounding more confident. "It's been a rough day. I think I've pushed you too hard already."

You said nothing, loathing your cowardice. "Jack-"

"Just let me hold you," he said. "We can nap, then we'll eat some of those awful ration bars, and then we need to strategize about how we're going to handle Gabe and Ana."

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"I'm sorry," you said when you woke up and found Jack already awake, idly rubbing your shoulders.

"What'd you do now?" Jack asked, a single brow raised.

"About earlier."

"It's OK, sweetheart. We can talk about that stuff later. I shouldn't have pushed."

"I don't mean to be-"

"You don't have to explain. I get it." Jack kissed your cheek. "I like what we have. It's important to me. That's what you need to know. Anything else, we can work on later."

You nodded. "OK."

"That's my girl," Jack said. "Now, why don't we figure out how to keep Gabe and Ana from skinning me alive?"

"Power armor or a miracle. I'm voting power armor."

"You're hilarious," Jack said.

"We can hide you," you said.

"Mmm, no that doesn't work. Ana just gets angrier..." Jack said, ruefully. And you really wanted to ask how he knew that and what exactly he had done. Later, maybe.

You slowly dressed yourself, wincing as you moved. The emitter had dulled your aches and the bruising was fading, but you were still sore and it was going to get worse. Jack dressed quickly and efficiently, before stopping to help get your hair into a more manageable state.

Athena gave you periodic updates. And you trusted she would warn you if Captain Amari
was boiling a giant cauldron of oil or Gabriel was building a gibbet. No one outside Shit Spiders clearance even knew that Jack had taken off on a secret and highly controversial mission. Things seemed normal enough, excluding the fact that Captain Amari and Gabriel had reached a transcendent level of fire-breathing fury.

Jack had already sent a short communication letting them know everything was fine and that he'd brief them when you returned to base.

You watched Jack carefully, and though you knew you'd hurt him, he wasn't showing it. He kept touching you, gentle caresses across the back of your neck, kisses when you weren't expecting them, and several times he just held you in his lap, and you let him. Jack was important to you. There was no question about that. But after today, you weren't equipped to process any more gut-wrenching epiphanies.

You dictated a report, emphasizing the previously unknown aspects of Zheng's mental state and Feng's ability to handle her. You also gave a detailed description of the base, the projects you had seen, Feng's parents, and her combat capabilities. Laid out professionally, you could almost pretend this was a good policy choice. You submitted it, hoping that it would be enough to justify Overwatch involvement in On Sing internal politics. Lacroix wouldn't be happy, but then the influx of new information would make your case, and frankly, Lacroix was not the one you were worried about.

Jack sat beside you, typing up his own report.

"Shit."

"What's wrong?" You would have to swap out augments when you got back to base, and probably see Angela about your fried ones. You could submit a report to Torby, avoid a face-to-face confrontation. But it would all take time and you suspected you would not be up for cooking tonight.

"I need to be in Geneva tonight for a UN briefing." Jack sighed. "I have enough time to get checked up, chewed out, and changed. Wanted to invite you back to my room, but..."

"It's OK," you said, kissing his cheek. "I get it. Work's a bitch and the boss man's a slave driver."

Jack narrowed his eyes at you. "Are you referring to a specific commanding officer?"

"Who, me?" You made a polite face and shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about. But I had this one CO who was a real stickler for paperwork and the dress code. Got pretty tetchy about me wearing a suit into his office."

"Shut up," Jack grinned, leaning over to kiss you. "Gabe's so pissed. Ana too. You should prepare yourself for some shouting. Because make no mistake, we are in trouble."

"Mmm, you're in trouble. I left a note."

"I know Gabe. He's going to be too enraged to care."

Jack was right. "Well, I guess we're both going to have to apologize and give him time to cool down," you said, wondering if that would be enough.

"You're learning," Jack said, and leaned back against the seat. "We should've bribed someone to feed him..."
"Oh, yeah." You shook your head. Gabriel often forgot to eat when he was angry, and if no one reminded him, well, he just got angrier, in a vicious cycle of wrath and starvation. You could picture him now: Gabriel Reyes single-handedly fulfilling the roles of apocalyptic horsemen Death, Famine, and War. Hanzo could be Pestilence, sneezing angrily at everyone because they shortened his name to "Pest." Heh.

"Judging by the timestamp on the angry messages I've received, he's been this way since morning." It was early evening back in Zurich.

_Great._

Gabriel and Captain Amari were waiting for you in the hangar. That you expected. Angela was there too, which was for the best. It was good to have someone there who could surgically extract Captain Amari's boot from your asses. And then there was Lacroix. Oh boy.

Captain Amari stood front and center, her flat expression, dead-eyed expression worrying you the most. Lacroix was smiling, but it wasn't a nice smile and it was aimed at you. Shit. Gabriel loomed there, arms crossed tight, stormy glare ping-ponging between you and Jack. The harsh anger on his face surprised you. His jaw clenched and you almost took a step backward. He was really mad. You probably should have invited him, or at least sent Jesse a message to make sure he ate.

It took all your self-control not to yell, "it was his idea!", then shove Jack at them as a distraction, and run away. Ziv's crate was sounding awfully cozy right about now.

"I would really like to know what the Strike Commander thought he was doing, haring off on his own, on an unsanctioned mission, with only one Blackwatch agent as backup? And don't worry, I have plenty to say about your choice in missions, Jack, but let's start with your stupidest mistake first," Captain Amari said, each word popping emphatically between her lips.

"Let's walk and talk. I have a meeting in Geneva in two hours," Jack said, with the calmness of a man resigned to being shot at for a living.

Captain Amari gave him a hard look, but nodded slowly, like she was letting him dig an even deeper grave.

"We need a moment first, Ana," Gabriel said, voice low.

"A moment, Gabe," Captain Amari said, her tone just on the polite side of impatient.

"I only need a few seconds to knock some sense into this _pendejo_." Gabriel stalked forward, fury etching grooves on his face. He gripped the collar of Jack's coat, nearly lifting him off the ground. "Just what the hell were you-"

"Don't punch him! He's concussed!" You blurted out.

Gabriel narrowed his eyes at you. "You can wait your turn."

"It's fine, sweetheart," Jack said, and leaned forward to kiss Gabriel's cheek. "I'm sorry, I worried you, Gabe. I didn't mean to bring Lucky along. She caught me trying to sneak off and so I
"That doesn't make it any better!" Gabriel dropped Jack and shoved him backward. "You can't charm your way out of this one, Morrison! Of all the shit-brained, irresponsible, dim-witted things you could have done-"

"Mmm, very touching reunion, but if the Strike Commander is concussed, I should probably check him out," Angela said, raising her scanner. "This will just take a moment, and then you can return to your regularly scheduled drama. Lucky, how are you feeling?"

"Sore," you admitted. "Got hit in the hip by an omnic."

Gabriel's head whipped around. "You left that out of the report-"

"I submitted an On Sing situational analysis, not a post-mission report. Sorry. Will do that next."

"Minor concussion, no swelling or internal bleeding. That laceration needs to be treated though." Angela clucked her tongue and got out a tube of medical gel. She applied it to the cut on Jack's head and then flashed her scanner over it, the UV light speeding up the sealing process. She opened up her kit and applied more ointments and at least one injection. "This might scar, Jack."

"That's OK. Lucky's prostheses were out of commission, so we couldn't quite suture it shut."

Gabriel's expression grew grimmer with each admission.

You were up next and Angela sighed. "Bone bruise on the greater trochanter. You were fortunate that you didn't break it."

"That would have been bad," you agreed, recalling all those damn stairs.

"Going to have to give you a localized nanite injection and keep you off combat duty for a week so you can heal up. We'll see to your prostheses later."

"Yes, ma'am," you said. "Thank you, ma'am." You were relieved she wasn't taking you to task for frying yet another set. But then, if she wanted to chew you out, she'd have to get in line, wouldn't she?

"So...Lucky left a message?" Jack asked, like he didn't know. Sneaky bastard was upholding his end of the bargain though.

"With Agent Shimada, and he let Agent McCree know what was going on, right before he left to fulfill his part of Operation I Need Coffee." Captain Amari did not sound amused. "While Agent Strike can claim she was just following orders, I think we all know that she applies those rules selectively," Captain Amari said dryly. "I will say that I appreciate you at least having the sense to make a contingency plan for backup, unlike our fearless leader."

"I uh...tried to do the best I could...given the circumstances," you said, not sounding very confident, because she had just called you out, and you could not deny a word of it.

"Yes, well, I know Commander Reyes and I both would have appreciated you directing that message to one of us, personally. And I know you knew that too. While I'm sure the Strike Commander ordered you not to contact anyone else, you ignored that directive by requesting backup from Agent Shimada. Honestly, you've managed to disregard all our wishes in one day,
and that is quite a feat."

Your gaze shot between her and Gabriel. The veins in his neck bulged, and he looked like he was going to bite through his own teeth.

"...Sorry, ma'am," you hunched over, really not liking Gabriel's expression of barely constrained fury.

"I'm going to have to think about what kind of consequences you'll be receiving for your part in this debacle, but I can definitely say that I expected better from you, Lucky. At the very least, if you're going to defy your commanding officers, you should demonstrate better judgment."

You flinched, because you realized then that even Jack's direct intervention wasn't going to get you out of hot water. "That reeks of premeditation, ma'am. I assure you, I cobbled this together as I went."

"Write up your report. Commander Reyes and I need to have a little chat with the Strike Commander."

You glanced at Jack who just gave you meek smile, because he had to know now that he wasn't going to get you off scot free.

"Let's walk and talk, Jack," Captain Amari said in a silky tone. "I have so much to say. Because out of all the witless, naive, ludicrous things you have done, Jack Morrison, and believe me, I have tried to keep count, running off to a secret desert Triad base truly surpasses my expectations. And persuading another agent to go with you? Please Jack, I'm dying to know what you consider "a good reason" for this sort of behavior."

"I uh...you know, it's hard to concentrate on giving logical answers when your laser eyes are drilling through my skull, Ana."

Captain Amari did not look the least bit amused. And you weren't entirely sure she did not have laser beams in her eyes. "Keep digging, Jack. And what are you even wearing? That is a gross crime against discretion-"

"There was a mask," Jack said, somewhat chastened. They began to walk out of the hangar, Jack bookended between an angry Captain Amari and a furious Gabriel.

"No better than Agent Mihret...Simpleminded...ill-advised...shortsighted..." You didn't try to follow Captain Amari's verbal evisceration of Jack. You were too afraid that you might attract her attention.

"Well, wasn't that entertaining, Chanceux? Let us get you to infirmary, because I have words for you as well." Lacroix uncrossed his arms, eyes gleaming.

Goddamnit.

You limped to the infirmary, Angela muttering under her breath about the stupidity of field agents and Lacroix strolling along like he didn't have a care in the world. You knew better than to start offering excuses or apologies. Lacroix would rip you a new orifice if he was angry.
Otherwise he could also just set a trap, and let you walk yourself into it. Silence was the wisest course.

"Interesting report about Feng's role," he said, when you were sitting down and Angela was jabbing a two inch needle into your hip. An icy sensation spread through your side and thigh. Then heat flared and you could feel the blood start to rush to the area.

"Zheng confessed it. Justified the mission to me, considering the potential ramifications."

"Mmm." Lacroix steepled his fingers. "And it had nothing to do with the fact that you like Feng?"

"That played into it too. Jack was the one who wouldn't let it go. But I admit, I wasn't that hard to persuade."

"Mmm."

"I'll have a new set of augments calibrated for you tomorrow. Just dispose of the old ones," Angela said briskly. "Eventually Torby will come up with better shielding, or he won't. Either way, I know I can't depend on you to be careful."

"Sorry, Angela."

Angela handed you a temperature pack. They could be set at hot or cold and lasted a few days. "Elevate. Rest. Apply heat at night. Apply cold after exertion. You know the drill. I'm not going to bother telling you to avoid sparring or strenuous activity, because you obviously aren't going to listen anyway."

"Thank you, doctor," you said, hoping it sounded sincere. "I do appreciate you patching me up. I honestly don't like getting hurt and really do try to avoid it. I'm just really bad at dodging."

"Dummkopf," she said with a tired smile. "Just fix that problem for me and we will be fine." She walked out, shaking her head.

"Yes, ma'am," you called earnestly at her back. "Thank you, ma'am!"

Lacroix gave you a mild look. "You are getting better at finessing her."

"That is one person you do not want mad at you," you said, voice returning to a neutral tone. "She controls the painkillers and how sharp the needles are. I am going to stay on her good side."

"How uncharacteristically prudent of you."

"...OK, stop being a weasel. If you're upset, just say it." You crossed your arms.

"Not particularly, Chanceux. You made the best of a difficult situation, and while that is not how I would've handled it, your results are not to be denied." Lacroix lounged in his chair, looking actually quite relaxed. That worried you a little, but you didn't see any trace of that coiled energy he exuded when he was getting ready to spring a trap.

"What would you have done?"

"Informed Ana immediately, then feigned surprise when she caught the Strike Commander attempting to leave. But I am not the Strike Commander's bedmate, and so my consequences
would be far different than yours. Though, Gabriel does look quite unhappy. I would give him wide berth for now."

"Yeah, OK." You didn't disagree. "So if you're not going to tell me off, why did you come along?"

"Ostensibly to upbraid you for your part in this. Selectively obeying potentially conflicting orders does not reflect well on you in a military setting. And in an espionage one, well, you were a step or two away from being considered rogue. Not quite at Ziv's level, but then you are slightly subtler than him. A shock, I know, considering all your social blundering, your blunt, soldier-like tendencies, and your penchant for rash action."

"You know, at this point, you're just beating a dead horse."

"Such a droll idiom. Very picturesque." Lacroix took a moment, presumably to imagine himself hitting a deceased equine. "You must realize that people will talk if both my pupils get reprimanded for insubordination and worse, for getting caught at it."

"O-K," you said, because while listening to Lacroix monologue was annoying, he wasn't really disciplining you. "I suspect if you were going to let me have it, you already would have." The fact that all those insults didn't faze you spoke volumes about your relationship with Lacroix. "So you just came down to deliver a lecture?"

Lacroix chuckled. "Honestly, I only wanted to watch Ana castigate Jack. It's a rare sight and usually worth the price of admission. Reprimanding you was just an excuse to be in the hangar. I plan to relay some of the choicer moments to Ziv. He will appreciate stories from home."

You rolled your eyes. Of course.

"I know, it is terribly petty of me, but you of all people have no room to judge, Chanceux."

He was right. And you shrugged, avoiding any demonstration of outward agreement. You might both know it was true, but he didn't deserve the satisfaction of your acknowledgment. Because yes, QED, you really were that petty.

Chapter End Notes

I am so unmotivated right now. It's meh. Oh well. I have cake and my teenage cousin is coming over tomorrow to clean and berate me for my lack of housekeeping skills. He's a good kid. I'll feed him and pay him, no worries and we'll probably watch the Shape of Water, because I still haven't watched it.

Work is blah. Life is blah. Writing is fun, but not quite going in the direction I wanted. Damn Angst!AU taking up my thoughts. Slightly concerned about how Retribution is going to change my timeline, but I'm already committed to the the IAL timeline, so if it contradicts, I guess I just have to accept it.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

You can't hide from Gabriel forever.

Chapter Notes

I'm super excited about the Blackwatch Lore release. I mean, it's totally fucked my timeline but you know what, that's OK. This is an AU and at 470k in my drafts and I'm not turning back now. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ziv had finally deigned to send you a message, and you had to stare at the screen for a few seconds. He hadn't actually written you. He just sent you pretty pictures of the ocean, the white sand, the skies. It would have been thoughtful, except in the center of each frame was his hand raising his middle finger to the camera.

You just shook your head. Forget your guilt. Putting up with Ziv was the price for all your sins. You were laying low, eating a hastily-grabbed salad and drinking the awful cafeteria chicken soup straight from the thermos. That was penance enough.

The post-mission report was done. And while you hadn't heard from Jack, you assumed he was either on his way to Geneva or melted into a slurry from the combined heat of Gabriel and Captain Amari's anger. You hadn't heard from Gabriel yet, and that was probably for the best. You'd give him at least another day to cool down.

You still weren't sure what to do about Lao. No, that wasn't right. You knew, you just didn't like it. But you would be supportive. You would visit. You would give her space if she wanted it. But you had to understand that you could not make her forgive you. You could not fix her or change what had happened to her. You wanted to reach out, hug her, and magically make everything better. And worse, on some level, you still had trouble accepting that you could not single-handedly fix things. You had to remember to balance fault and responsibility within realistic parameters. Half the trouble was coming to terms with your own limitations.

Your other problem was the data breach. You had most of the pieces in place and Athena had prevented any further leaks from the source. But you still weren't sure how you wanted to handle it. Gabriel was already getting impatient, and relationship issues aside, he was angry about the leak. And while you were too, you wanted to make damn sure you had exhausted all options, before he did anything irreversible.

There were more messages than Ziv's scenic "fuck you" montage. Gabriel had sent you a tersely worded "Where are you?" message this morning. You knew better than to answer that now. You had to confirm the date of the tea party with your Blackwatch friends; it had to be pushed back because Jesse and Genji had scheduling conflicts. On a whim, you invited Amélie, warning her not to expect anything formal. Shoal wanted everyone to go drinking again. And, surprise, surprise,
Feng had already sent you an invitation to some social event in Shanghai. She'd asked you to pass it on to Genji and Hanzo, so you dutifully forwarded the message. You sent off your weekly chat to Michael and Maggie.

Michael had sent the digital file of his portrait of Jack and their dog Atticus awhile ago. The print out and frame had been delivered, after you and Jack had made up. So you had a gift for him instead of a bribe. Maybe you could just give it to him when he got back. As an apology for interrupting his...well. You sighed. Jack had caught you off guard. And maybe he wasn't going to say what you expected. But you'd reacted and now... If he said it, and you didn't? That would be bad. If you said it and didn't mean it? That would be worse. And if you said it and meant it, well, that would mean you had some things to think about now. And you had enough things to think about. This could wait.

With Hoffman dead, Lacroix had some bright plan to push the Numbani delegate into greater political prominence. UN Undersecretary General Gabrielle Adawe's protégée, Adaeze Kwento, was a rising star, and from what you could tell, an actual decent person. Meeting with Kwento was going to be tricky. Everyone was keeping an eye on her, whom she met with, and what she did. Lacroix's eyes had lit up when he described some of the formal affairs she would be attending this year. You didn't like that look. It spoke of fancy clothes, good posture, and expensive cover stories.

The whole world was watching Numbani's development, but while omnis concerned you (and everyone else), Oasis worried you more. Sure, it was rich and actually pretty safe. And so very rich. That alone set off alarms. The founders of the city were checked out clean and spoke only of wanting to encourage scientific progress and the art of learning, but where exactly had all that money come from? And how were they recouping it? Being a brain didn't equate riches. But this was your personal geopolitical warning list, and you did not set policy. You just kept an eye on problems. And your problems had gone from individual names like "Nguyen Anh" and "Director Petras" to having their own postal codes.

It was late, and you sat in bed trying to focus on the poetry anthology Gabriel loaned you. The warm glow of the emitter was making you sleepy and you didn't really want to read any more. Some of the works actually rhymed, and they were fun to read out loud. The first time you did it, Athena had been worried about your mental health. The second time you did it, she joined in, doing a better job than you of keeping the weird rhythm of Edmund Spenser's "Faerie Queene." You read an excerpt aloud, only because it was fucking difficult to keep straight in your head. Athena correcting your pronunciation didn't help, but you thanked her anyway, because she was so excited that she got to play too. She then bombarded you with terms like "Spenserian stanza" and "iambic hexameter," prompting you to switch over to "The Raven."

Your door opened, and you stiffened, knowing it could be Jack, but he was supposed to be in Geneva, so in all likelihood it was Gabriel, and you had nowhere to hide. You were in your pajamas, a blue camisole and shorts set that Captain Amari had pointed out to you. And you wondered if you had time throw your armor on over it.

Gabriel walked in, shutting the door behind him. He didn't look at you, didn't speak. He just rested his head against the door for a half a minute. When he turned around, his expression was grim. You froze, eyes darting from his face to his clenched fists.
You carefully set the book on your nightstand. "Do we need to-"

"Sinaga's dead." The words came out clipped and forceful.

Oh. Malik Sinaga was one of Tataryn's crew. He was clever and quiet, a cat burglar as well as a decent medic. You swallowed your questions, pushed off the covers and rose. Gabriel was staring so hard at you that it seemed he was looking straight through you. You padded over to him.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Water." His tone did not change.

You grabbed a bottle and handed it to him. Gabriel took it mechanically, motions tightly controlled. He downed the water and you got him another bottle.

"He was out with Vo and Diallo in Kalkan. They were supposed to be acquiring some contraband from an arms dealer."

Diallo and Vo's presence meant the arms dealer wasn't necessarily amenable to giving up the goods.

"They were going in quiet, but according to Diallo, a dozen OR-14s came out of the sea. Went straight for the villa. Diallo was able to shield Vo with her suit. But Sinaga got caught on the premises during the attack. Arms dealer and her entourage were slaughtered. Diallo recovered Sinaga's body and some of what we sent them there for, but..." Gabriel took off his hat. "Tataryn's been drinking since the news broke. Jesse's with him now."

You sighed. You weren't close to Sinaga. He came to poker night sometimes. He was quiet. But he was a solid Blackwatch agent, and that mattered as much as any personal relationship you might have had with him. "Funeral?"

"Soon. He was Sunni. From Surabaya. No family left after an omnic raid... He was one of my recruits." Gabriel's voice was dry and quiet, like the rustle of dead leaves.

"Do you want to talk about him?" You asked, sitting down on the bed.

"...Not yet." Gabriel took off his hat and then his hoodie. He stripped down to his pants. He didn't look at you. "My head hurts."

"Come here." You scooted back in the bed, and he climbed in, resting his head against your chest. You massaged the back of his neck, already familiar with the tension headaches Jack got. Gabriel shuddered against you, and closed his eyes. He was heavy and warm so you left off the covers.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome." You scratched his scalp and he groaned. "Have you eaten?"

"No appetite."

"I have some cake left."

"Later," he said, face buried in your shoulder. "I just...need to rest."

"OK," you said. "Athena, dim the lights all the way, please."
The room went mostly dark, the emitter still on, and you dropped back against the pillow, Gabriel's arms around your waist. He was too tense and you squeezed his shoulders, working the knots out of the areas you could reach.

Since coming to Zurich, there had been Blackwatch funerals. But you'd never seen Gabriel like this. Granted, there hadn't been any Blackwatch deaths since you began the relationship. This was the first.

"I'm still mad at you," he mumbled sleepily.

"I'm sorry," you said.

"I know. I'll probably forgive you. Just let me lay here for a few."

You nodded, even though he obviously couldn't see you. "Of course. Just relax. Athena will notify us if you're needed, OK?"

He said something unintelligible, and you felt your lips quirk up. It was late. You could use the sleep too. Embracing Gabriel, you closed your eyes and settled down.

Something slid across your inner thigh, then blew gently on the damp skin and you blinked sleepily. The room was still dark, but the familiar weight of Gabriel had shifted. He lay between your knees, pushing the fabric of your shorts aside while his tongue licked a trail upward.

You sat up slowly. "Gabriel."

"Want me to stop?" He rasped.

"No, but-" He yanked your shorts down and tossed them on the floor.

"You're still uh...mad at me, remember?"

"Working through that," Gabriel said.

"Is that what we're calling this?" You raised a brow.

"If you don't want me to-"

"I didn't say that." Digging your fingers into the pillow, you rested your weight on your elbows, trying to hold yourself up. "Just...not sure where your head's at."

"I won't be too rough. You're still sore. Anything else I should know?" His fingers traced the edges of your panties and you were having trouble thinking now.

"Have to keep it down. Got noise complaints last time." Gabriel's face was in shadow and you wished you could see his expression.

"Got it." He yanked and the fabric of your underwear tore, the sound louder than you expected.
"Gabriel!" Outrage colored your tone.

"Shh. You have to be quiet, remember?" He laughed softly and leaned down, pressing his tongue against your slit. You bit back a moan, already breathing hard as he licked you. He pushed two fingers inside and you whined at the suddenness of the intrusion. Gabriel leaned over you, mouth hot against your ear. "Guess we're going to have to use the floor. Your bed squeaks. Or was that you?"

He spread his thick fingers and you dropped flat against the bed.

"Gabriel-

He kissed you hungrily, tongue prodding your lips open.

"Think you're ready, hermosa?"

"That's a trap," you said as he withdrew his fingers. "I'm never ready for you."

Gabriel gave a pleased laugh. He tossed a blanket on the floor and set a pillow in the middle. "Knees on that," he ordered.

You took off your camisole before he had a chance to rip that too, your nipples hardening in the cool air. Grabbing your other pillow, you got on all fours, and set the pillow under your head.

Gabriel ran his hands along your right hip. "Is this where it hurts?"

"Yes."

He kissed the skin gently. "All right." He rubbed the head of his cock against you, collecting your slickness. You pushed back against him and he tensed. "So eager? Didn't you get fucked nice and hard a few hours ago?"

"Missed you too," you sighed, unsure if you should bring up Jack right now.

"You're just spoiled," Gabriel said gruffly, and snapped his hips forward.

You squealed, head dropping as you fisted the blankets. Gabriel chuckled behind you, and slowly pulled out, almost all the way before filling you up again. You buried your face in the pillow, biting the fabric as he kept a steady rhythm. He wasn't going as hard as he could, but Gabriel was big and it didn't take much for him to reduce you to a frantic needy mess.

He leaned forward, the heat of his chest warming your back, those strong hands squeezing your breasts while he rocked against you. His beard rubbed against the back of your neck as his teeth glided over your ear.

"We're going to play a little game, hermosa." The words sounded so casual, but you could feel the undercurrent of something wolfish.

You swallowed, glancing warily over your shoulder. "What kind of game?"

Gabriel's smile bordered on vicious and you shivered. "You already made the rules, baby. I'm just enforcing them." He grunted as he hilted inside you, hips flush with your ass. "I know the walls are thin." Gabriel's smile widened. "But I'm not the only one who gets loud. You're just going to have to show some discipline. If you can't, well, I guess I'll have to stop what we're doing
"and fuck that pretty mouth instead."

"Damnit, Gabriel-" you snapped as he drove his hips into you.

"That's one outburst, hermosa. Two more and your sweet little pussy will be going without."

Bastard. You almost protested how unfair that was, but realized he'd just use that against you. Biting your lip, you dropped your face into the pillow, hoping to muffle your noises.

"Ah ah ah," he murmured, gripping the back of your neck. "If I wanted to gag you, I would have already. You'll just have to control yourself," He released you, hand tangling in your hair. He thrust hard against you and you clenched your teeth, a high-whine scraping against the back of your throat.

"Good girl," he chuckled. "At least you're trying now."

"So mean," you whispered.

"Mmm, not at all, I'm just following your rules, hermosa." He nuzzled your cheek. "You're just used to getting your way. I've been far too lenient with you." He rolled his hips, and you closed your eyes, panting hard.

He started up slow again, cock stretching you at an easy pace, each thrust stroking you sweetly. Your eyes flew open as his fingers ghosted along your clit. "That's...that's not fair," you said, breathlessly.

"You don't like it when I touch you?" He asked, feigning innocence.

"You're the worst," you told him.

"If you're going to be insulting, I'll stop being nice," he said, and you could hear the smirk in his voice. He was goading you into this and you were too far gone to care. He gripped your hair and sped up, cock pistoning smoothly in and out of you, each stroke going deeper than before.

You gave a startled cry, and he leaned over, keeping the harder pace. "That's two, hermosa. You're really not very good at this."

"Fuck you, Gabriel," you snarled.

"And three," he laughed in your ear and released you. He pulled out and you lay against the pillow, grinding your teeth. "Let's see if you can do better with that smart mouth. Get me off and maybe I'll return the favor. Otherwise, you can get dressed."

You almost called his bluff. But he had you wound just tight enough that you wanted his cock inside you, you wanted him fucking you into the carpet while you screamed into the pillow. You didn't care who heard you right now, and that was exactly the state Gabriel wanted you reduced to, the goddamn bastard.

"You're an asshole." You rolled over and glared at him.

"I'm just following your rules, corazon." He gave you an innocent smile. "Applying them equally, in the spirit of egalitarianism." He rose, standing there naked, erect cock bobbing. "What's it going to be?"
"I'll take the penalty," you said through gritted teeth.

He sat on the bed, thighs spread wide enough for you to kneel between them. You didn't look at him, already knowing the exact slant of his mouth, the infuriatingly smug look he'd be wearing while you licked your juices off his shaft. Digging your nails into his thighs, you swallowed him down, taking him halfway, then to the hilt. You hollowed your cheeks as you raised your head, tongue laving his tip before you returned to sucking him off.

He groaned, gripping your hair. "That's it. Put that loud mouth to good use. Love how you look when your lips are wrapped around my dick." He began to thrust slowly, and you tried to relax your throat, but he was thick and you gagged. "Tap if you have to," he reminded you.

Your eyes watered, but you kept him in your mouth, the heat of his velvety skin warming your throat and traveling down to your core. Your fingers massaged his balls, and he groaned softly. You encircled his shaft with your other hand, and began to jerk him, sucking hard on the head.

"Look at you actually trying this time. You want to come that badly, baby?"

You didn't answer, because if the jackass could formulate smarmy remarks, you weren't doing your job well enough. Instead you sped up, your jaw starting to ache from his girth.

"Yeah, it looks like you do." He laughed. "Going to swallow my load or do I get to blow it all over your face?"

You ignored him, because while he seemed to enjoy your outrage, it wasn't actually getting him off.

"I asked you a questions, baby." He pulled out with a wet pop and you touched your throat and wiggled your jaw side to side.

"Doesn't matter as long as I get you back inside my pussy," you rasped, throat raw.

"...Such a greedy little cockslut," Gabriel said. He pushed back into your mouth and you continued suck him, moaning softly as he massaged your scalp. "That's it. Keep drooling around me. I like it when you get wet and messy. Bet your cunt is soaked right now. No, you can't touch yourself. Finish me off, and maybe afterward-"

You nearly bit him. But that wouldn't do any good in the long run. Instead you channelled that fury into working faster, your fingers squeezing and rubbing his length while you pushed back the foreskin with your tongue and focused on laving his crown.

Gabriel shuddered, his hold on your hair tightening. "That's it, baby. I'm real close. Going to have to put you on your knees in the office. Like the idea of having you under my desk..." The words trailed off and he tensed beneath you before his cock started to spurt. You continued jerking him off while keeping your lips sealed around him. His hot cum flooded your throat and you had to rapidly swallow or choke.

"Good girl," Gabriel groaned. He gave a few shallow thrusts, and you let his half-hard cock drop. Still glaring, you wiped your mouth with the back of your hand.

"You're a jerk."

"So impatient," he rumbled, leaning over to kiss you. "Maybe I should just let you touch yourself. See how you frantically rub that needy pussy-"
"Don't you dare!"

"Maybe I need a minute to recover. You still have those toys-"

"Gabriel Reyes, if you don't fuck me right now-"

"Get on your back, then." He began to stroke himself as you reclined on the floor. "Have any more rules you want to throw out there?"

"Stop being difficult, that's an order!"

"So demanding," he laughed, and pushed back inside you, the heat of him soothing your need. "Wrap your legs around my waist, corazon. You'll get your reward, even if you don't deserve it."

"Worked hard to-"

"You were wrong today and you know it," he rumbled. "Was furious at you. Still not happy. But getting there." He rested his forehead against yours, eyes dark, but holding your gaze. The tension in his jaw startled you. "Ready?"

You squeezed your inner muscles around him and Gabriel growled. "Been ready."

"If you weren't injured..." He slammed into you, and you cursed. "Yeah, my thoughts exactly."

You just clawed at the floor, head thrown back while he maintained a hard rhythm. He hit your sweet spot with each thrust and your eyes widened when he covered your mouth with one hand.

"Since you can't do it on your own, I'll help you keep quiet." He leaned down, moving his hand and kissed you hard, his hips moving faster as he pounded you into the floor. It grew rougher than you intended, but you sure as hell weren't going to tell him to stop. You were going to be so sore tomorrow and you didn't fucking care. You just locked your ankles around his waist and took everything he had to give. You slid one hand down to stroke your clit. It didn't take much to finish you and you came around him as he swallowed up your cries. He paused as you shook beneath him, your legs slack, and your head tilted back as you tried to regain control of your body.

He kissed your forehead, not even bothering to hide his satisfaction. "Again?" Was all he murmured as he stroked your hair.

"Again," you agreed.

You were pretty sure the entire hall heard the two of you. And you didn't really care, because you were boneless and sated. You lay stretched out of the floor, Gabriel gently massaging your bruised hip.

"I'm sorry," you said as you struggled to keep your eyes open. "This morning, all I could think about was not letting Jack go on his own. It was stupid of us both, but I'm not sorry we saved Feng. Especially given what we learned about Zheng."
"...If you think that's what pissed me off, you're dumber than I thought," Gabriel said, no anger in his voice. "Jack knows better, but what you did was just as bad."

You blinked. "Not to make an excuse, but I wasn't so sure he wouldn't tie me to the bed and leave. I agreed to help and once I did, I wasn't going to renege."

"You do realize that agreements made under duress aren't binding, right?"

"...He didn't threaten me, I just... I-"

"Jack would've tied you up," Gabriel acknowledged. "He already admitted that he wasn't going to let you stop him. And while I'm furious at him for dragging you into it, you're still an idiot and I thought you had more sense than that."

You flinched. "I don't know what I was supposed to do."

"...Yeah, I know you're dumb when it comes to feelings," Gabriel sighed, kissing the back of your neck. "Why do I like them pretty and emotionally oblivious? That's rhetorical, don't try to answer it."

You snorted. "I'm sorry, it's been a long day."

"For both of us." Gabriel paused. "So it never occurred to you that if both you and Jack were so hellbent on rescuing this girl, if it mattered so much to you, that I'd understand? I don't give a shit who's in charge of On Sing, as long as they aren't coming into conflict with us. But if you and Jack care enough to flaunt the rules, don't you think I would listen? I might not initially agree with a plan, but we've been able to sit down and talk it through, when you actually deigned to tell me what was happening. Or am I mistaken?"

He didn't directly compare Cambridge to Lucerne. He didn't bring up that he was letting you take the lead on Angela's data breaches, despite his own misgivings. He didn't even mention Spinshot. But you remembered.

"Oh," you said quietly as the realization reared up and slapped you across the face. "I... Damnit."

"So you realized it was a bad political move, and maybe that made you hesitate to ask, so on a professional level, you obviously knew you were in the wrong. On a personal level, you didn't even consider that maybe I would be reasonable about this, did you?" He didn't sound angry any more, just tired, and you instantly understood that weariness only masked the fact that your lack of faith had hurt him.

You shrunk into the blankets, heart dropping through the floor.

"Both you and Jack decided that no one else would understand and went off on what you knew was a stupid move that could have turned out to be a trap. While you at least had the sense to tell someone where you were going, he was willing to go it alone. Wasn't that your first clue that he wasn't thinking straight? Or was your tunnel vision so bad that you didn't take that into account?"

You put the pillow over your head, because Gabriel had nailed it without even raising his voice. "You can give me the coup de grace now," you said. "I have no excuses and am utterly defenseless."

"You don't get off that easy." Gabriel sighed. "Even if Ana, Gérard, and Wilhelm
disapproved, I would have at least prepped a better op than the two of you did, rushing in to what could have been an ambush. And I would've liked to go out with you both.” That last bit was wistful and you winced. You hadn't meant to exclude him.

"I'm sorry," you said, because you were the worst girlfriend ever. Not only were you bad at relationships, you were bad at people. "I uh...fucked up a lot today."

"Yes," Gabriel nodded. "You did."

"And I'm hoping you'll forgive me, because yeah, I...tunnel-visioned. It wasn't just about Feng. I didn't want to let Jack down either."

"...I know," he said softly. "I know that when you're in his orbit and he gets a harebrained idea, it can be very easy to go along with it. He's extremely persuasive. You just trust him, follow his lead, and forget to give the plan the critical examination it deserves. I've had that experience too."

"I just...was dumb and didn't think about things."

"I know."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know, baby." He laid down beside you, and you hugged him, tucking your face against his neck. "But you can't operate like that. Not if you want us to work."

"I get that," you said. "I was stupid. I'll try to do better."

"All right." Gabriel just sounded exhausted now and you were awful for contributing to that weariness. "I forgive you. And I love you, idiocy and all."

You blinked rapidly and just held on to him tighter.

"Mmm, what's wrong?"

"Jack..." You exhaled slowly. "I thought Jack might say something like that while cuddling on the ride back... I told him he was concussed and shouldn't talk."

There was a long pause, and Gabriel sighed. "You actually did, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I mean...he might not have intended to say anything like that. I don't know."

"Do you know why?"

"I panicked! There'd been too many emotions already. I just...I panicked."

"...Mmm." Gabriel snorted. "Tell me about it."

So you did. You told him about the mission, about your nascent friendship with Feng, about Jack's obsession with houses, and all the stupid risks you both took. You told him, against your instincts, because Gabriel was right, this wouldn't work if you kept secrets and assumed he wouldn't work with you. This wouldn't work if you told him the truth and he shut you down for it.
This wouldn't work if you couldn't form compromises or trust each other. And now more than ever, you wanted this to work.

You told him about your flashback, about Shin, and Lao, and all those things you didn't want to think about, including Jack's big relationship reveal. And he listened, obviously displeased by some parts of the story, but he let you tell it, keeping his interruptions minimal and confined to frustrated interjections. And when you were done, you closed your eyes, worried that you'd gotten it all wrong again.

"I love you, but next time, bring me along," he said kissing your forehead. "You and Jack are too reckless together. He's a showoff and you're far too permissive of him."

"He says the same thing about you." You rolled your eyes. "The permissive thing. He hasn't actually called you a "showoff" to me." You drew in a deep breath. "And I love you too. Even if I'm bad at it." You weren't sure what to say about Jack just yet.

"Jack gets it. You were open. Not saying it didn't sting, but you're not withholding affection to manipulate or punish him, are you?"

"No! Why would you-"

"It was rhetorical." Gabriel rubbed his eyes. "Back in SEP, there was a girl, support staff for the chem camp. She was beautiful, whip smart too, but had some damage. Me and Jack were both...interested in her. We were already together and that really got her attention."

"This...girl have a name?" Because you were damn sure this was the bad experience they referenced in the beginning, and the "crazy bitch" Chang mentioned.

"We'll call her "Tara," not her real name. Don't need you hunting her down later." Gabriel chuckled. "Don't give me that look. You think I don't know how you operate?"

You pretended to be too dignified to answer that.

"Anyway, Jack, me, some other guys, a few girls, we were all pretty open about our interest in her. And she took a shine to Jack. Liked me too, though... it was more an unhealthy thing." There was an almost melancholy dreaminess to his tone. You could feel his nostalgia in the rare instances that he spoke of SEP, but it always tinged with sorrow. You thought you understood why: there weren't a lot of super soldiers left.

You reached out and stroked Gabriel's cheek. "How so?"

"She'd play me and Jack against each other. I was the mean one. Jack was the good one. I was the one who played rough and dirty with her. Jack was the one who wiped away her tears and cherished her." There was a sardonic grin on his face, but it wasn't the least bit happy.

"...Uh..."

"Well, it didn't actually go down like that," Gabriel huffed. "That was just how she liked to see it. Jack was blonde and angelic. I was big, black, and scary."

"Stupid bitch," you muttered. "It's obvious that Jack is the evil one and you're a fluffy teddy bear."

Gabriel laughed at that, because he knew you were joking. All three of you were awful and cuddly in varying amounts. "She played games. Liked to watch Jack and me. Liked being in the
center of things even more. She was kinky, I'll give her that. But she got jealous easily. Tried to make everything into a competition. It turned toxic pretty quick. I'm not proud to admit that I fed into some of the drama. Jack did too. Chang almost stepped in, but Jack begged her not to. Granted, Chang wanted to beat up both Tara and me, so don't think she was some kind of saint."

"Saint Chang the Pitiless, Patron Saint of Harsh Truths and Ass Kickings, Protector of the Morrison line," you said. "It actually suits her. I want to see a stained glass window of that."

Gabriel gave you a wry grin. "Anyway, if things had continued in that vein, Jack and I probably would have ended up hating each other, but two things happened. Aishani stepped in and force-fed us our egos till we choked. And Tara slept with Galanos."

"The one whose funeral we went to...?"

"Yes, that one," Gabriel said, not looking the least bit perturbed. "He tried to act like he was the better man and had won some kind of prize, but Tara had done it to make us jealous. And after Aishani kicked some sense into us, Jack and I realized we didn't need to deal with that bullshit. Tara stuck with Galanos for a little while after, and he lorded that over us for years. But we were better off without her."

"...Yeah. What exactly did you see in her?"

"She wasn't a completely shallow evil bitch, baby. She was clever, pretty, and funny when she wanted to be. But she was also damaged, insecure, and ultimately unwilling to accept that she caused most of her own problems. She wasn't a bad friend, but she wasn't a good partner. Jack and I really did like her, but sometimes the situation just becomes unsustainable. We were better off walking away than trying to fix things, and we knew it."

"That's a lot nicer than I was expecting you to be."

"I never want to see her crazy face again," Gabriel admitted. "But it's tacky as hell to trash your ex-girlfriend to your current one."

"...Fair," you said, even though you kind of wanted him to. But this was the classier path. If Gabriel had held onto that grudge after all these years, well, that would have been bad for him. And you were glad he had moved past that.

"My point is, Jack and I know when someone's jerking us around. You're not. If you need time to sort through things, that's fine. When have we not given it to you?"

"You've been great," you said.

"So yeah, you could have been more graceful about it, but honestly, probably not much more."

You wrinkled your nose. "Really?"

"Yeah," Gabriel grinned. "You're not smooth, baby."

"Yeah, OK," you sighed. He had you there.

"Anyway, you're doing better. We'll get there." Gabriel kissed your cheek. "You're trying, and you accept constructive criticism. If you really want to make it up to me, you can make some of that pork cutlet on rice that I like."
"...Out of pork, I can do the chicken katsu."

"That'll work. Do the version with seven spice powder and the sriracha mayo on rice. Lots of cabbage. Top it with bulldog sauce. Yeah. That sounds really good right now." Gabriel sighed happily.

"You want some karaage too?"

"Is that the extra crunchy, bite-sized, marinated fried chicken?"

"Yeah," you said, stomach rumbling.

"Hell yeah," he said. "And don't let fucking Jesse steal it all this time." It hadn't all been Jesse. Last time you made it, Genji, Vo, and Jesse had all hung around to snatch bites off the cooling rack. Gabriel had not been pleased, and you just didn't tell Jack, because there wasn't enough.

"Rice or banh xeo?"

"Both," Gabriel said. "You just keep talking dirty to me, baby. I'm a man deprived," he growled in your ear. "I'll drag you to the kitchen, we'll cook, we'll use fresh ground spices, and we'll eat till the itis kicks in."

You laughed. "I love you."

"I know," he chuckled. "I knew long before you ever said it. Maybe before you admitted it to yourself." He held you against his chest, yawning as he stroked your hair. "And in case you haven't noticed, Jack can be just as insightful."

Chapter End Notes

You guys are awesome, by the way. This month has been just bleagh, and I'm trying not to be all boring and depressing.

Yes, Hanzo's Scion skin is super sexy. Yes, I love Moira's hat, even though I don't think she does. Yes, Gabriel is still sexy at fucking 50+. Yes, I love that Gérard and Gabriel are obviously friends. :D I do wonder why Jack was acting all reticent about Blackwatch going on "unsanctioned" missions, but I'm going to say that it's probably because the Oslo attack was high profile and they have to be more circumspect.

I know everyone was excited about Gabriel yelling at people, but I hope this doesn't disappoint too much. There are still consequences, but Gabriel isn't just going to lash out because he's (rightfully) angry. He's a complex guy and while having kinky sex is one way to work through your issues, I suspect that talking is also important. :P And there are more consequences to come...
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Sorting out other people's feelings is not part of your job description, but then your job description is pretty vague and that excuse won't fly with Captain Amari, now will it?

Chapter Notes

Some cool artsy anon made a moodboard! All that detail. ■ ■

So thirsty for Soldier 24. Also, yes, I <3 Retribution dialogue. So good.

Warning, long pointless rant in the end notes. You have been warned.

Also, Pun!AU is way worse than Angst!AU and I draw the line there. There is only so much suffering I can bear.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Sorry, if the arguing kept you up," you said to Jesse, gauging how much he knew. You sat in the cafeteria, watching him drink coffee-sludge. He had bags under his eyes and gave you a blank look.

"No, you didn't disturb me last night. Was too busy trying to keep Tataryn from getting arrested, puking in the cemetery, and drinking vinegar. Didn't get in till this morning."

...Goddamnit, you'd forgotten about that. And Vo was still out of town. And who knew what Genji was up to? Gabriel. Gabriel knew. Gabriel knew everyone was out and the quiet game was just a way of getting back at you. Goddamnit.

"...Never mind. We sorted things," you said, vaguely.

"Yeah, boss wasn't happy yesterday." Jesse slumped at the table. "I can't do the office today, Lucky."

You thought about telling him that Gabriel would be in a better mood today, but decided that would be too revealing.

"Between a long night watching Tataryn drink and how on edge the boss is going to be over Sinaga- Shit. He can't believe he's... I owed him money." Jesse sighed. "Guess I better donate it to his mosque or something."

"I didn't know him very well," you said. "Seemed nice. For being one of us."

"He wasn't bad at all. Boss recruited him off the street when he caught Sinaga trying to pick his pockets. He was on his own, rough situation. But you know about those," Jesse said. "At least Vo and Diallo made it." Jesse set his hat on the table. "Sinaga was more like you. Less a fair
fight guy, more a knife in the back, or something sneaky. Didn't stand a chance against all those omnis."

"...Yeah." You stared at Jesse's bagel and he pushed the plate at you.

"Not really hungry," he said.

"Split it?" Because Jesse still needed to eat.

"Yeah, OK." He cut the bagel and spread some garlicky cheese on it. You took half and watched as he took a bite and ate mechanically, obviously not tasting the food.

"Call out. Get some sleep. Tell Gabriel I'll be in to cover for you later. I'm on med-leave anyway."

"Really?" Jesse perked up. "You'd do that?"

"Got to get back on his good side anyway," you lied.

Jesse gave you a measured look, his grin widening. "If he was in your room last night, we both know you're on his good side and-"

"Pizda! Lucky Strike! Or whatever your real name is!" The voice was harsh and slurred, and you glanced up, a little surprised to see Tataryn staggering toward your table, shoving chairs out of the way. His normally sleek hair was a bird's nest, and his face was rough with stubble. He glared at you through bloodshot eyes. Jesse groaned.

"How is he even upright, Lucky? I swear to god, he should have been dead from alcohol poisoning six hours ago."

"Lucky, you dumb bitch. If the boss didn't have me babysitting your stupid ass, I would've been out there with my team! Malik would still be alive! I should kick your fucking ass!"

Jesse was on his feet immediately.

You blinked. Well, this was unexpected. He pushed past a few concerned blues, and slammed his hands on the table. His fists shook and you knew he was on his feet through sheer willpower alone. It wouldn't be hard to lay him out and you probably wouldn't even get in trouble for it.

"Tataryn, you're out of line-" Jesse snapped.

"Poshel na huy," Tataryn spat. "Well, what'll it be, pizda?" You just going to hide behind McCree? Because I'll kick his ass too!"

You stood, very conscious of the eyes on you and of the desperation in Tataryn's voice. He was drunk. He was hurting. And he wanted a fight. You knew intimately how that felt. Hell, he'd picked you, and that only worried you because he knew better. He'd seen what you could do. He knew you weren't weak. And he had to know exactly how Gabriel would react if he laid hands on you. Yeah, Tataryn was trying to play chicken with a hypertrain, fully aware that he would lose.

"You sure want to do this here, Fedya? Too many witnesses. Makes Blackwatch look bad." You kept your tone even.

"Po khuy!"
"Come on, you know the Overwatch agents will break it up before it even starts." You were very conscious of the surrounding Overwatch agents debating whether or not to get involved. That was actually wise of them. You were Blackwatch, and you could handle yourselves. There was no need for them to interfere.

Tataryn eyed you suspiciously. "Yeah."

"Let's go somewhere else." He wasn't yelling any more, and if you get could get him to agree with you, you had cleared the first hurdle.

"Yeah," he said. He sneered at Jesse. "Suka."

You pushed the plate at Jesse. "I got this. You get some sleep. If I need help, Athena can cover."

"That's a bad idea, sugarpie," Jesse said, swiping his hat off the table. Sure, Tataryn was bigger and maybe meaner than you. But those kinds of odds didn't bother you any more.

"...Nah. This is between Fedya and me."

"Yeah!" Tataryn snapped. "Fuck off, McCree. I don't have a problem with you. Except that you can't hold your liquor."

You stood, pushing in your chair. Tataryn wobbled beside you.

"A good fight never hurt anyone," you told Jesse and he gave you a very skeptical look. "I got this. Trust me."

You clapped Tataryn on the back and he stumbled. "Come on, Fedya."

"Don't tell me what to do," he mumbled as you walked out of the mess hall and down the kitchen corridor.

"Sorry," you said. "You look kind of pale. When did you eat last?"

"...Last night. Threw it all up." He closed his eyes and braced himself against the wall. Yeah, in this condition, Tataryn wasn't much of a threat.

"You can't fight on an empty stomach, Fedya." You stopped at the kitchen. "Want some eggs? Maybe crepes? I haven't eaten yet either. Hate exercise on an empty stomach, never have enough energy. Want to eat first? We can punch it out after. Loser does dishes."

Tataryn drew a deep breath and slowly blew it out. He smelled like too much cologne and alcohol. Eyes still shut tight, he laughed bitterly. "I think we both know I'm in no shape to fight you, Lucky."

You shrugged. "I'm still hungry. You interrupted my breakfast. I had negotiated half a bagel out of Jesse. He even put cheese on it for me. Some of that fancy French crumbly cheese with the herbs and garlic."

Tataryn's stomach growled. He turned away. "Lucky-"

"The least you can do is keep me company, after dragging me away from my cheesy bagel. Come on." You went into the small kitchen and Tataryn trailed behind you, now cringing like a kicked dog.
"You were supposed to jump up and punch me," he grumbled. "One-two, lights out, and I wouldn't have to think about Malik."

That was exactly what you suspected and you were glad you hadn't reacted rashly. "...I'm sorry about Sinaga," you said. "Losing squadmates is hard. Worse when you feel responsible for them."

"What do you know about-" And miraculously he stopped, then dropped his head against the table. "Korva. I am an ass."

"Yes, but that isn't news." Tataryn had been briefed on Shit Spiders after the spa incident. You put the kettle on, then you melted the butter and began mixing up the crepe batter, which apparently was your go-to recipe for talking to men in difficult straits.

"Should've been there," he muttered.

You didn't say that ever so helpful phrase, "oh, well then you'd be dead too" or worse, "what could you have done?" He had not been there, and that haunted him. That you understood. You drizzled the melted butter into your mixing bowl and stirred till the batter had emulsified.

"He was one of mine."

"He was." You understood. You found some eggs, some fresh mozzarella, and prosciutto. You stirred mayonnaise and sherry into the eggs. In one pan, you threw together scrambled eggs. In the other, you began the crepes.

"...Malik was young. Shouldn't have been on his own." There was a rawness to Tataryn that you had not seen before. Before he had always been laughing and flippant, even when he killed. You had misjudged him badly. Tataryn cared. Tataryn cared a whole lot, and you understood then why Gabriel trusted him so much.

"Sinaga was an accomplished agent. Wouldn't have been on your team otherwise," you said, voice mild. "You don't babysit incompetents, Tataryn. You're the one Gabriel goes to when he needs a job done right."

"Well, I obviously can't keep my people alive!" Tataryn snapped. And you remembered a variation of those words coming out of your mouth.

"I think we both know that even you or I wouldn't have been prepared for what happened in Kalkan. The mission was an acquisition. No one expected a tidal wave of omnics. It's a miracle Diallo and Vo got out alive."

"The boss would have been prepared," Tataryn said.

His faith in Gabriel surprised you. Not because Gabriel didn't deserve it, but because Tataryn was such a practical cynic. But you didn't comment, having been on the other side of this discussion before. Instead, you let him talk, and maybe you would be able to say a few things that had eased your grief.

"Maybe. But you and me are mere mortals, Fedya. We do our best. Sometimes it's not enough, but it's all we've got. There's no shame in doing your best, even if you fail." You had not entirely embraced those words, though you knew them to be true. You just worked hard to make your best better. You would be strong enough. You would be fast enough. And everyone would come home, you would make sure of it.
You went to the pantry and got down a blend of hibiscus herbal tea. Jesse said it was good for hangovers, and he probably wouldn't mind if you pinched a little. After all, you were taking his office shift today. You made a cup for Tataryn and a cup for yourself. You set the mug in front of Tataryn and flipped the first crepe onto a plate. After starting the next one, you gave the first one to Tataryn, then got out the cream cheese, Nutella, and strawberry preserves.

Tataryn silently put all three on his crepe and then got out the powdered sugar. He dusted the whole thing with it, rolled it up, and began to eat.

You added the cheese and prosciutto to the eggs and scooped out a plate for Tataryn, hoping he wouldn't sugar those too.

"It's good," he said after a moment.

"How can you taste anything under all that sugar?"

"It is how my daughter likes her crepes. Makes me think of her."

You blinked. You really needed to start reading people's personnel files. You weren't so much surprised that Tataryn had reproduced, just that he had cared enough to stay in contact. And that was kind of judgmental of you.

"What does she do?" You asked, trying to keep the question general. You moved between the table and the stove, steadily building up a supply of crepes.

"She goes to a private boarding school in here in Switzerland. Very expensive. The boss arranged it." Tataryn looked smug. "She is smart. And beautiful. And very sneaky. Just like her father. With the right connections, she will be much better off than him."

"How old is she?"

"Eight." Tataryn sighed. "She is not happy about being sent away, but it is for the best. What do I know about children?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about children," you agreed.

"Mmm. One of life's great mysteries," Tataryn said. To his credit, he didn't ask you if you wanted any. You would have said, "yes, everything goes well on crepes."

The kitchen door opened and Gabriel stood there, expression hard. Of course, Jesse had gotten him. You sighed.

"Boss," Tataryn gave a half-salute, powdered sugar smeared across his jaw.

"...Tataryn." Gabriel glanced between the two of you.

"Are you hungry?" You asked, with a half smile.

Gabriel gave you a long look. It was a silly question. Gabriel was usually hungry. And he hadn't stayed very long this morning. He'd scooped you off the floor, tucked you back into bed, and kissed you goodbye, while you sulkily muttered about not wanting him to go because he was nice and warm, damnit.

Gabriel had been amused then, but not so much now. He frowned at Tataryn, expression harsh.
Tataryn hunched over his plate, not saying a word.

"Eggs?" You asked and Gabriel looked up, frown softening.

"Please."

You made him a small plate of eggs, making sure to put more crepes on Tataryn's plate. Tataryn put his eggs in the next crepe, rolled them up, and began to eat. No powdered sugar this time, thank god.

Gabriel ate the eggs, leaning against the door frame, gaze drifting back to Tataryn, the corners of his mouth dropping. The tension in his shoulders worried you.

"Strawberry or Nutella?"

"One of each." You spread cream cheese on the strawberry one for him. Your eggs were getting cold, but you kept shoveling food at both of them, not because you were some kind of homemaker, but to keep the peace. Tataryn couldn't say anything stupid if his mouth was full. And Gabriel would probably be in a better mood with food in his stomach.

"Here you go," you gave him another plate of crepes, taking his empty plate and putting it in the dishwasher.

"Thanks."

Tataryn swallowed roughly, looking paler now, like he expected to be taken out back and shot.

"I'll be by the office later. Do you want me to bring you something?"

"Chicken katsu," he said, studying Tataryn. "You know how I like it."

"All right. I'll make that next. Jesse's going to be out today. I'll cover."

"Yeah, all right." Gabriel exhaled. "Tataryn, eat your breakfast, and go get some sleep. That's an order."

"OK, boss," Tataryn said, meekly.

"See you in the office," Gabriel said, and exited the kitchen, shutting the door behind him.

There was half a minute of silence while you sipped your tea and Tataryn waited for Gabriel to come back and do something terrible.

When that did not happen, he gave a deep sigh of relief. "Thank you, Lucky."

"I'm glad you liked the food," you said. "But I was hungry too." You picked up your eggs, and began to eat.

Tataryn blinked in surprise, and then sat back in his seat, shaking his head. "You are formidable woman. No wonder they like you so much."

You almost asked whom "they" were, but decided against it. "You're just saying that because you want more food. Help yourself. I have to cook something else anyway."

"I can do dishes," Tataryn said after a moment. "Because you will just leave the dirty ones
in the sink. I know it is you who does that."

"Hey, I cooked. I shouldn't have to clean up!" You grinned. "Yeah, you can do dishes. Just go get some sleep first, all right?"

"You are just planning on making a bigger mess," Tataryn sighed, serving himself the rest of the eggs. "You will make more delicious food, and eat it all while I sleep. And then you will laugh at your poor Fedya, slaving away in the kitchen, scrubbing dirty pots, and wasting away into thin air."

You just smiled and ate another crepe.

You carried a large container of chicken katsu on rice, with shredded cabbage, and sauce on the side, into the office. Gabriel didn't look up when you came in. He just glared at his screen. "I don't like this, Lucky. They've been too quiet. Now that they can't get access to our systems, they're angling for something else."

"Of course," you said. Lacroix had already flagged three new recruits as potential security issues and was changing the security clearance vetting process as well as the three year renewal process.

"They're still hitting us with the budget. There's Angela's little problem. You're sending off doctored reports to Petras. And backdated "concerned" memos about Blackwatch keep popping up in the periphery. Lacroix and Mihrat have been using Athena to track them. It's a goddamn setup. They're pushing us toward something big and I can't tell if it's Jack or me that's supposed to take the fall. I'm the more convenient scapegoat, but..."

"Let's assume both," you said. "Hell, if they're really clever, they'll just pit you two against each other. Push you to a breaking point. Make it look like the two of you were the cause of the whole thing." And if they were both dead, then they wouldn't be able to refute the charges. Petras would be free to spin whatever narrative he wanted. The realization chilled you.

Petras still wanted Jack, for some reason. But he was courting Gabriel too, though it seemed he was more interested in stringing Gabriel along. He kept throwing unsanctioned and unpleasant missions Blackwatch's way and trying to see how hard he could push for compliance. For example, he wanted dirt on tech conglomerate that happened to be a rival for his brother-in-law's firm. Claimed they were funneling money to omnic hate groups, but wanted to the work done off the record. You'd done the preliminary research and found nothing of the sort. Still, you'd sent off a stalling report claiming that it was being worked on and discretion took precedence over speed.

"I can't fucking run a black ops division and parry a UN conspiracy at the same time!" Gabriel snarled, and while you knew he could, you also knew that wasn't the main reason he was in such a foul mood.

"Consult Lacroix. He's the criminal mastermind." You set the food down on his desk. You opened it up and pushed it in front of him with chopsticks and sauce in little dipping cups. "Eat first. I'll make some coffee."

Gabriel took the food and began to eat, his eyes not leaving the screen. "He said he'll get
back to me. Has to check up on some sources. Said you were planning to arrange a discrete
meeting with Kwento. There's been some traffic about her lately. She's making waves and that's
earning her enemies." His analysis would have been unremarkable, except for his admiring tone.
Gabriel liked Kwento. Huh.

"You know you're cynical when you think that's a good sign."

"Yeah." Gabriel chewed thoughtfully, his tension easing up as he ate. "This is good.
Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Want some?"

"If there's any left later."

"There won't be. Have some now." Gabriel cut off a generous piece of chicken, dipped it
in the sauces and gestured for you to come over. You rolled your eyes and leaned across his desk.
He fed you a bite of chicken and then rice.

"What do you want me to do first?"

"Sift through reports. Forward me anything problematic." Gabriel cut up another piece of
chicken and offered it to you. You shook your head.

"I'm good. If I eat any more I'll just fall asleep."

"More for me," he said, and happily continued eating.

You filtered through the reports quickly and returned to your own workload. Kwento was
your main focus now. You'd seen some of the extremist media caricaturing Adaeze Kwento.
There'd been a particularly unflattering comic portraying her as a gorilla that managed to be
offensive on numerous levels, but the artist swore up and down that race had nothing to do with it.
It was just a political statement. Why were people so sensitive?

Uh huh.

But more importantly, you'd seen her voting record, her public works, and her penchant for
solving problems through collaboration, charismatic leadership, and uncompromising advocacy for
civil liberties, for both humans and omnics. And while you were no fan of omnics, you understood
that they weren't just overpowered blenders and toasters, and if they were people, after a fashion,
they deserved some kind of recognition complete with rights and civil protections. But wading into
that sort of legalism and philosophy wasn't your forte. That's what people like Kwento were for.

Kwento held the international conglomerates accountable, pushing for more humanitarian
distribution of the Omnica Corporation's seized assets. She channeled aid relief into the areas hit
hardest by the Omnic crisis, no matter the continent. And she kept the kept the multinational
profiteers out of Numbani, which was a feat in and of itself.

Undersecretary Adawe was not a fan of Blackwatch and since she was already on her way
out, Lacroix said it wasn't worth it to try to change her mind. Kwento though, Kwento might be
worth the risk. Because of her connection to Adawe, she probably knew about Blackwatch and
was not predisposed to look at it favorably. You weren't sure how to change her mind. Lacroix
was still brainstorming and your team was digging up everything they could on her.
You were still running background financials, searching for any whiff of corruption. Because if you were going to back this candidate, you did not want any surprises. Bolstering Kwento was far riskier than assassinating Hoffman. That had been a one-time thing. This would be a sustained alliance and possibly an on-going operation. Any kind of prolonged contact increased the chances of getting caught.

You glanced at the clock. It was late afternoon now and your hip was starting to ache again. You stood and stretched.

"Is Jack back from Geneva yet?"

"No." The empty food containers sat neatly stacked on the floor beside Gabriel's desk.

"You going to be up for seeing him when he gets back?" You sat on Gabriel's desk, and he crossed his arms.

"I'll deal with him tonight."

"Am I invited?"

"I guess." There was a pause. "You going to behave?"

"...I want you two to make up," you said.

"It's not always pretty."

"Well then, you'll need me on hand to separate you two if it gets ugly," you said, hoping it would not go that far.

"...I suppose," Gabriel sighed. "How's Tataryn?"

"Walked him back to his room. He's pretty broken up about Sinaga."

"Yeah." Gabriel shook his head and you saw the weariness in his eyes. "I sent Sinaga out. Was just supposed to be a B&E. Diallo and Vo there if things got heavy. Proportional force. Didn't expect the omnis."

"No one did." You shrugged. "Tataryn is still blaming himself."

"...That idiot. Tried to self-destruct in the middle of the mess hall, did he?"

"I handled it." You shrugged again, arms crossed, fingers splayed across your shoulders. "You know how it is."

"...Yeah."

There wasn't much more you needed to say. "I know there have to be consequences, but don't be harsh on him."

"...What would you have me do?" Gabriel asked, though there was no anger in his voice. He looked at you thoughtfully. "I'm not being sarcastic. I'm curious."

"Tataryn pretty much admitted that he wanted me to knock him out, so points to him for picking a fight with someone who can defend themselves."

"He knows you're my woman. He had a goddamn death wish."
"Yeah, he's a dumb drunk." You shrugged. "We're going to need to replace Sinaga. Put Tataryn on Overwatch rookie duty for a few weeks. Nobody likes that. See if anyone works well with him. Don't tell him to scout, just keep an eye on him. If he likes someone, great. If he doesn't, well, you've at least got a competent agent training them."

Gabriel raised a brow. "You're learning."

"I had a good teacher."

Gabriel gave you a wide grin. "Oh?"

"Yeah, Captain Patel was the best."

Gabriel snorted, but he didn't argue.

"So, if I came to ask you for advice, would you just laugh at me or-"

"...I'm not going to overclock your space heater, Lucky. That's a fire hazard, I don't care how cold your room is, just put on another layer." Torby glared up at you as he scooted out from underneath Reinhardt's suit. "The lasers still aren't ready. And no, I won't make you dildo-fingers. I draw the line at the vibrators."

"...I...what?" You tucked your left hand behind your back, unable to banish the mental image of "dildo fingers" attached to your hands. Just what kind of implications was he making about your private life anyway? "I...can't even process that. No, I didn't come here for tech help or custom sex toys. I uh...I don't know what I was thinking. I'll just be going now..."

"Hold up, eelhead."

"...Eww," you said. "Torby, you have the weirdest descriptors for body parts and I don't know if that's an "engineer" thing or a "you" thing, but please stop."

"You wanted advice," he said gruffly. "Why would you come to me?"

"...I'm desperate, obviously." You clapped a hand over your mouth. "OK, not quite desperate, but I'm hitting my head against a wall. You're a smart guy, and you have a lot of experience weighing the potential far-reaching consequences of your actions. I need help doing that." At least, you expected he did, considering all the groundbreaking weaponry he designed. Torby was very aware of how it had been used badly.

"What have you done?" Torby climbed to his feet and began to scale Reinhardt's armor. It was a terrifying thing to watch, knowing that the dwarf could climb so nimbly.

"Nothing yet. Someone else has done something bad, and I'm trying to figure out how to fix it."

Torby sighed. "Are you going to have to kill them?"

"It's the most likely outcome. But I actually don't want to."

Torby paused. "Huh."
"They fucked up. They compromised us, but there are extenuating circumstances."

"But you can't just let it slide and Reyes is going to want blood."

"Yeah," you said. "I could go to Jack, but...that's the nuclear option. I'd rather not. It would just complicate things. You know how he is."

"Yeah, Rein is like that. Too...optimistic about our fellow man." Torby shook his head and looked down at you like he really knew the moral quandary you were facing. "It's not Mihret, is it?" He actually sounded worried.

"No. He's loyal. Just a fucking pain in the ass."

"They can't stay."

"...Yeah, I figured." You sighed. "It's complicated. And I really don't want to kill them, but what they've done isn't really forgivable."

"...Forgiveness is a personal thing, Lucky. You can forgive someone for wronging you. But that doesn't mean you retain them professionally." Torby began banging on a dent in the chestplate. "How personal is this?"

"I take betrayal pretty personally," you admitted.

"Was it you or all of Overwatch? Give me a scale."

"Both...ish. Like the amount of harm caused is minimal, but it could have been a lot worse."

"I don't know anything about intel protocols, Lucky. But if you don't want to kill this person, then don't. And if you feel strongly enough about it that you have to find me to confirm that for you, then what the hell is wrong with you?"

"...Thanks Torby." He wasn't exactly wrong and you grinned up at him. "You should write greeting cards."

"Pass me that spanner, will you? This one is too small to knock sense into your thick dumb skull."
"Well how is Gabriel going to know if he works well with any of them? Fedya probably isn't going to praise them. I don't even know if he'll be in the right state of mind to train them. And you could do with a refresher on Overwatch discipline."

Sighing heavily, you nodded. It wasn't unfair. It was just going to suck getting up at 4 AM every morning. "Understood, ma'am."

"You'll just be covering the intro to black ops classes. Maybe a few PT courses with them. Definitely the live fire exercise. We're not leaving you and Tataryn alone with the green recruits, Lucky. We don't want them going rogue on the second day."

"Ma'am," you acknowledged, quirking your lips.

"It's one week out of the entire training," she said. "You deserve a much longer sentence, but Gérard claims he needs you on hand for a mission. So I suppose you'll just have to make sure you do a good job. Otherwise, I'll assign you to the next batch for the full training period."

"Yes, ma'am," you said.

"Jesse has helped me run the marksmanship portion. Liaise with him if you have questions about the course material."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mmm, that is all." She paused. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Please," you said, perking up.

"And if I give a Lucky a cup of tea, she's going to want a biscuit to go with it, isn't she?"

You just smiled. "As you say, ma'am."

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You studied the scar across Jack's forehead. It had faded from angry red to a pink toned line, but it was still very noticeable.

"Got a lot of thoughtful looks. Guess those crusty fucks forgot that I still go out in the field."

"Maybe it's bad to remind them that you're mortal."

"No, it's good to remind them that I fight metal monsters the weight of semi-trucks on a regular basis, and that maybe they should consider that when they talk to me." Jack sat on his couch eating chicken katsu. You had put some aside for him too. Gabriel seemed incapable of leaving leftovers. You sat beside him drinking beer and eating cake. "How's Gabe?"

"Cooled down somewhat. Lost one of Tataryn's agents. Random omnic attack on one of our ops. He came to me last night. He was pretty upset over it." You should have felt weird telling Jack this, considering that Gabriel was still mad at him. But being dishonest didn't sit right with you and you didn't think Gabriel would mind once they sorted things.

Jack looked at you, frowning. "What'd you do?"
"Cuddled, fell asleep, had sex, then talked about everything."

"So you softened him up for me?" Jack didn't seem bothered at all. In fact, he was grinning now.

"Oh, he's still mad at you."

"But he's coming over tonight." Jack's look was downright smug. "That's a pretty fast cooldown."

"He's just... tired. Sinaga was one of his personal recruits."

"Ah." Jack's smile flattened. "When's the funeral?"

"Tomorrow. 1400 hours."

"I'll be there." Jack sat back. "That region's becoming problematic." He rubbed his temples. "I'm guessing you fed Gabe?"

"Oh yeah," you nodded. "Definitely."


"Yeah..." You shrugged. "That's my punishment for my role in I Need Coffee."

"Better than mine. Ana said if I had time to run across the world and take on stupid missions, I had time to make a comprehensive facilities review and check over the maintenance budget. Lucky, how are individual pipe-fittings thirty credits now? Like, I can walk into a home improvement store and get a dozen for ten credits."

"Or they'll give them to you for free, because you are the Jack Morrison."

"Shut up," he scowled.

"Heh." You leaned against him and he offered you a bite of his chicken. You took it. "So, any advice?"

"Wait, you've never trained raw recruits before, have you?"

"Nope," you shrugged. "I'm sure it'll be a learning experience."

Jack chuckled. "Never let them see you sweat. Your job is to be a scary as possible."

"...I see."

"You're doing the black ops course. That's basically an excuse to terrorize them." Jack looked amused. "You have to weed out the weak. Let them know how much easier it is to be a rank and file agent. It's a Blackwatch tradition, or so I'm told."

"...What?" You sighed. You knew hazing the recruits was standard fare, but you weren't so sure about Jack's idea. "I'll review the course material tomorrow. I have time."

"If you need ideas, I can ask Ray. She's always up for sadistic training exercises."

"I'll keep that in mind." You shook your head. Jack was way too excited about this. And
then you remembered how much he enjoyed you bossing him around. Oh. You could work with that.

The door opened and Gabriel dragged himself in, shoulders hunched. He kicked off his boots, sniffed the air, and then shot a hard look at you.

"There was more?" The accusation bordered on outrage.

"I uh...saved some for Jack?"

Gabriel pursed his lips. "I'm still hungry. Didn't eat right yesterday because I was too worried about someone who put on a mask and decided to play vigilante."

Jack looked down at his bowl, conflicted. You rolled your eyes. He stood, walked up to Gabriel, and extended his chopsticks, holding up a generous slice of breaded chicken. "I can share."

"I'll fight you for it, Morrison. Don't think that I won-"

Jack shoved the chicken into Gabriel's mouth, a delighted smile on his face. "I haven't set up the mats yet, hey-"

Gabriel snatched the bowl out of Jack's hands and sat down on the couch beside you. "Give me those chopsticks."

Jack sighed and handed them over. He sat down on Gabriel's other side, shaking his head. Gabriel cut off a piece of chicken and elbowed Jack. "Open up."

"Whatever you say, sir," Jack said, lips quirking up in a smile.

"Don't get cocky, Morrison." Gabriel fed Jack a bite. "I'm still sore at you."

"I am sorry, Gabe. Next time we'll drag you along. We missed you." Jack gave Gabriel a peck on the cheek. "I shouldn't have taken off like that. I shouldn't have pressured Lucky into going along. And I shouldn't have bypassed you, and I was an idiot. Feng just reminds me of Maggie and I didn't want to sit by and do nothing because of politics."

Irritation flickered across Gabriel's face. He took another bite of chicken. After he swallowed, he looked at you. "You warned him, didn't you?"

You shrugged. "I just pointed out all the things we overlooked and explained that, yes, we were, and probably still are, amazingly stupid."

Gabriel shook his head. "And what have you learned, Jack?"

"...That I should've left Lucky tied to the bed so she couldn't warn anyone. Then she could have distracted you when you noticed I was missing." Jack began to laugh as Gabriel choked. "I'm kidding! I'm kidding! I didn't actually learn anything, because I should have known better to begin with. I just got carried away. Like the old days, because I miss them. I know. It was stupid and I'll reign it in. I just...it felt good to be out there as an operative, and not the Strike Commander... Next time, I won't try to solo it. I promise."

"There better not be a fucking next time, Morrison."

"...Next time I go out," Jack amended quickly.
Gabriel handed Jack his bowl and sat back, an arm around you. "You know snitches get stitches, right baby?"

Jack began to shovel the food into his mouth, in case Gabriel changed his mind.

"Mmm, definitely. But I seem to remember a very smug man advising me on how to handle a relationship hurdle, because I was too dumb to figure it out on my own. I was just following his example."

"Wait, what are you implying?" Jack asked, looking up from his bowl, mouth full, cheeks puffed out, and brow furrowed.

"Mmm, all right then." Gabriel kissed your cheek. "I suppose I can let it slide this once. I know I'm too tired to give him the ass kicking he deserves."

"Besides, I know it was you who gave Captain Amari the idea to have me "help" with the trainees."

Gabriel grinned. "It'll be good for you. Think of it less as punishment, and more as a leadership building course. You're gaining important new skills."

"Oh, it's punishment," Jack grinned, setting his empty bowl on the table. "But on the bright side, you get to spread that misery around." He leaned against Gabriel. "So are you going to forgive me or not, papi? Because I can grovel if you want." The cheeky bastard knew Gabriel had already let it go. That's the only reason he was being such a smug shit.

Gabriel turned to Jack. "You're an ass. And you got that pretty face fucked up. What am I going to do with you?" He pressed a kiss to Jack's forehead. "Let me plan a mission for the three of us, all right?"

"...That sounds good," Jack murmured, cupping Gabriel's chin.

"He flirts, a lot," you said.

"She gets so riled up, it's adorable."

"You're both ridiculous." Gabriel kissed Jack. "Any other news?"

"Lucky's getting a pet."

"What? There are no pets in the Blackwatch dorms. Not after the goddamn ant farm incident."

"I heard it was termites," you wrinkled your nose.

"It didn't matter. Vo took it upon herself to exterminate the colony with extreme prejudice. Didn't actually kill them all, blew through two walls, dispersed them through the building, and we had to get fumigated all while Agent Findlay cried inconsolably over her damn ant farm." Gabriel shook his head. "No pets."

"She offered me a Mongolian death worm, which are apparently giant mutant skinks that shoot electricity and eat camels. I said "no, thank you." Obviously."

"...I read that part three times. I'm still having trouble with that," Gabriel said.

"It's true, saw them myself." Jack hadn't actually been against you having pets. Maybe if
something caught your fancy, it could live with him. Like your orchid. "Anyway, Feng said she'll make Lucky a small dinosaur."

Gabriel snorted. "That girl is deranged. If she actually creates a dinosaur, yeah sure, you can have one. Otherwise, no pets."

"I'm not the one lobbying for pets. I can barely keep my plants alive."

Jack just looked smug. He nuzzled Gabriel's cheek. "You want a back rub?"

"Sure." Gabriel's voice was tired. He sat sandwiched between you and Jack, head resting on Jack's shoulder, you curled up against his side. Jack reached over and clasped your hand, winking at you behind Gabriel's back.

It was not lost on you that no one had raised their voice or thrown any punches. And you wondered if that was a sign of problems or progress.

Chapter End Notes

Wednesday was...soul-draining. I answered the phone and an older man with a heavy Appalachian accent asked me if we carried books of "a sexual persuasion." Oh boy. I said yes and asked what he was looking for specifically, dreading the answer. "Well, I've spent my whole life thinking I was one way and now realize I'm another way." OK, not what I was expecting, but OK. So I asked if he was trans or coming out of the closet. There was a long pause. "I'm not the first, but I'm...bisexual. I'm trying to figure out how I'm supposed to live now."

Oh boy. I'm a retail employee, not a counselor. Now I've given some impromptu comfort for strangers at work, from "my boyfriend just dumped me" to "I'm pregnant out of wedlock and Jordanian, if I don't get an abortion, my dad will disinherit me" to "my mother has Alzheimer's, I don't know what to do." (That one is actually really frequent). Sometimes, I've had nothing good to add and just nodded politely. December 26, a woman came in to return over $200 worth of books. Her reason? "My husband gave me the divorce papers Christmas day. I'm returning all his presents."

But yeah, I'm not qualified to give anyone life advice over the phone and honestly, I don't get paid enough for this. However, I gave him some recommendations out of our LGBTQ section and he was like "I've tried to keep it under control my whole life, but the monster keeps rearing its head." And I was like...well shit. So I told him, that it's not a big deal, that's just my young, liberal opinion, but if that's whom he is, there's nothing wrong with it, and maybe he should join a support group. He thanked me, asked me for a number (which I didn't have and told him he could google ), and he told me his sister had google on her phone and he'd ask her to do it. But he would be in later today with his girlfriend, would I be there?

He did come in. The woman he came with did not look happy. He asked me if a book called "How to Create Chemistry with Anyone" would work for men and women. I'm not sure he was shopping for books on identity as much as kink, but...yeah. None of my business. Just...yeah. I don't always have the emotional depth to want to help people, but I try to at least be compassionate and it's fucking hard.
The real kicker was the bitchy older woman who put "No Ego" on reserve then told me off because she wanted two copies. So I grabbed her another one, came back, and she told me she didn't want it because it was too expensive, but she was going to buy one. Obviously, she needed to read it.

Then I went to cover a cafe break, and she was there, demanding chai with no sugar. We make our stuff from concentrate. There is no sugar-free chai from us. I explained we had two sugar free syrups, but if she needed to avoid sugar, she should also not get frappes or soy milk, because ours contain sugar. I explained this multiple times. She wouldn't clarify if she couldn't have sugar or just didn't want it. Then she asked me what I could make, and I gave her a rundown: lattes, cappucinos, americanos, drinks with sugar free syrups, hot tea... Anyway, she told me it was too complicated so I defined every drink for her. I was getting a line and she was being a bitch, but whatever, I was polite. She then told me she didn't want anything that tasted like coffee. I nearly facepalmed, but I ended up getting her a sugar free vanilla latte with almond milk. Hooray?

No, she called back half an hour later to complain to my manager that I'd been condescending and demanded he send her a $5 gift card because she was too busy to stop in the and the drink tasted like coffee. This manager looks like Sid from Ice Age and he caved, and I was so mad for the rest of the day that I threw things in the air going "I'm done! I'm done! I don't care any more! I'm done!" I didn't get in any trouble, because yeah, lady was a bitch, but I'm still seething. (The other managers aren't happy with him, so I don't feel as bad.)

I went grocery shopping after work, to try and get a win. I did get lots of veggies, fruit, and meat on sale, so I feel better. But then I went home, took a bite of something, and couldn't pull the fork out. Two of the tines had gotten stuck in the lining of my mouth under my lip. It didn't hurt, they just had to be pulled out slowly. I'm still like "WTF, how did that happen?" And pictured myself going to Urgent Care with a fork stuck in my mouth. I'm fine now, but yesterday was so stupid.

But I made Japanese-style Bulgogi tonight and it was good, so I'm OK. I'm OK. I hope you are too.
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

Funerals, friendship, and near-death experiences.

Chapter Notes

There's some heavy bits in here, so warnings for discussions of death and suicide attempts.

You guys are so nice. I didn't mean to rant like that, but I hadn't rebuilt my mental armor to deal with stupid and it all came out like word vomit. Sorry!

Story got extended again. I know you're all shocked. I'm at like 460k and facepalming. But don't worry, I'm making notes for the Angst!AU and reshaping a few things. Because my headcanons just like to go wild.

A very intrepid anon put together a playlist. I am listening to it now. ヽ(●_●)ﾉ♪

You guys are so awesome and I'm making fist clenches and staring off into the distance overwhelmed by emotion. (Not sure which one, they are all kind of confusing.) :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a bright and clear spring afternoon, sunny, but still chilly. You wore your funeral suit and walked alongside Gabriel and Tataryn. Diallo, Jesse, and Riggs were behind you. Genji and Hanzo were already seated in a row of folding chairs at the service site. Every Blackwatch agent that was not out on a mission should be here.

To your surprise, Lacroix and Amélie were already seated in the second row. Jack, Reinhardt, and Captain Amari were in the first row, where you, Gabriel, Tataryn, and the rest of his squad would sit.

It would not be a traditional Islamic service. Blackwatch had its own quirks. Sinaga had referred to himself as "Muslim-lite." He occasionally drank alcohol, borrowed money, and engaged in relations outside of marriage, but he abstained from pork and regularly attended a local mosque. The imam was not entirely comfortable presiding over a Blackwatch service, and though he was in attendance, it was an Islamic Overwatch chaplain who would be conducting the service. Sinaga had no family left outside of Blackwatch.

The casket was at an angle, facing southeast toward Mecca. In front of the chairs was a podium. There was a portrait of Sinaga in dress uniform, flashing a crooked smile at the camera. He had been young, close to Jesse's age, and no one had expected him to... Well, your obituary could read the same. You did not like how at every funeral, you ended up wondering about your own mortality.
What would they say? She did her best? She was a good agent? She liked cake? No one is surprised, she took stupid risks?

Everyone else did too; it's why most of the off-duty Blackwatch agents would be falling down drunk before dinner tonight. Sometimes it was easier not to talk or think about it. Maybe not healthier, but definitely more palatable.

You took a deep breath and schooled your face. Tataryn's jaw was clenched and Gabriel wore that blank officer expression that worried you just a little. You sat down beside Gabriel, not touching, but close enough. He was between Jack and you. And Diallo sat beside Tataryn, her hand on his shoulder, Sinaga's watch on her arm. She took it off then and placed it on Tataryn's wrist, and he let her, though he didn't look anywhere but at that flag-draped coffin.

You wondered then if Sinaga and Tataryn had been lovers, or if you just saw shades of your own life reflected in everyone else's. It didn't matter. Tataryn was mourning Sinaga, and that was real enough. Diallo was mourning Sinaga, and Vo... Well, where was Vo? You raised a brow, but said nothing. Vo didn't like social gatherings, but she usually made it to funerals.

"She wouldn't come out," Tataryn said, hoarsely, when he noticed you staring at the empty seat. "I couldn't make her."

"I'll talk to her afterward," you said.

"Just make sure she eats," he mumbled, staring down at his wrist.

There was praying, and Sinaga's imam read from the Qur'an as he sat beside the casket. It was closed, as per tradition, and not because of the state of the body. You knew, because, well, you knew things.

Gabriel spoke first. "I met Agent Sinaga late at night, on the streets of Surabaya, with his hands stuck in my pants."

There was a pause and some nervous laughter from people who did not know the story.

"He was trying to steal my wallet. I was impressed that he'd managed to get that close. I still punched him in the face for getting fresh with me-" The laughter was more confident. "-And then I offered him a job, because he was fast, smart, and actually the most well-mannered pickpocket I've ever encountered. Malik Sinaga went on to become one of our most decorated spec ops scouts. He managed to do translation work, supply logistics, and earn his MBA on the side. And while he lost his family to the attack on Java, he started a charity for other war orphans there, so I couldn't go back to the city and recruit them all. In lieu of flowers, he requested that the money be donated to that fund."

You knew that most of you would give and that the details would be sent out later.

"Most people won't ever hear about Agent Sinaga's heroics, about his actions at the invasion of Algiers, or the bombardment of Kandahar, or even the massacre at Shaki." Because of the mixed crowd, Gabriel only mentioned Overwatch operations. "But he was there for them all, and we will remember him, even if the world does not. Because we are Blackwatch: we do what we must, we do not forget, and we are always vigilant. De oppresso liber." He turned to salute the casket, then walked away from the podium.

Jack was up next, though he took a moment to clasp Gabriel's forearm in a manly hug, instead of saluting. It surprised you, and probably several of the other attendees, for different
reasons, but Jack was actively trying to mend fences with Blackwatch.

As Strike Commander, he touched on sacrifice and honor, but focused on inspiration, talking about the good that Sinaga did and how he changed his corner of the world. It was a rousing speech, meant to lift spirits and remind everyone what they were fighting for. His speech did not quite apply to you, because sure, you were fighting to protect your people, but you were also here for revenge. You were going to make sure Talon, Petras, and all of their ilk paid for what they did at the Ninth Circle.

And then Tataryn was up, pale, but clean-shaven and dressed in a suit. He gave you a panicked smile and nearly tripped over his feet going up to the podium. You didn't laugh, because this was a funeral.

"I uh...after that lineup, I might be the only one who actually has to introduce himself. I am Fedor. I was Malik's direct superior, at least in rank." Tataryn took a steadying breath. "But he was the better singer. And cook. And he was very good at calligraphy, beautiful penmanship. It's a lost skill." Tataryn's voice wobbled and while some would think it nerves, you had seen Tataryn under pressure. This was grief. "Malik was a better man than most: honorable, kind, and trustworthy, which is why he always lost at cards." His eyes widened as he glanced at the imam, probably remembering then that good Muslims were not supposed to gamble.

There was a smattering of laughter.

"Korva! I mean... Malik was my friend. I do not have a lot of those left. He was a good man, and you can go a long time in a world like this without finding one of those. He was a soldier, yes, but he wanted to go back to Surabaya and teach children. He made me pecel lele and rawon, then laughed when it burnt my mouth. He was brave, clever, and talented, and we are poorer for his loss." He saluted then, back straight, and eyes hard. "Все, що було зроблено, зроблено, тепер ми повинні жити з наслідками. Вічна пам'ять."

He abruptly returned to his seat and the service continued.

When the time came, it was Jack, Gabriel, Tataryn, and Diallo who carried the casket to the gravesite. You and the other agents followed. This was done in silence, the burial beginning. Gabriel threw on the first shovelful of dirt, and Jack the second. Tataryn took a long look at the wooden box before adding to it. Diallo followed in suit. And then those in attendance had their turn. Because if Blackwatch was good at anything, it was burying things.

You sipped the jasmine tea and sighed. "Thank you. I needed this."

"It has been a trying day," Captain Amari said and broke out a packet of savory-sweet rice crackers. You accepted them gratefully.

"I have a problem."

"Mmm," was all she said, eyeing you carefully. Or like she was trying to hold back all observations about what your problem could be.

"It's purely professional," you clarified and she nodded, like she was expecting another sordid story about Jack and Gabriel and you wanted to say that not everything revolved around
them, but then Gabriel was a periphery issue here and that invalidated your point. So you took a
deep breath and laid the whole thing out for her. And then you ate too many rice crackers, because
the crunchiness was addictive.

"I'm curious, you're one of the "wronged" parties. How do you feel?"

"...A little betrayed," you admitted. And you did not handle betrayal gracefully, or gently.

"So why the hesitation? We both know you're not cowardly."

You held the teacup in both hands, absorbing the warmth in your palms. "Doesn't feel
right."

"And your other kills have?"

"Yeah. Mostly." You shrugged. "It's not a clear cut case. I think the difference is intent.
And my feelings kind of don't matter. I'm supposed to fix this and do what has to be done. That's
the Blackwatch way."

"You need eliminate the leak, sure. But does that require a death?"

"...Maybe not. But that sends the wrong message. And honestly, someone else will
probably get them. I could let nature take its course, but I can't pretend I don't have some
responsibility there." You shrugged. "I don't have a good solution."

"And there are other aspects to consider. What kind of message are we sending to our own
people?" Captain Amari leaned forward. "You have a point, Lucky. Give your endgame more
consideration. Your time isn't limitless, but make sure you're at peace with whatever decision you
make."

"Vo, it's me. I have food. Will you open the door?" You carried a tray.

There was silence.

"I have Nutella."

You heard something move inside the room. The door opened a crack.

"Can I come in?"

The door opened a little more, but not wide enough for you to enter. Sighing, you passed
Vo one cafeteria croissant, slathered in Nutella. Her small hand snatched it from yours. There was
a long moment, and finally she opened the door the rest of the way.

You knew better than to take off your shoes. While Vo's room wasn't packed full of things,
she kept a lot of her supplies on hand. Nails, ball bearings, pipes - nothing explosive was allowed
in her quarters any more, but you doubted that she actually followed that rule. Vo was a hoarder,
and you'd found her packets concealed all around the base. As long as they were nonperishable,
non-explosive goods, you left them alone.

Vo backed up and sat on the floor, wrapping herself in swathes of blankets. She was a
small woman, her hair steely and bobbed. She was tiny, barely clearing four feet and too skinny, resembling a child or a gnome. She had a starburst scar on her left cheek, and wore her sleeves too long, either to hide the numerous scars or maybe because she was so small that none of the standard issue clothing fit properly. Her skin was leathery and tanned and she had heavy eyelids that made her look like she was always half asleep. She could have been anywhere from forty to seventy, you didn't have a clue. Vo didn't talk about her history, though evidently she'd somehow been cleared for Blackwatch.

Very carefully, you set the tray down in front of her. She eyed the jar of Nutella, the apple slices, and the croissants. "Porquoi?" She asked in her accented French, her voice rusty and soft.

"You missed the funeral," you said.

Vo shrugged, not making eye contact.

"Tataryn and Diallo were looking for you."

She shrugged again. "Trop de gens."

You sighed, rubbing your forehead. "It was a funeral: everyone in Blackwatch tries to show. It was nice, I guess. Gabriel spoke about meeting Sinaga and what he accomplished. Morrison gave a speech about making a difference. Tataryn talked about Sinaga as a person. It was a very well-rounded summary of a life. But yeah, it wasn't fun. I guess I can't blame you for skipping out."

"Il était gentil."

"He was a good guy," you said.

Vo took an apple slice and dipped it in the chocolate hazelnut spread. She tasted it, found it acceptable, and proceeded to eat the rest of the apple slices with varying amounts of Nutella. "Il serait vivant si je restais à Zurich."

You sighed. "That's not true. There's no guarantee Diallo could have reached him in time or even survived that onslaught. You leaving Zurich didn't change a damn thing and you certainly didn't get Sinaga killed."

"Qu'est-ce que tu sais?"

What did you know? Not enough, about saying the right thing, to be doing this on your own. "Vo, it's not your fault. No one is blaming you. And if they try, send them to me or Gabriel, OK? We'll straighten them out. That goes for Tataryn and Diallo. If they've said anything..."

Vo shook her head. You didn't think Tataryn or Diallo would have lashed out at Vo, but you also hadn't expected Tataryn to pick a fight with you.

You were not the best at handling Vo. She was not...like anyone else in Blackwatch, her needs very specific, and her behavior unabashedly child-like. Everyone in Blackwatch knew it, just like they knew it was in bad taste to point it out. But she built amazingly intricate bombs, capable of anything from leveling a building to harmlessly dispersing glitter throughout a room. She made things that you didn't know you needed as well as devices to your exact specifications, and really, even if she was fussy and eccentric, did you need any more out of a demolitionist?

Vo just stared at her tray.
"I'm sorry you're sad, Vo. I know words can't make it better. But sometimes talking about it helps."

She tore a croissant into pieces and proceeded to dip them into the Nutella. Vo refused to make eye contact with you, but that wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

"Tataryn was really upset. Got drunk and tried to get me to punch him yesterday. I didn't, obviously. But he was a mess. I made him some food."

Vo nodded. "Fedya not eat enough." Her English wasn't as fluent as her French, but it was a good sign when she used it with you.

"You don't eat properly either," you said. "Nutella is not a food group." You said it lightly, rather than as an admonishment. Vo didn't handle scoldings very well.

"If you make crunchy chicken again, invite me," she said, clearing her throat. "I like it. And banh xeo. Make banh xeo. I like that too."

"OK," you said.

"You can go now," she said. "I will take plate back. I will see Fedya and Fatou later."

"All right," you said knowing that plate would never make it back to the kitchen. "Please do. Tataryn is very sad and I think seeing you would help."

"Yes," she said solemnly, looking up at you, her eyes huge in that wizened face. "I will help."

You skimmed the highbrow science fiction that Gérard seemed to secretly favor. He projected an image of literate sophistication, but you could totally see him on his couch, perusing trashy novels, drinking wine, and reading the spicy excerpts to Amélie while they both laughed. His taste in sci-fi was still over your head.

You had read the collected works of Yoon Ha Lee, finding the underlying themes to be less about speculative science and more about human nature. You were coming to understand that all good sci-fi interwove those aspects. Though the outrageous tech like origami folding weapons and amputation guns did increase the entertainment value and gave you ideas about the kinds of things you should be requesting from R&D. You might try writing some proposals and see what happened. Most likely Torby would come to the office and break your ankles for wasting his time, but there was a miniscule chance you could inspire him to make something...catastrophic.

There were a great deal of improbably mathematics, double-dealing, and creative problem solving. Some of it was pure fantasy, neat solutions to hard problems, balanced and predictable like the Pythagorean theorem. Your life was never that orderly. But some of the ideas felt raw and realistic, like the extra few steps you had to take to find least common denominators to balance fractions and the use of imaginary numbers, involving concepts like the square root of negative one. They were twisty-turny and not entirely intuitive units, but they made sense after you looked at them sideways. They too were solutions to your equations, and you had to think a step deeper and sharper.
You weren't certain if you were stretching the facts to fit the situation or at least justify your concerns. But you did know that in this instance, it wouldn't hurt for you to explore other options and different angles to fix your problems. Because head-on confrontation and sneaky assassination were the exact things you were trying to avoid.

How odd.

You went for a run around the grounds. It was relaxing to just follow the walkways, able to set yourself on autopilot and just think. It would have been more relaxing to ask Genji or Jesse to spar, but you did not actually desire to speak with anyone right now. Funerals put all of you on edge, and you were better off leaving them alone while you collected your thoughts.

...In war, the ideal must be a bloodless engagement upon an empty battlefield.

You remembered that line from the book you read to Lao. At the time, you had not really understood it, taking it to be artistic pseudo-Zen sentiments. Both Lacroix and Gabriel had been pushing you to read things like The Art of War, The Book of Five Rings, and the Heiho Kadensho. You had finally given in, not because Gabriel recommended them, because he recommended a lot of books and you honestly could not keep up. Not just because Lacroix made you feel stupid for not knowing the literature by heart. But because once upon a time, Shin had those books on his shelf, though you had never picked them up or discussed them with him.

You didn't share your reasoning. You just read them on your tablet and tried not to get frustrated. They were deceptively simple books, with maxims that encompassed a lot of situations. Honestly, you couldn't take them literally, as warfare had changed since they were written, but when you looked at them sideways, you understood some of the principles behind the laws.

But the idea remained that open confrontation and death were a last resort, and once you reached that stage, you had already fucked up.

All right, how were you going to fix this now?

You bent over to tighten your shoelaces.

No one ever said you had to do it alone. And to be fair, you had not. You had asked for advice and you knew what you could not do. All right, you had to take that one step further. What were you trying to accomplish? And who could help you get there?

You rounded a corner, the Blackwatch dorms in sight.

Jack could. He had the power to make things happen. But that verged on nepotism and Overwatch could not be seen doing things in that fashion. As much as you were tempted to, you could not build on favoritism and there wasn't much Jack could directly handle outside of Overwatch. In fact, involving him would cause more trouble than help. For this particular problem, Overwatch had too many morals and Blackwatch had too few qualms but... Oh. There were other ways to get things done. You just weren't being flexible enough.

Huh. You didn't want to kill anyone. You wanted to stop the leak. And you wanted to take care of your friends. You applied the idea to your problem, twisting and angling till you had a tangible plan. It was neat. It upheld your goals. There was no contradiction.

Now you just had to convince everyone else.
"If you take all those, Gabriel will murder-eat you," you told Genji. "And I will let him."

Genji just snatched two more pieces of karaage off the cooling rack and dropped them into his rice bowl. "You're just too slow at this," he said. "We're hungry now."

Hanzo sat at the kitchen table, silently watching. He had a bowl of rice and oyakodon, which is what you had made for everyone else. Genji had a bowl of that and was still stealing your fried chicken. The karaage was for Gabriel, Jack, and Vo. Tataryn and most of Blackwatch were out getting drunk, so you could count on them not invading the communal kitchen.

Jesse leaned against the sink, waiting for you to turn back around so he could steal another piece without getting yelled at. You glared at him and he just tipped his hat at you.

Vo sat the table, occasionally shooting dirty looks at Hanzo.

"Look, if you want some, you can help make them. Otherwise, fuck off."

Genji rolled his eyes. "That's no fun."

"Shimadas don't cook," Hanzo said and you nearly threw the pot of hot oil at him.

"Shimadas who want to eat my cooking can help!" You jabbed your metal chopsticks at him. "Otherwise, they can find their own food!"

Hanzo wisely looked away, pretending like you weren't going to stab him in those judgmental eyes.

Vo silently ate her banh xeo. She'd wrapped the rice flour and coconut milk crepe around three pieces of karaage, and you'd managed to get some lettuce in there as well. She smacked her lips as she downed some of Jesse's tea.

Hanzo stared at her like she was an alien.

She just gave him a flat unfriendly look and took an aggressive bite out of her wrap. "Casse-toi."

"Je parle français."

"Quelle importance?" Vo crunched her chicken. "Je m’en fous."

"Stop bickering," you said. "Hanzo's a ninja. Vo's a demolitionist. This kitchen will not survive your clash and I'm trying to cook."

Vo gave you a mildly resentful look, but went back to eating. Loudly.

Hanzo stared at her in disgust.

"Have some tea, sweetpea," Jesse winked as he poured you a cup of hot water from the electric kettle. "It'll be fine. I'll keep these scavengers at bay."

"And in exchange, you just want some chicken?"

"I'm helping!" Jesse laughed.
You sighed and began dredging the marinated chicken: it had been sitting in a mix of soy sauce, garlic, wine, ginger, red pepper. Then you rolled it in rice flour. Then you wrapped strips of salted chicken skin around the meat and dredged it again. Once you had a plate full, you could start deep frying again. "I'll call Gabriel down here, don't think I won't-"

Genji just laughed and stole another piece. That was it. You had been working on this all afternoon for Gabriel and Jack. These parasites needed to stop now. He reached over again, obviously not taking you or your warnings seriously.

So you stabbed him in the arm with one of your chopsticks. It was the metal arm and the chopstick just got caught in the plating around the wrist joint, but he stared at the utensil, eyes wide, like he couldn't believe that you had done that.

"I will go for flesh next," you said, yanking out the chopstick.

There was a long moment of silence, interrupted only by Vo's loud eating.

"...I can wrap and flour the chicken," Genji said, looking between the chopstick and the raw chicken. "Just let me finish this bowl."

Rolling your eyes, you flipped another banh xeo and put it on Vo's plate. With Genji's superior manual dexterity, the process went faster, and while there wasn't nearly as much as you wanted, Jack and Gabriel would have to make do. They were fortunate to get any with this crowd hovering around.

You ate as you worked, refilling your small bowl of rice and occasionally wrapping the chicken in banh xeo. Shin had explained his process to you in loving detail, and you had yet to find a way to improve his recipe. The chicken was juicy and flavorful, the skin crispy, and served with the rice? It was incredibly satisfying. You packed a smaller container for Lao. Jesse could take it to her.

You packed a large container of rice for Jack and Gabriel, as well as one of banh xeo. You grabbed several leaves of lettuce and packed the chicken as well. It was best fresh, but some people around here actually worked and couldn't just get up and leave their stations.

Vo left as soon as she finished her food, stopping to pull faces at Hanzo as she exited.

Genji didn't even try to hide his amusement.

"You freeloaders can clean up. I'm done here."

"I have to deliver this to Agent Lao before it gets cold," Jesse said.

"I have an appointment with Angela," Genji said. "I cannot be late."

Hanzo stared at the pile of dishes in the sink. "Wait a minute-"

"Thanks, Hanzo. I knew I could rely on you, despite what Genji said," you called out over your shoulder. "I'll let Gabriel know you volunteered to clean up. He'll really appreciate it!"

And the three of you hightailed it out of the kitchen, before Hanzo could protest.
Gabriel grumbled as he served himself. You sat on his couch, the food spread out on the coffee table. Jack was due in soon.

"Bunch of thieving weasels," he muttered. "Taking my food. That damn ingrate..." You laughed as he angrily bit into his chicken.

"You could just help me guard the payload next time."

"Vo, the Shimadas, Jesse: I'll ship them all out to Antarctica tomorrow."

"You didn't eat earlier, did you?"

Gabriel shrugged. "No appetite before the funeral."

Your smile faded. "Of course."

Gabriel picked at the rice for a moment. "...Was it really necessary for you to hug Tataryn in front of everyone?"

You blinked. "It was a funeral. It wasn't inappropriate." You narrowed your eyes. "And yes it was necessary. A lot of people saw him call me out yesterday. I needed to show that there was no bad blood between us, that Blackwatch is united, especially in the face of tragedy. That seemed the simplest way to demonstrate it."

Gabriel sighed. "Yeah. All right. That's a good reason." He put down his bowl. "I'm not trying to tell you whom you can and can't be affectionate with. I just...there are already rumors about the two of you, and maybe it irks me that I can't be demonstrative with you and Jack in public. And I'm still grumpy from...everything. Sorry." He shook his head.

You straddled his lap and cupped his face. "It's OK. I get it."

"Do you?"

"Yeah." You kissed him gently. "You wanted to hug Tataryn too and maybe cop a feel. But you know that Jack and I will kick your ass," you said.

"...That's exactly it," Gabriel drawled. "Except I generally beat his ass, and you know it."

It didn't always go down like that, but you chose not to point that out. "Well, then I'll kick your ass. Jack will just watch and laugh."

Gabriel chuckled, leaning over to kiss your cheek. "You have nothing to worry about. Tataryn is pretty enough to look at, but I already have a pretty blonde boyfriend and a jealous dangerous girlfriend. That's enough for me."

The door opened and Jack walked in, tossing his jacket onto the kitchen chairs and kicking off his boots.

"I hate Petras. I hate the UN. Rocks can fall and they can all die," Jack muttered.

"I second that motion," Gabriel said.

You paused, taking a moment to picture the UN building buried under rocks. It was strangely soothing. You pictured Petras screaming while the stones piled on. Wow, that was therapeutic.
"If you want food, you better hurry," you said.

"Oh, what's that?" Jack squinted at the karaage. "Smells good."

"Help yourself," you said and Gabriel stifled a groan.

Jack vaulted over the back of the couch and grabbed a piece of chicken with his fingers. He sniffed it then popped it into his mouth. "Oh wow, that's delicious." His eyes widened and he grabbed a banh xeo then wrapped a few more pieces of chicken.

"This is really good. How come you've never made this for me before?"

You started laughing, a note of hysteria creeping into your voice, and Gabriel just sighed.

"Lucky, I'm sorry to intrude, but you are needed."

You yawned as Athena's voice roused you from your sleep. You were in Gabriel's bed, Gabriel curled against Jack's chest with you embracing him from behind. You were not very good at being the big spoon, but Gabriel had trapped your arm against his body. You weren't entirely comfortable, but you'd fallen asleep this way.

Athena was technically not allowed in Gabriel's quarters. You frowned.

"It's regarding Agent Nergüi Bayan."

"...Shit." You pulled free of Gabriel and he grumbled.

"I'm not hearing that damn AI in my bedroom, am I?"

"Mission critical alert. I got it." You kissed the back of his neck. "I was going to deal with it yesterday but with the funeral..."

Gabriel grunted, already falling back asleep.

"Need us for anything?" Jack mumbled.

"No." You did not want Gabriel there, for multiple reasons. "I can handle it. You guys rest."

"OK," Jack sighed and began to snore lightly.

You pulled on your clothes, putting your hair back and popping the coin sized comm unit in your ear. "Brief me."

"He's on the roof of the main building," Athena said. "He has been praying."

You ran out the door, down the hall, across the cafeteria, and rapid-pushing the elevator buttons before you realized that Athena was still talking.

"-no alcohol, but his behavior has been erratic for the past week and-"

"Get Genji on site. Tell him we might have a jumper."
"Genji is currently with Dr. Ziegler for maintenance," Athena said. There was silence. "He says he'll get it covered. I will...override the elevator protocols."

"...That doesn't sound safe," you said, shaking your head but not actually telling her to stop.

"We are just avoiding involving anyone else," Athena said. "You will still be traveling at scientifically safe speeds."

You did not want to ask what that meant. The elevator opened, and made a straight shot to the highest floor, stopping for no one. The roof access door was unlocked and you took a deep breath, hoping your backup got there in time.

You climbed the stairs and opened the door. It was still dark, though there were floodlights set up on the roof.

Bayan stood at the edge of the building in shadow, still in his blue scrubs, staring down, his back to you.

"Hey Bayan. It's kind of cold out. You should've brought a jacket. I should've brought a jacket." You crossed your arms and stepped onto the roof, the door slamming shut behind you.

He turned, not moving away from the low wall that edged this part of the roof. He was about six meters out. "I..." His voice was a raw whisper and you could not see his face. "What are you doing here?"

"Roof's a good place to think or drink. Maybe sneak a cigarette." You took another step. "I have to be careful. If Captain Amari catches me smoking, she'll gut me."

Bayan gave a humorless laugh. "Smoking will kill you. You should quit."

"At this point in my life, I'm far more likely to die from lead poisoning," you said, moving slowly.

"But the water- Oh you mean bullets. You're not funny," Bayan said.

"I'm hilarious," you said. You took another step. "So I came up here to sneak a cigarette. You want one? I won't tell Angela." One more step forward. Bayan was now three meters away.

"That's close enough," Bayan said sharply. "I don't smoke."

"I haven't lit up yet," you said, taking another step.

"They're terrible for you, even with all the chemical filtration and fiberweave filters," Bayan said.

"Well, if you were planning on jumping, I figured you weren't concerned about the health risks."

Bayan flinched and turned away from you. "Not another step Lucky. I'll do it and it'll be on your conscience along with Agent Lao and whoever else you're dragging along."

"Ouch," you said, and inched forward.

"That...that was cruel. I'm sorry." Bayan's voice was reedy in the wind. "It isn't your fault. I know Agent Lao wasn't your fault. I shouldn't' have said that."
"Agent Lao was my fault. You know her story, right? My old squad, presumed dead. Got picked up by the enemy. They did some shit to her. I found her, but...it took me too long to free her. She doesn't want anything to do with me now."

"She'll come around," Bayan said, back still to you. "When she woke, all she would do was ask me about you. I couldn't tell her you survived, but it was obvious that she still cares about you."

"Maybe. Maybe she just feels guilty about almost killing me."

"It wasn't just that," Bayan said.

"Still should've been there for her," you said.

"Not your fault," Bayan murmured. "You did your best. And you brought her home. " Your heart clenched, because even now, teetering on the precipice, Bayan was trying to be a healing influence.

He took a deep breath and tilted his head back.

"I know about your younger brother," you said quickly. "I know he got a job at one of Nguyen's tech companies here in Switzerland. I know about a month ago something bad happened. They didn't involve the police, but he called you for help. I'm assuming they leaned on him to get to you."

"...Blackwatch." Bayan shook his head, shoulders tight. "I'm not even going to ask how you know all this. But yes, Jalair was excited about the job at Pan Tek. They asked him to do some...unethical things: mostly falsifying documents. He's not proud of it, but then they turned around and nailed him for it. Threatened to prosecute. There was a lot of jail time on the table and my brother is only nineteen. They said I could make it go away. All they needed was a little medical information. They made it sound like corporate espionage. At first, I let myself believe that. It was innocent enough: what kind of cures were coming down the pipeline? Which supplier was Overwatch favoring and could they undercut them? Then they started asking about things they had no business knowing: Genji, Min, Lao, you."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"They already have people within Overwatch. They knew where I went, what I was doing. They sent me pictures of Jalair in the center of crosshairs. I didn't know whom I could trust. Hell, for all I know, you work for them and are here to silence me."

You stood there for a long moment. "I am so glad you are a medic and not a spy. Because you are very bad at it."

Bayan gave a bark of laughter. "Even if you don't say it, we all know what happens to traitors. I know Ivanov and Montero didn't just quit."

"Yeah, Commander Reyes personally executed them both."

Honesty was your best policy, though it didn't feel like it. "They were taking money from terrorist groups and actually getting people killed. Different circumstances."

"...I've broken my oath, Lucky. I was here to help people. I was supposed to take care of my brother. I didn't mean to aid the enemy. I didn't—" He shook his head. "The damage is done. I can't do a trial. I can't shame my family, and once I'm dead, they'll have no reason to go after Jalair. This is the best way." He stepped onto the low wall.
"Your brother-"

"He'll be fine," Bayan said firmly. "After this, it will all be fine-"

You lunged then, hands grasping at air as he fell forward. Heart pounding in your ears, you snarled, already knowing you were too slow. You skidded to a halt, forcing yourself to look over the edge of the building, knowing that no matter what Bayan said, this failure would haunt you as much as-

Whumpf!

Something flew overhead and you blinked as Hanzo slammed Bayan onto his back against the roof tiles.

"You fool! If you killed yourself, your brother would not be fine! He would carry your death for the rest of his life! Suicide would fix nothing! If you are an honorable man you will throw yourself at the mercy of those you have wronged! You would atone for your sins!" Hanzo shouted, and you wondered how long he had been listening and if he'd actually tried doing any of those things yet.

Well, Genji had not complained about Hanzo to you recently. So maybe he had?

Bayan wheezed on the ground, because Hanzo had not saved his life gently.

"Come on, let's get him to a holding cell." You patted him down for weapons and found nothing.

"Please-" Bayan's voice broke. "No trial. Make it quick. If you ever meant it when you said we were friends-" The painful desperation in his words made you flinch.

"We're still friends," you said with a sigh. "But now we've got some problems to work out."

Chapter End Notes

Trying to work out the kinks in a new minor arc. It's making me mad. I know I'll sort it out, but right now it's like "...RAWR."

I finally showed Vo, I know. She's been mentioned for chapters and finally got a real appearance. Bayan's arc is coming to a head. Hanzo is trying.

It was nice and warm all weekend, and today it is snowing. Snowing big honking pellets. I made beef stroganoff with miso and goat cheese, because I watched a cooking video with a subpar version and wanted to do it right. Got estimates for doggy surgeries. About what I expected. One has a sebaceous cyst, which isn't a big deal. I'll probably hold off a few months, because the other has a fatty tumor/possible hernia and it's in an inconvenient spot. But other than that, the jerks are healthy.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Consequences, for all.

Chapter Notes

Stephychanng made another compilation of the music!anon's playlist. I enjoyed it. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You made Hanzo breakfast for a job well done. And you were pleasantly surprised to find the sink empty of dishes. Whether he actually hand-washed them, loaded the dishwasher, or threw them away, you weren't sure. But your skillet looked clean, so you cooked omurice with the leftover rice and made mentaiko sauce, while Hanzo sipped some of Jesse's oolong tea.

"Thank you for the assist," you told him as you put the food in front of him. The seasoned rice and chicken had been covered in a sheet of egg. You decorated it with kewpie mayo, ketchup, furikake, and put the savory mentaiko cream on the side. "I was too slow and-"

"You called for backup. Genji asked me to come. He informed me of the protocol." Hanzo bowed his head. "It went exactly to plan."

"...You're right," you said. Because one person would not have been enough. "Thanks, though. I uh...I have enough guilt. I didn't want Bayan's death on my conscience."

"Will they kill him?" Hanzo asked as you made yourself a plate. He hadn't touched his food yet.

You poured yourself some tea. "I hope not. I took over this op because I didn't want to have to kill him."

"He made a mistake and it snowballed. He...tried to protect his brother. That is admirable." Hanzo waited for you to take a bite before he started eating. He'd seen you cook it, it obviously wasn't poisoned- Oh. This was polite Hanzo showing manners and waiting for you. Huh.

You sat back in your chair. "I know. Lacroix is debriefing him now. We've already sent a team to pickup the brother. He can't stay, though. As much as I like him, that's not a good idea."

"It sets a bad precedent," Hanzo agreed. "This is...good. Thank you."

"Yes, and you're welcome." You sighed. Of course, Hanzo would see shades of his own life in that story, if only because Bayan stood by his brother when Hanzo did not. "He still should have come to one of us in the beginning. If not me, then Angela or Gabriel." You shook your head and ate your food. You would make more for Gabriel and Jack, and maybe there was still time to
salvage this.

"Commander Reyes is not known for being...merciful to traitors."

"...True," you said.

"I don't think he should die," Hanzo said.

"Me neither." You took another bite. "If you want to help, there are still things you can do."

Hanzo gave you a firm nod, hair streaming down his shoulders, fire in his gaze. "I will assist."

You just smiled, because you knew he wouldn't like this plan once he heard it, just like you knew that he wouldn't back out now that he'd committed to this course of action.

"No, absolutely not." Gabriel set his chopsticks down. "That's a terrible idea."

"So you'd rather have a messy circus of a trial?" You sat on his desk. Lacroix had pulled up a chair and sat there with a satisfied smirk on his face.

"No trial necessary. He admitted to everything. We can just take him out back and-" Gabriel trailed off.

"Vo is really fond of him," you said.

"Then we can ship him off to-"

"And there are extenuating circumstances."

"He should have come to us," Gabriel said sharply.

"I agree. That's why he should lose his job, but not his life. I don't want him in prison where Nguyen can reach him either. He did minimal harm, and it was under coercion." You sipped your coffee. "The brother corroborates the story and Ziv is taking a break from penal pushups to hack Pan Tek. If we can verify the story, well, I'd advise that yes, we make an example of Bayan. We spin it that we could have saved his job if he just worked with us."

"And I think Chanceux's plan is really quite elegant," Lacroix said, sounding pleased. "She has handled this investigation deftly."

You frowned, realizing that Lacroix had given you two compliments. You waited for the other shoe to drop.

"And our hands are clean if they decide to execute-"

"No, Lacroix, that's not what we're doing," you scowled.

Lacroix pursed his lips. "Of course not. Someone else is doing our dirty work."
"No, Lacroix, that's not what we're negotiating for."

He crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. "I take it back. Chanceux is stupidly sentimental and ruined a perfectly good plan by inserting maudlin drivel into it. I vote we keep her away from Jack and Reinhardt. They are a disgusting influence."

"Would you be doing this if he wasn't your nurse when you were in the infirmary?" Gabriel asked, leaning back in his chair.

"...Probably not. I mean, the facts of the case don't warrant a death sentence. But would I have taken on the extra work? No. But you're the one who tells me not to dwell on speculation. I took the op. I did the work. And this is my recommendation."

"I will admit, this isn't what I expected from you," Gabriel said after a moment. "I thought you would just take him out back or let him fall off the roof."

"That would have attracted too much attention. Obviously, he wanted us to investigate posthumously. He left a very detailed note."

"...So you're saying "don't kill him" that's what he wants?"

"No, I'm saying he doesn't deserve to die, and I like him, and other people like Angela and Vo like him, so we should tread carefully."

Gabriel exhaled slowly. "Is this forgiveness?"

"I think so," you said, though there was not much to forgive. But it was a step in the right direction and you let yourself have that.

Gabriel pondered that. "That's...more progressive than I was expecting."

"...You're the one who sent me to therapy. It's your fault."

Lacroix laughed at you both. You weren't sure how you could tell, you just knew.

Gabriel ignored him. He looked at Bayan's dossier. Then at you. Then at the wall. He took a deep breath, and from the loosenning of his shoulders, you knew you'd won. "Run it by Ana. If she approves, then I won't contest it."

"This is the only way?" Hanzo asked. He was dressed in his formal kyudo-gi, nipple exposed, and yes, that would help make your case.

The two of you sat in front of the camera. "If you have a better idea, please let me know. But this is the plan Gabriel and Captain Amari approved. Everything else was imprisonment, or a doubletap to the back of the head, or leaving him in the open where Nguyen can reach him."

Hanzo sat there for several minutes. "...I have nothing."

"If you don't feel comfortable-"

"I said I'd do it," Hanzo said tightly.
"All right then. I'll explain. You appeal. Got it?"

"...Yes."

You opened the line.

"Lucky! And Hanzo! Wow! And that is a really nice kyudo-gi. Have I ever told you how awesome your tattoo is? Like seriously. Is the artist a Shimada exclusive or do you think I could get him to ink me too? Not the same design of course, that would be tacky as fuck. Me copying you. Not your tattoo design." Fen sat in an egg-shaped chair eating shrimp chips. She was wearing a conservative navy blue suit and sensible shoes.

"Is this a bad time?"

"Nope. You just saved me from a meeting with the cousins about how to divvy up Fa's research projects. Honestly, they were mostly dumb and boring. I'm happy to let most of them die in development hell. But yeah, official Overwatch business totally trumps their petty concerns!"

Feng grinned. "What can I do for you today?"

You explained the Bayan situation, and to her credit, and your surprise, Feng didn't interrupt. She just nodded, shouted things then covered her mouth, and began to scribble notes.

"So...did you want me to arrange for an accident or...?"

"No!" Hanzo snapped. "We want you to hire him."

"...Wait, whaaaaaaaat?" Feng narrowed her eyes. "You want me to invite a known-traitor into my house? Like, this is a fucking Triad, a goddamn secret society! Not some kind of corporate free-for-all! Yeesh."

"We want him out of Nguyen's reach. He was an exemplary medic till they leveraged his family." You paused there to let Feng digest that. "I'll forward you his service record."

Feng began to spin in her chair as she read. "Oh, he's cute. Good bedside manner. Excellent nurse. Worked on Dr. Ziegler's advanced cybernetics augments program. Not too shabby." Feng paused. "And you want me to take the brother too?"

"We don't want him extradited if Nguyen tries to get them back."

"Paralegal, fluent in Mongolian, English, French, and Chinese, specializes in international IPR... Hmm. Actually, the brother is a good candidate too." Feng gave you a shrewd look.

"We wouldn't send you incompetents," you said.

"I guess not. So what happens if I say "no"? Because I'm not convinced this is a good idea." Feng crossed her arms. "Will that affect our alliance?"

"No. You asked me to find you some people. I did. It's a nonzero sum game. You get good employees, with some black marks, but who will owe you their lives, and I'm fine making them contractually stay with you-"

"Not indefinitely, and you cannot mistreat them," Hanzo said.

Feng raised a brow. "You really want me to do this."

"Yes," Hanzo said. "He did it for his brother. That is something...admirable. And
something I think you understand."

    Feng tilted her head back. "I see."

    "I...would take it as a great favor if you did us this kindness," Hanzo said formally. "You are the only one we can turn to and the only one we can trust to handle this correctly."

    Feng blinked. "Wow, those are the most polite words I've heard you string together, ever. Like who are you and what'd you do with Grump-Grump Hanzo?"

    Hanzo winced, like this conversation actually caused him physical pain.

    You smothered a snort.

    "Joking aside, I see that you are very serious and that changes things. Can I confer with Lucky for a moment?" Feng leaned forward, expression suddenly neutral.

    Hanzo glanced at you in confusion. "I will step out." The door clicked behind him.

    "...Do you really want me to spare them?"

    "Yes. I would have said otherwise."

    "Huh." Feng studied your face.

    "I can do my own killing," you said.

    "Hanzo really wants to save this guy, huh?"

    "Yup." You yawned. "Bayan jumped off the roof. Hanzo caught him and dragged him back up. Then proceeded to yell at him about honor, redemption, and brotherhood. I'm not sure that helped matters, but it was quite the demonstration."

    Feng's eyes widened. "That's so dramatic. I didn't realize I'd have to put him on suicide watch. Well, I'd keep him under close surveillance and away from weapons anyway, so it's not like it's an extra hardship. Hmm...And all this is true?"

    "I wouldn't lie to you at this point, Feng. I'd just leave out information. But in this case, I didn't."

    "I appreciate the honesty. It's an important aspect of any friendship." She studied her nails. "I notice that you didn't mention that part of our relationship."

    "...This is business. I'm not going to leverage our friendship for that." Which was kind of true. "I'm inclined to trust you because of it, sure. But I'm not using that against you. Anyway, while I like Bayan, Hanzo's really stuck on this. I'm certainly not using him as leverage either. He's genuinely invested."

    "I can tell." Feng shook her head. "And I guess if I say "no" he'll be salty at me when we go out to dinner."

    "It'd be bad form, but probably," you agreed. "I figured you'd like the chance to do Hanzo a favor. It's taken me months of work to get him to be civil. You had him behaving right off the bat."

    Feng chuckled, clapping her hands together. "I see what you did there, Sneaky Pants. Very
clever. If I do this, I win some approval from Hanzo. And then I have you to thank for it."

You shrugged. "Every once in a while, I get something right."

"I like it. You're right, it's a win-win. And they do look good on paper. I'll give them a chance and if they fuck up I'll just send them off to a minor, less profitable business. And if they really fuck up, well, I can't keep them." She gave you a grave look.

"Fair," you said.

"Hanzo! You can resume listening!" Feng shouted.

You rolled your eyes and got up and went to the door. Hanzo loitered in the hallway, glaring at cowering Overwatch agents who passed by. You gestured for him to come back into the comm room.

"OK, Hanzo. I'll do it for you," Feng said. "And I'm not asking for anything in return. You don't even have to come to dinner. Though Genji RSVP'd for both of you and I'll admit, I'll be salty if you don't make it, because Caridad's is a pain to get reservations for."

"...That is the new Cuban-Chinese restaurant in Shanghai, right? It looked interesting," Hanzo said. "I will attend, provided I am not needed for a Blackwatch operation. Most of my involvement has been...unplanned."

Feng beamed at you. "Oh. Cool. Well, I'll uh...I'll make arrangements for...your people. My people? Whatever. If this goes well I might even have to pay you a headhunting bonus."

She didn't specify if that was for Bayan or Hanzo, and you decided not to ask.

Lacroix waited for you in the hallway. You waived Hanzo off and he actually looked relieved.

"Judging by your expression, your proposal was a success."

"Yup." You crossed your arms. "Here to disparage my grievous amount of ethics?"

"Not at all. I said all that pseudo-Machiavellian drivel purely for Gabriel's benefit. He likes to be the white hat occasionally, you know."

Lacroix claimed he was being a dick, so Gabriel would realize that killing Bayan was dickish, and change his stance. You squinted at him, not entirely buying his argument. "I don't know what actually goes through your brain, Lacroix."

"Mystery keeps the romance alive," he said.

"Now you're just baiting me," you said, as he fell into step beside you. "So, what is it really?"

"Ziv has acquired an interesting batch of documents from Pan Tek. Some of them verify your nurse's story. Others tell a very interesting, if unrelated tale. Things going back to Hanoi and also our new favorite UN delegate."
"...You're not going to tell me about them in the hallway."

"I'm still reviewing the data. I'll share after I've formed a better picture of the situation. I just came by to see how your operation went."

"I can't complain. I got what I want, and once I get Gabriel's go-ahead, I'll give Bayan the good news."

"Good job, Chanceux," Lacroix said brightly and handed you a cigarette.
You tucked in your front pocket. "That's condescending as fuck, you know."

"I can take it back."

"...You can try."

"It's true that you did good work. Whether or not you choose to accept the compliment is up to you."

"I can never tell how sincere your compliments are," you admitted.

"You've managed to solve the leak, strengthen our ties with On Sing, deny Nguyen retribution, keep Angela and Min happy, and used the elder Shimada to do it." Something like pride colored his tone. "It was a elegantly maneuvered. I won't even comment on how soft you are to jump through all those hoops for someone who doesn't deserve it." Well, there it was, the critique. You weighed it against the positive bulk of the statement. Huh. OK, it seemed Lacroix probably meant this compliment.

"Nowhere in the Espionage Handbook does it say that I have to make every decision broody, ruthless, and painful. Sure, I'm bending the rules, but isn't that our prerogative in Blackwatch?"

"Sentimentality is considered a weakness, Chanceux."

"Being ruthless, because you're afraid to be seen as weak, isn't strength."

"Obviously, but you have to be aware of how your adversaries read your actions."

"Fair. I see letting Bayan live as a great big "fuck you" to Nguyen. Not only are we better than you, you can't touch him. Also, your plan didn't work, we're not bringing down morale, and we're still the better people. Suck it."

Lacroix laughed. "Now you are just making things up."

"Maybe, but buzzwords and toxic intel community standards aside, aren't we trying to guarantee the best outcome? Doesn't that sometimes take some creative problem solving? We're black ops agents, Lacroix. We don't blindly follow anyone else's rules. After all, what's the point of having questionable morals, if they don't make you happy? If you're just going to feel bad about everything you do, you might as well stick to conventional thinking and methods. Join one of those self-flagellating religions while you're at it. Ugh."

Lacroix blinked, his mouth open, but no words coming out, like you'd genuinely shocked him. He closed his eyes, opened them, and then he reached into his front pocket and handed you the whole pack of cigarettes.
You made your way down to the holding cell and were slightly surprised to find Tataryn and Vo waiting outside. Vo glared up at you, her anger twisting her features, making her resemble a very sinister lawn gnome. Tataryn placed a hand on her shoulder. She snapped her teeth at him, but he looked at you.

"How bad?" Tataryn's accent was heavier than usual and you realized you were used to the flippant and cheerful Tataryn. His grave expression surprised you. You knew he liked Vo, but you now realized that he liked Bayan as well.

"We're not taking him out back with a shovel," you said, looking at Vo. "And we're not putting him through a lengthy trial. But he can't work here any more."

Vo actually hissed at you, and shook off Tataryn's hand. "Not send him away!"

You gave Tataryn an irritated look. What was he thinking bringing Vo here?

"It was that or let Gabriel do something drastic. He and his brother are going to go work legitimately for an On Sing company, no accidents, no espionage, and protection from Nguyen. I've had to work very hard to broker this deal, and let me tell you, it was the best outcome I could arrange."

"Nguyen? Nguyen Anh?" Vo snarled.

"...Yeah."

Vo spat on the floor and stalked off. You stared at the glob of saliva on the ground, wondering, not for the first time, how Vo processed information.

You glanced up at Tataryn, and he shrugged. "She was coming to see him no matter what anyone said. I thought you wouldn't want to deal with her on your own."

"Yeah, well...yeah. Thanks." You shook your head. "It's the best I could do. He gets to live and he gets a decent job that offers protection, provided he doesn't slip up."

"...Min will calm down. She just needs time." Tataryn sighed. "I am glad to hear it, Lucky. I had feared the worst."

"If he'd been profiting off this arrangement, I would have killed him myself. But that wasn't the case." You shook your head. "It's still messy."

The door opened and Angela walked out shaking her head. She gave you swift nod and kept going, muttering under her breath in German.

Bayan sat in the chair resting his head on the table. From the rumpled state of his scrubs to the bags under his eyes, he looked as exhausted as you felt. His cuffed hands were in his lap, and he raised his head when you walked in, blinking rapidly.

"I don't think Angela will ever speak to me again."

"...She'll probably get over it. She just needs time and two, maybe three more capable nurses to replace you with."
Bayan stared at the table. "My brother didn't-"

"I know."

"I never meant-"

"I know."

"I fucking hate it when you don't let me finish my sent-"

"I know." You grinned.

Bayan huffed. He turned his attention to Tataryn. "Where's Min?"

"She got mad at Lucky and stormed off. She'll be back." Tataryn leaned against the wall and you sat down.

"How did you know?" Bayan asked after a moment.

"You wore your guilt on your face," you said. "Honest men make terrible spies, unless they're flexibly honest men. Which you aren't."

"Thanks. I think." Bayan wrinkled his nose at you.

"Good news or bad news first?"

"Bad news."

"You're fired." You shook your head. "Should've gone to Angela or Commander Reyes. They were the least likely to be corrupt." Because if Angela was working for them, they wouldn't have needed Bayan.

"...I kind of figured. Angela said as much." Bayan gave a heavy sigh. "Lost my job and a good friend. Don't tell me it's going to get worse..."

"Possibly? That's up to you. Here's the good news. There will be no trial and you aren't getting arrested or executed, and neither is your brother." You folded your hands in your lap. "I know Nguyen will go after you if you stay in Switzerland. So I've made arrangements. How would you like to work for one of On Sing's legitimate businesses?"

"That's rhetorical, isn't it?"

"He's quick, Lucky. He might still learn to be a spy." Tataryn chuckled.

"Nah, he's still too nice. Hanzo called in some personal favors and Zhai Feng is willing to shelter you in exchange for you being an excellent employee. The offer extends to your brother as well."

Bayan gave you a long look. "...Am I supposed to survive this employment?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that? For fuck's sake, I've spent my morning trying to keep you alive, you moron. I could have gone back to bed! Or at the very least I could have avoided arguing with the commander! If we wanted you dead, we would do it ourselves. Blackwatch takes care of its own problems. We don't need to farm you out to a friendly Triad."

Bayan had the grace to look embarrassed. "I...yeah. You're right. I'm not good at thinking
"So those are your options. Go out in the world and try to hack it on your own - I don't suggest it because Nguyen has long reach. Or take On Sing employment which includes a reputable job, fair compensation, and protection for you and your brother. Either way, you need to be out of Switzerland soon."

"...I've heard of Zhai Feng in passing. I thought she was some kind of eccentric heiress and tech mogul."

"That too," you agreed. "And she's a pretty OK girl. But she'll kill you if you betray her, so...I'm just going to put that out there for you and your brother."

"I'll need to talk to Jalair, but...this is far better than I expected. Thank you." He looked at you with warm damp eyes and you rubbed the back of your neck.

"Just don't do it again. I can't save you from Feng. And you should probably thank Hanzo before you go. I know it's a shock, but he actually has feelings underneath all that nitpicking bitchiness. They're pretty underdeveloped and kind of squishy, but they're there."

"I...You know, you throw a lot of information at a guy. I don't even know where to start."

"Get used to it. Feng is ten times worse than me."

Bayan gave you a pained smile. "Oh. OK."

"Like a rabid hamster with ADHD," you said. "Oh, I guess that's not very reassuring. She's pretty decent. Just...you know, let her talk and ask questions when she takes a breath. Maybe take notes."

"...I'll thank Hanzo, don't worry. I...Angela really let me have it. I think she was more upset about the roof thing than my...betrayal."

The "roof thing" was an interesting way to reference his suicide attempt. "Feng is aware of your...stress levels," you said.

"I'm sorry for the things I said. They were really shitty. But...I don't think you're going to have to worry about that. I...cracked under pressure. Maybe it's for the best that I'm leaving."

"Bayan, you stared too closely at the problem for too long until you couldn't see any other options. If you'd taken a step backward and gotten a second opinion, you'd have realized that. It was a matter of perspective and yours was shortsighted. It's another reason you'd make a bad spy. Contrary to all those terrible movies I'm sure you've seen, death is not absolution. You have to solve those soul-crushing problems creatively, and self-destructing is not a particularly clever or effective resolution. You were in over your head, but you're not broken," you said. "Things will get better, just don't try to go it alone, idiot."

Tataryn snorted.

"Your pep talks are strangely touching, Lucky. Not too sweet, not too bitter, with plenty of salt and sourness."

"The best foods in life are complex," you said. "And by complex, I mean "cake." In case you were wondering. I'm no expert, but I think you'll be OK, you just need time and maybe an opinion gentler than your own."
Bayan nodded. "I...yes. Maybe you're right."

"Great. And now I have the unenviable task of figuring out how to cheer Vo up."

"...Chocolate," came the raspy voice. Vo slunk into the interrogation room and made a beeline for Bayan. She patted his arm. "Want you to stay."

"I can't," Bayan said. "I made a bad mistake and now I can't stay. I'm sorry. But I can write you. Call. Send snacks."

Vo gritted her teeth. "How bad? I blew up someone's room once. Killed her bugs. Made her cry. They not send me away."

"...Very bad in a very different way, Min. Lucky and Hanzo got me out of a tough spot. Please don't be mad at them."

Vo took a deep breath, resting both hands on top of her head. She took another steadying breath and then turned to you, brow furrowed. "He will send me things. If he stops, we need to go investigate."

"You hear that? You have to send Vo regular care packages. It's part of your penance."

Bayan gave a hoarse laugh. "All right."

"Maybe if he's good we can arrange visits, OK?" You immediately regretted the suggestion because who knew how Vo would react to Feng?

Vo nodded. She turned back to Bayan. "Be good. I will make you a present."

Bayan nodded. "No property destruction please."

"Glitter," she said.

"That's OK."

With that, Vo turned on her heel and walked out.

"Fucking Nguyen," you said, shaking your head. "The sooner we do something about her, the better."

"You know I never dealt with anyone named Nguyen." Bayan shrugged. "But judging from the look on your face, I should not ask questions."

"...I read your debrief. We have all those other names on file." You glanced at Tataryn. "Hey, what do your weekend plans look like?"

"Let's see: I have two hot dates, a potential orgy, and at least one session of steamy, mindless, no-strings-attached sex, but other than that, I am free."

"You want to go out and get some good old fashioned petty revenge?"

Tataryn's smile was a cold hungry thing, his eyes flat and looking through you. "I thought you would never ask."
"Now that you have progressed onto subtler methods, I have a job for you. We will be making contact with Kwento in two weeks."

You sipped your coffee and lit a cigarette.

Lacroix patted his front pocket, and frowned, suddenly recalling that he had given all his Gitanes to you.

"You will be accompanying Amélie to the party in Lyon."

"Bodyguard?"

"Date." Lacroix smirked.

You choked on your coffee and it was a few seconds before you could stop your coughing fit. Lacroix just sat by smugly, the points of his mustache mocking you.

"I uh...was not expecting that." You raised a brow as Lacroix extended an open palm. "Oh, you want a cigarette? Tell me your clever plan first."

Lacroix actually rolled his eyes at you. Which was kind of your thing. Huh. "You're just going to set up a meeting. You don't even have to do the talking. This is a practice run. You begin your foray into polite society, and we can gauge how much progress you've made."

"...Can I wear a suit?"

"No."

"Can I-"

"For every foolish question you ask, you get another hour of finishing school practice," Lacroix said. "Now give me a cigarette and I'll pretend you're not making that ridiculous face."

Sighing, you handed him a cigarette.

"So I have blackmail on all four of these guys, courtesy of Ziv," you said. "How far do you want to take this?"

"Boom," Vo said.

"...I'll vet that," Tataryn said, looking down at her with a wry grin.

"I have no objection to permanent solutions." Hanzo poured everyone tea. "Is this kind of unsanctioned operation common?"

You held up your hand and wiggled it from side to side. "Don't ask, don't tell, don't get caught."

"Don't get caught doing what, agent?" Gabriel growled as he entered the kitchen. Vo
immediately disappeared behind Tataryn. Hanzo stiffened.

"Don't get caught borrowing Jesse's tea sachets. He doesn't count them, but if you get greedy, he'll notice."

Gabriel did not smile. "Out, all of you. And if I get so much as a hint that you've been taking on unsanctioned missions, you will be having a visit to Coronado for a very special training session, courtesy of SEP Sergeant Ray Chang."

Hanzo, Tataryn, and Vo dutifully filed out.

"Gabriel-"

"You don't get to just run amok, agent. I don't care how much Nguyen's people deserve it. This leak was a big problem and while I'd love to escalate the fight, Overwatch needs to be circumspect," Gabriel scowled, obviously parroting someone else's words.

"...We have names, Gabriel. Are we just supposed to sit on that?"

"What did you have in mind, beside bloody murder?"

"...That. But I can...adapt. We are Blackwatch, we are petty, and we liked Bayan. We need an outlet, Gabriel."

"...I'm listening," he said.

"So what if we...just made their lives miserable? I mean, I have blackmail material on most of them, sure. But we can start small: slash their tires, laxative their coffees, put dead fish in their air vents. Little things. Till they wish for the sweet sweet release of death..."

"Huh." Gabriel raised a brow. "You are petty."

"...Yes," you agreed, and very wisely did not point out that he had no room to judge.

"I'll...think on it."

You kissed his cheek. "It'll be fun. Blackwatch fun!"

"...I said I'll think about it," he scowled.

You just smiled up at him. "You're invited too. We'll call it the Blackwatch Petty Prank Club and it will be a training exercise, morale booster, team cohesion builder. And there can be snacks."

Gabriel just gave an exasperated sigh. But he would give in, you knew it. He couldn't resist snacks.

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Getting up at 4AM was about as fun as you expected. You drank your coffee, muttered angrily to yourself, and checked your gear. You couldn't afford to look weak or silly in front of the new recruits. Today you would be lecturing, briefly, about what not to expect from black ops missions: fame, fortune, or bragging rights. You figured you'd cover some of the downsides like
trauma, paperwork, and the frequentness of bad hygiene. They didn't have hot showers on surveillance runs and when it came to close combat, the blood got everywhere.

And then there were the exercises. You didn't have to run alongside them, thankfully, but you had to be outside yelling at them and reminding them not to eat rocks off the ground or whatever stupid things cadets did.

You got to the classroom, a little annoyed to see Tataryn looking polished and professional in a Blackwatch henley and khakis, a bright smile on his stupid pretty face. Worse, it looked like all twenty rookies, uniforms pressed and starched, were sitting straight in their seats, watching you attentively.

"Ah, Agent Strike." Tataryn smirked at you, and you suddenly had the urge to punch him the face. "I was just informing the recruits of your high standards. Please remember that they are new, and none of them have formally petitioned to join our black ops programs, so perhaps you can go a little easy on them?"

You blinked, your gaze sharpening. Did he make you the bad cop? Really? Well, it was too late to change it now. Damn, you should have gotten here first. You remembered Captain Patel, the brusque way she cut through protocol and while she didn't use fancy words, she didn't bully anyone either. She went straight to the point, and while you weren't like that, not with all your espionage training, you could still mimic her demeanor.

"Agent Tataryn, we are not here to babysit children. We are an elite fighting force. These recruits are supposedly the best of the best. If they don't have the mettle for our black ops programs, I'm not wasting my time coddling them. Either they make it on their own merit or they don't make it at all."

To their credit, your class didn't shrink, murmur, or complain. Their eyes just got rounder and they leaned forward attentively.

Tataryn's shit-eating grin also got bigger.

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted you, and you had to quash the urge to feed him his teeth. You really hadn't had enough coffee for this.

It was unnerving having twenty pairs of eyes focused on you every time you moved or spoke. Most of them were young - had you ever been that young? Chronologically, sure. That stupid, also a yes, but not that earnest, that bright-eyed and hopeful. At least you didn't think you had been. Maybe Captain Patel would have told another story.

They hung on to your every word, as you explained the actual types of ops that Overwatch ran. You didn't mention Blackwatch by name, choosing instead to keep to the military classifications. After all, Overwatch did plenty of top secret operations that were ethically-sound, just sensitive.

"...Any questions?" You asked, after what you were certain was a boring lecture. Hell, you just summed everything up as, "If you have to fight, someone's screwed up along the way. But if you have to fight, you fight to win."
"Is it true you took down an omnic assassin in single melee combat?" One girl asked timidly. They had their names embroidered on their uniforms, which was useful.

"What the hell does that have to do with anything that I just said, Jeong?"

"Ma'am, sorry, ma'am. Uh...Agent Shoal said to ask you about it. She cited it as an example of black ops tactics versus conventional squad tactics."

...Goddamnit, Shoal. You hadn't realized she was teaching too. You were going to have words with her.

You could see Tataryn still wearing that smug, oh so punchable grin, a few trainees shooting him admiring glances.

You ran through your knowledge of Cobblestone Dust. What the hell had Shoal been thinking? "The details of that mission are classified. I'm going to cite that as an example of black ops discretion versus conventional squad braggadocio. You don't get to tell everyone what you've done."

You expected Jeong to deflate, but you saw her eyes widen with something like awe. "Oh, of course, ma'am. I understand, ma'am. My apologies, ma'am."

Oh god, you'd just confirmed it. You resisted the urge to facepalm.

Another rookie raised his hand. Maeda Vargas: he was lean and very tan, excitement gleaming in his eyes.

You were getting a headache now, and you wondered if one of them would just challenge you to single combat so you could intimidate them into silence and good behavior. "Yes?"

"Ma'am, I think what Jeong meant to ask was, do you have any tips for facing down omnics in single combat?"

"Yeah, don't do it. It's stupid and a good way to get yourself killed," you scowled.

Tataryn fidgeted beside you, looking entirely too gleeful.

Another one, Forrester, raised her hand, and you realized then that you would probably have to learn their names eventually, because they wouldn't always be labeled. Goddamnit. "Yes?" You asked, wishing for more coffee.

"What about cyborgs, ma'am?"

You slowly turned your head to give Tataryn a hard look.

He was smiling so wide that you could probably fit both your fists in his mouth.

You almost yelled at them then, but you stopped, turning some ideas over in your head. All right, they wanted knowledge? You could give it to them and increase their chances of survival. Fine. Because you were never going to get anything done if they just fixated on your checkered background. And, if they were motivated... Hmm.

"It seems like you want me to cover information not given in the basic lesson plan."

Multiple heads nodded vigorously at you, their enthusiasm almost painful.
"If you can cover the assigned work, and we can finish it in a timely manner, I will make some unconventional additions to the class. If you can't handle the basic course material, then you're just wasting everyone's time."

At this point, you realized, your severity wasn't actually dissuading them. Goddamnit. Now you were going to have to put together a lesson plan on how to survive close combat with omnics and cyborgs, just like Lacroix predicted. This was way more work than you'd signed up for. But then you remembered Captain Amari's threat to put you on permanent teaching duty if your results were shoddy.

You were going to make the best damn modules on killing things, ever.

They were smarter than you ever were, and simultaneously more helpless. They thought in grids and formations, in trajectories and straight firepower. Some of them had degrees in quantum engineering, molecular genetics, material sciences: things that went beyond your limited education. They were sharp, clever, and hungry to learn. Most of them had a few years of national military service and even some combat experience. But they saw the world in straight lines and military tactics. They thought in terms of glory, honor, and sacrifice. They viewed facing death as an uncomplicated stepping stone to validation. You were going to beat that out of them, or at least give them second thoughts about making stupid last stands.

There were a few exceptions and you thought maybe a fifth of them had potential in Blackwatch. Jeong had served in the Korean military, but she worked logistics and had a keen understanding of the chokepoints on a map. She was a quiet intense girl, and after reading her files, you learned her family had been wiped out in an omnic attack.

Maeda Vargas had grown up poor in a favela: you recognized the way he sized up the room before he walked in, the sardonic smile he wore when his more affluent classmates talked about first world problems. Tataryn had to take him aside and gently remind him not to pickpocket the other recruits, even if he returned the goods unasked and only did it as a parlor trick.

Chey was a bulky self-educated combat mechanic out of Siem Reap, specializing in jerry-rigging power armor and bludgeoning omnics with his tools. He was a bit older than the rest, and he watched them with that same resigned tolerance that you tried not to show on your face.

Lowell had been a student who helped foil an anti-omnic terrorist attack on their university. You weren't actually sure why they were here, because their PT scores were the lowest in the class. But they had excellent range scores and a medical degree. Versatility was always a plus, but those PT scores needed to go up.

Tataryn was a better co-teacher than you expected. He seemed to be giving the students individual instruction and charming them, but not actually building a rapport with any. Well, the week was half over. There was still time.
Now when people ask me what I'm doing at work I just say, "Disassociating."
Sometimes I smile vaguely. Sometimes I do my creepy smile.

I have a lot of nicknames for my pets and my cousin and I do voices for all of them. I realize this is probably a sign that we need to get out more, but you know. Whatever. But Shepard is my asshole dog. He is clever. He is food-motivated. He's stolen my breakfast so many times, I can't even. He loves to poop in my dining room because he hates standing in wet grass. So yeah, I have taken to promising him cookies and other treats if he poops outside while we are outside and it fucking works. That asshole knows exactly what he's doing and the fucker will hold out till I promise him something and then he does his business outside. Yeah, yeah, who's trained whom?

I say "cookie" and they all know. (I give them dog cookies, biscuits, not human ones. Though once I offered him cake and had to deliver. He knows. He's smart. He just uses his intelligence for evil.)

Need to get back on the job hunt. fkJdadfkfjdkakdfkdk It's the worst. Have some flight credit from last year that I need to use up. So maybe I'll take a much-needed vacation soon. (Like fly to visit friends because I'm not at "pay for hotel" level vacation budget.)
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Teaching is a learning experience, one you really rather would have skipped.

Chapter Notes

We have passed the six month anniversary and I am face-palming. Mostly because it was not supposed to drag on this long. And then after this there's a few oneshots I hope I can do and the Angst!AU. I keep doing little drabbles on my tumblr, and I need to cut back and finish this. Not that I'm shirking, obviously. *glares at the 478k word count*

I have three missions I want to cover with minor arcs in-between. But I need to set an end goal, because otherwise this is going to go on forever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Well, he didn't say "no" to this plan," you told Hanzo.

"What exactly did he say?" Hanzo sighed and sipped his tea.

"You shouldn't ask," Tataryn said, biting into a glazed doughnut. "Plausible deniability and all that."

"He said, and I quote, "I'll think about it." So if we want to get started on recon..."

"That isn't explicit permission," Hanzo said, eyeing the box of doughnuts. You nudged it toward him and he took one.

"Just recon," you said. "If he doesn't say "no" right off the bat, that's a good sign."

"She's right," Tataryn said, nodding sagely.

"Unless this is too beneath you. I get it. Killing people is way more satisfying and as the scion of a great house, you probably can't be bothered to-"

"I help him," Vo said, patting Hanzo's arm.

You blinked as she pulled herself into a chair and grabbed a jelly doughnut out of the box on the table. Vo had never hidden her dislike of Hanzo, but apparently the fact he'd saved Bayan had won him some grace.

Hanzo eyed her suspiciously. "What did you have in mind?"

"Start small. Fill sugar bowl with salt. Soap in the ice machine. Leave fireworks in toilet." Vo laughed her raspy little chuckle that sounded more like emphysemic coughing than happiness.
"This sounds like something Genji would have done. When he was six."

"And remember how angry it made you?" You beamed.

Hanzo stared at the table thoughtfully. "Little deaths."

Vo nodded. "Then big messy ones."

"Never underestimate Blackwatch petty," Tataryn yawned and drank his coffee. "They can't give us all these cool toys, AI friends, and high end training, then not expect us to use it. That's such a waste it's practically criminal."

You and Tataryn had taken a shift scouting Harvey Beringer's condo and Betty Junger's house. Those two lived within close proximity and they had basic security systems, but with Athena's drone, you'd had little trouble diverting the feeds. It was broad daylight, but your targets had corporate day jobs and the two of you had no trouble slipping in and out of their homes, just to see what you could learn.

"Junger has good taste in ice cream," you said, to sum it all up.

"Beringer has horrible taste in pornography," Tataryn wrinkled his nose. "And I'm not normally a judgmental man-"

"They both have terrible security," Athena said. "I must warn you. If Winston finds out what I am up to, we are all going to be lectured about boundaries."

"Mmm," you said. "Well, Winston's not the one we're worried about finding out."

Tataryn laughed as you started up the car. "You can disconnect, Athena. I don't want Winston to worry."

"OK. See you back at the base," the fish torpedo chirped, before the lights dimmed and the signal cut out.

"I will never get used to that," Tataryn sighed. "Tracker is turned off, yes?"

"Yup," you said and then gave Tataryn a questioning look. He smiled brightly at you, all princely charm and refined good looks. He'd worn khakis and collared shirt. For some reason, he brought a blazer. You'd stuck to black turtleneck and cargo pants.

"We are...friends, are we not, Lucky?" Tataryn asked, his smile too easy as he pulled on the blazer.

"...Now I'm worried," you said, rubbing your forehead. "Yeah, Tataryn, I think we're friends, despite the fact you made me take the role of the mean teacher. That doesn't mean I'm going to loan you money or help you declare war on the Albanian mafia."

"Pfft, Albanians." He laughed and you sighed, not sure if there was a joke there or if he was just being difficult. "You are very good at teaching through intimidation," he said, glossing over your jibe. "Much more convincing than me. And I thought we were, but sometimes it is hard to tell." He shrugged. "I did not want any miscommunications. I appreciate you standing up for
me with the Commander. I know you intervened. On his own, the boss would not have let me off this easily for picking a fight with you."

You shrugged. "You're welcome."

"I want to ask you to go somewhere with me."

"...Oh boy."

"It is not a duel or anything sordid. We are only half an hour away. I can give directions."

You eyed him. "Am I going to regret this?"

"I think I am the one in more danger," he said without any visible anxiety.

"Gabriel isn't-"

"I am not referring to the commander or you," Tataryn shook his head. "Turn left up here."

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You stopped outside the wrought iron gates of a fancy campus. There was a lot of open green space and several expensive buildings dotted the idyllic setting of the Institut Montana. Tataryn got out and pressed his palm to a reader. You watched as he typed in a code and the gates opened.

"Drive slowly. The guards are always nervous around me for some reason." You shook your head and noted the presence of half a dozen people in crisp uniforms carrying automatic weaponry.

You parked in the designated area, and followed Tataryn up the scenic walkway. This was a very expensive boarding school and you straightened your posture, recalling Amélie's many tiresome lessons on how to behave around the rich. Affecting an air of boredom, you let Tataryn lead. Something about him shifted too, suddenly he was no longer nervous or pensive. He smiled brightly, looking carefree and you could feel the charisma already beginning to pour off him in waves.

"Mischa Petrov and guest, here to see Kseniya Petrova," he said to the door guard, and the man opened the door, not making eye contact with either of you.

"...If you try to introduce me as her new mother, I will kill you slowly," you said, a polite disinterested smile fixed firmly in place.

"If I tried that, she would kill me first," Tataryn replied, his expression not changing.

You walked up a grand staircase, and Tataryn led you to the third floor. The kids had fancy room, bigger than your dorm, and you observed all kinds of amenities, including pools, tennis courts, and was that polo field? How had Gabriel gotten Tataryn's kid in here? Maybe Tataryn was independently wealthy. Tataryn stopped in front of a door, and knocked.

"Ksenya?"

There was a pause, and then you heard footsteps. You watched the hall, suddenly
paranoid. You could do civilian things without being attacked, but...

The door opened, leading to a well-furnished cream bedroom, trimmed with gold and pink. The girl at the door was dark, her hair gathered in two round puffs atop her head. She was very small, with sharp amber eyes and maybe Tataryn's nose. You weren't sure. She didn't look a thing like him.

"Who's that?" She asked in unaccented English.

"This? This is one of my friends, from work. Lucky, this is my daughter Kseniya."

She blinked at you owlishly. "Why is she here?"

Tataryn muttered something in Ukrainian. "You remember Uncle Gabriel? She is a very close friend of his."

Kseniya stepped back, allowing you both to enter her room. It was filled with books, and despite the princess color scheme, it seemed more like a library than a bedroom.

"You missed the visitation day," she said, sitting at her desk. You leaned against the wall, noting that the windows had kinetic shields. Tataryn sat down on the bed.

"There was a funeral," Tataryn said. "I am sorry."

"Who?"

"Malik."

The girl nodded, like she knew the name but not the man.

"Lucky is my friend. I thought you should meet her," Tataryn said.

The girl looked at you, and Tataryn had said she was eight. She was so small and you guessed that was what an eight year old was supposed to look like. You stared back, unsure of what to say.

"He's never mentioned you before," she said.

"Most of what I do isn't fit for polite conversation." You stopped, realizing how that would sound to a child.

But she just smiled shyly. "He cheats at cards."

"We all do," you said.

"He eats too many sweets."

"Guilty," you said.

"I hope you are not in love with him."

You began to laugh, and to his credit, Tataryn joined in. "Oh no. No. My love life is very full. As...charming as he is, no."

"Good, because he is still in love with my mother, and he is too stupidly stubborn to move on," she sniffed.
You raised a brow.

Tataryn shrugged, as if to say, "Children? Who knows where they get these ideas?"

"Well, I suppose I'll see you around," you said, giving Tataryn a quizzical look.

"Sure," she said, already losing interest.

"Do you mind waiting in the car?" Tataryn asked.

"No problem. Nice meeting you," you said, and showed yourself out.

It was only on the way down the stairs did you realize what Tataryn had done. And you shook your head, trying to tell yourself that it was just your imagination. That Tataryn was only being polite inviting you up. That since he was in the area, he only wanted to make a quick visit to his kid. That he wasn't introducing you to her just so you would be a familiar face if something happened to him.

"So I volunteered to teach, partially because Jemmy didn't want to, and promised me a month's worth of pie if I did it for her, and partially because yeah, it looked like fun." Shoal nodded to herself. "I did overlook the early hours, but...I guess I don't mind."

"...What the hell is wrong with you?" You asked, inhaling the steam coming off your travel mug. The coffee smell went straight to your brain and you opened your eyes a little more, and stood up a little straighter, your spine no longer scrunched up like an accordion.

"Pie, Lucky. All the pie I can eat for a month. And I can eat a lot of pie." Shoal grinned at you, running her fingers through her short hair. The color was too bright. Like her smile. Like the sun. Goddamn sun. Ugh. Why the hell were you even up?

"That's incentive," Jesse said, nudging you with his elbow.

"OK, I can see that," you agreed, brain not quite processing everything yet.

"Doing it for the pie or me eating a lot of pie?" She asked, narrowing her eyes.

"...Both?" You shrugged.

Jesse stifled a laugh.

"You're not actually awake, are you?"

"Getting there," you said, watching the trainees run laps around the track.

"So wait, how did you get teaching duty?" Shoal asked while you sipped your coffee.

"I pissed off Captain Amari and Commander Reyes," you said.

"...You know, Lucky. For someone so likeable, you're surprisingly good at making your COs mad." Shoal grinned at you. "It's like a supernatural talent or something. How have you not been shipped off to Antarctica yet?"
"They'd have to shoot me first. Fuck the cold."

"She's too useful," Jesse said. "No one else wants to deal with Commander Reyes when he's pulled a triple shift, forgotten to eat, and is drowning in paperwork."

"I don't want to deal with him when he's like that," you said. "I just prevent it from ever getting that far."

Shoal nodded. "It's a good thing Reyes likes you, considering how much you piss off Morrison. I'm serious, McCree. I have never seen the Strike Commander that enraged before. And she did it twice! Like, how did you not get demoted or fired?"

"Blackmail." You drank your coffee and watched Lowell lag behind everyone else.

Shoal blanched. "Really?"

"Nah." Jesse flashed a grin. "This may come as a surprise to you, but Morrison actually likes Lucky." When Shoal gave him a skeptical look, he nudged you with his elbow. You blinked at him. He nudged you again. "Tell her."

You nodded slowly. "It's true. Most of the time."

"...Huh. He hides it well," Shoal said, shaking her head. "Well, Morrison is a decent guy. He isn't going to hate someone who keeps saving his life."

You winced, recalling Cologne. "I think you're exaggerating things, Shoal."

"I am not! Like the way you went after that sniper in Belfast. It was like two minutes of Morrison yelling, ordering us to hold position, and looking like he was going to go in by himself to kick your ass for taking off. I thought he really would and then suddenly you were slinking back out of the building, dragging an unconscious assassin behind you. It would've been hilarious if I wasn't so scared Morrison was going to throw you out of the Orca on the trip back."

Jesse had the nerve to laugh at you. "You haven't told me this story, sugarpie."

"It was a long, stupid day," you said, watching Maeda Vargas easily outpace everyone else. Jeong and Chey were middle of the pack.

"Hmm, thoughts on who's going to wash out?" Jesse asked.

"None of them," you said. "But there are only a few with Blackwatch potential."

"Maeda Vargas," Shoal said. "He wears that same half-feral look you get in the field. But he's not very motivated."

"What?" You blinked, thinking about all the questions, extra training, and work he'd been putting in. "Are we talking about the same kid?"

"He does all right for me," Jesse said. "Good shot, steady hand, doesn't fool around. He's not a kid, Lucky."

You waved your hand. "Chey is the only adult in there. The rest of them are kids. They're earnest, mostly untried, and still in their teens. They're kids."

"Well, as I was saying, Maeda Vargas is not bad," Shoal said. "He just doesn't participate any more than he has too."
"...Uh...that one, the one at the head of them?"

Shoal blinked. "Yeah... Huh." She looked sideways, like someone was playing a trick on her. "He's been a solid if mediocre trainee for the past several weeks." Shoal was covering the entire training course, which was stupid. You were glad you only had this week to finish up.

"He's always raising his hand," you said. "Takes extra combat modules."

Jesse chuckled. "Tataryn says you terrorized the good behavior into them."

You shrugged. "Yeah, well, what he didn't tell you was that I walked in to him saying "Oh I'll be your buddy, but Lucky Strike is scary and mean. She isn't going to go easy on you. And she eats babies. Raw."

"He did not!" Shoal laughed.

"I only exaggerated a little. But yeah, I got stuck as the disciplinarian. Wasn't my idea."

"Well, whatever you did, it helped. He's definitely applying himself now." Shoal shook her head. "I might have to get you to guest lecture next time I do this. I'm not a convincing bad cop." Shoal squinted. "Are you sure we're going to keep Lowell? They're kind of...scrawny."

"They're deadly with a rifle. Could probably qualify for advanced sniper courses," Jesse said. "Compensates for some of the weakness. And they can pull double duty as a field medic."

"Fair enough." Shoal shrugged. "I like Forrester. She's got some real leadership potential. Lots of spirit, good balance of skills. Gotta say though, Chey is pretty cute."

"Cuter than me?" Jesse asked with a wink and Shoal began to turn red.

"Ah, there you are Lucky." Captain Amari strode over to the benches and Jesse looked away. "I reviewed your combat modules and found them most informative. I'm not sure we should be giving cadets this information during initial training, but I'm willing to test it out. I am impressed that you convinced Torby to repurpose some omnic shells for combat dummy practice."

You blinked. It wasn't just you and Torby but- oh. You'd designed a few exercises, asked Torby for spare parts, and requested Athena to puppeteer some uninhabited omnic bodies. But Athena's sentience was still a big secret and Torby's "involvement" made a good cover.

"Honestly, Genji should be teaching this part," you said, because you had consulted him and Hanzo quite a bit, because of their formal melee training. "I just compiled the data and made it digestible."

"Your personal experience shows," Captain Amari said, looking pleased. "I really didn't expect you to put this much effort into training the recruits, considering your initial reluctance. I'm very impressed. Keep it up and we might have a position for you as a permanent instructor."

You stared at her in horror, wondering how exactly your clever plan backfired.

"Again," you said, watching Maeda Vargas pick himself up off the mats. He was of an average height and on the skinny side, and like most humans, not really suited for facing an omnic
in direct combat. You had balanced the exercise by providing metal batons. Athena controlled a
generic chassis, bipedal and human-sized, and she was supposed to let up once they caused enough
damage to disable the shell. "You've got the right idea, but you need to find a weak spot: joints,
optics, processing panels. And remember that while the anatomy might correspond with a human,
omnics can store their processing units anywhere."

He nodded at you, firmly. "Yes, ma'am! I'll remember that! Thank you, ma'am!"

You squinted at him, trying to figure out if that was mockery, because Maeda Vargas
wasn't really the type to embrace hierarchy. But he had already turned his gaze back to Athena's
combat omnic. His eyes were on his opponent, and he licked his lips, bouncing on the balls of his
feet.

No, he wasn't being sarcastic. The kid was exhilarated. Great, another adrenaline junkie.
You sighed. Eager students were better than bored combative ones, but they still exhausted you.

Thus far, the only one who'd actually won a battle was Chey. He'd taken off his shirt and
managed to wrap it around the omnic's optical sensors, before dragging it to the ground and
smashing its head against the floor. He'd smirked at you afterward, like somehow you were going
to take offense that he'd done it all on his own. You had just filed that move away for later, and
given him the praise he deserved.

Lowell and Jeong got their asses handed to them, along with most of the class. Oddly, no
one seemed too discouraged, they just kept trying.

Tataryn nudged you as you watched Maeda Vargas dodge the hits, blocking with his baton.
He had a good chance of winning, but he got cocky, winking at you and Tataryn, right before he
get thrown again.

You stifled a snicker.

Tataryn poked you again, and you looked up, a little shocked to see Jack and Gabriel
watching from the doorway of the gym. Jack was elbowing Gabriel and whispering something.
Then they played rock-paper-scissors. Jack picked scissors. Gabriel picked rock. And you
sighed, knowing whatever was going to happen next, you probably wouldn't like it.

Gabriel swaggered into the gym, Jack following behind, shaking his head.

"Tataryn, Strike." The two of you saluted and you could feel the chill of Tataryn's evil
amusement.

"Commander Reyes, Strike Commander" was all you said. Because you didn't trust
yourself not to say something incriminating in front of the recruits.

You sighed as Athena threw Maeda Vargas again. He would win eventually, but not
today.

"Athena, halt exercise. Maeda Vargas, good effort, you're getting closer." You did not look
away from Gabriel whose smile was a little too wide. "What can I do for you today, sir?"

Jack surveyed the students. "Have you demonstrated your technique?"

"I didn't think it would be helpful," you said, suddenly seeing where this was going and not
liking it one bit. "Considering this is a basic course for beginners." You glared at Gabriel, because
you were not going to spar with him or Jack in front of all the rookies. There was way too much
sexual tension and not everyone was oblivious as you had been.

"Come on Agent Strike, you can show them how it's done. Give them a goal to work toward," Gabriel said. "Athena, shift to advanced mode." Gabriel grinned at you and you decided that he was going to pay for this. You weren't sure how or when, but you were going to get him.

But for now, you had to make due with giving him long blank look and then you took your gloves off. No sense ruining another pair. There were a few sharp gasps as you handed the gloves off to Tataryn. So your war wounds still weren't common knowledge. Given how Overwatch agents gossiped, the news would be across the base by the end of the day. Well, whatever. You picked up a baton and stepped onto the mat. Athena's practice chassis wasn't combat-rated, but it was still metal and getting hit would hurt.

"Begin," Gabriel said.

Athena leapt forward in a flying kick, a move she must have learned from Genji. You rolled sideways, and spun, striking the optical panel with your baton. The blow wasn't hard enough to break anything, and you had to slide backward to avoid her counterattack. She didn't stop though and you blocked a flurry of hits with your baton, sparks flying. Growling, you slipped the baton between the inside of her left arm, gripped both ends, and twisted as she tried to extend the limb. Torquing against the joint, you pushed till something snapped. Some omnis had joints that bent in multiple directions, but this model wasn't one of them. You had noticed that the more flexible joints weren't quite as durable, thankfully.

The limb dangled uselessly in front of her body, but she didn't stop, and the right hand smashed into your face.

You tasted blood, and dodged sideways, narrowly avoiding a follow-up strike.

"The thing about combat omnis is that they don't feel pain. You can hit them all you want, but unless you actually disable something, you're wasting your energy. Strike was nice enough to have them throw you, so you could see what kind of reflexes you're trying to match. But in combat, they're not going to bother with throws and locks. They're going to focus on strikes and trying to smash your puny meat forms."

You tried to ignore Gabriel's lecture, circling Athena's one-armed body. She lunged forward, and metal foot grazing your stomach as you danced backward. What the hell? You were going to have to set clearer restrictions on "advanced mode."

Athena reached for you, and you kicked her wrist aside and slammed the baton into her optics. The bludgeon cracked the glass plating. Not waiting for her to recover, you straightened your metal fingers and drove them straight through the processing panel on her chest.

There was a moment as the omnic stuttered to a halt, sparks flying from the impact. You gave it a shove and it fell harmlessly onto the mats. Your augments would need to be checked, but you had dropped the practice omnic in front your students and managed not to look like a complete failure.

"Omnics, while programmed with all kinds of useful combat software, are only as strong as their chassis," you said wiping the blood off your mouth. "You might be able to get away with this against a human-sized one. Bastions, OR-14s, anything much bigger than you, and you're royally fucked." You half-expected the Strike Commander to reprimand you for language, but you were too annoyed to care.
You could hear Tataryn's smothered snickers behind you.

There was a moment of silence and most of your students were staring at your left hand. You looked down at your prosthetic fingers, wondering if your middle finger had gotten stuck in the upright position or something. No, but your wrist was bleeding pretty badly, probably scraped on the jagged edges of the metal.

"Are you OK, ma'am?" Jeong asked, eyeing your torn up wrist.

"One of my COs once told me that if your sparring doesn't end in blood, you're doing it wrong," you said, staring blankly at Jack and Gabriel.

"What Agent Strike means to say, is that what is the point of sparring if you're not actually practicing your combat skills?" Tataryn said smoothly, handing you a towel. "The point isn't to bloody your partner. The point is to develop good reflexes."

"Yeah, what he said," you muttered, wiping your face again. You were still bleeding. She'd gotten you good, and you made a note to talk to Athena about safe levels of aggression after this.

Still grinning, because apparently you were the most hilarious thing he had ever seen, Tataryn gestured to the mats. "You made a mess, Lucky."

You glanced blankly at your class and sighed as Lowell hesitantly came up with a first aid kit, their expression concerned. Chey eyed you speculatively, like he finally believed that you weren't bullshitting them. And Maeda Vargas stared at the space between you and the downed omnic, like he was revisualizing the fight. You wouldn't be surprised if he tried to mimic the joint lock next time. Jeong and Forrester had big admiring grins on their faces now, and you just shook your head.

"Ma'am, maybe you want to get that cleaned and sealed," Lowell said in a soft voice.

"Thanks, Lowell." You accepted the kit and to your surprise, Gabriel took it from you.

"Let me help you with that, agent. Tataryn, you can handle the rest of the lesson while Strike gets cleaned up." The order was clear and Tataryn sighed.

"Of course, boss. I mean, sir." He winked at you and turned to the class. "Just because Agent Tataryn is now on the deck, doesn't mean you lot get to run rampant. I will report you to Agent Strike, and now you've seen firsthand what happens when things annoy her."

"And yet here you are, still alive," you said under your breath.

Gabriel chuckled. "Go sit down. It'll be easier if someone with two good hands assists you." You walked with Gabriel and Jack, watching as Tataryn easily took control of the class.

"-can I do that? Oi, do I look like I'm some kind of masochistic melee fighter? I just shoot them," he said with a laugh. "Which is what any of you should do. Agent Strike has been in some dire situations and had to learn her skills the hard way. That kind of thing is a last resort. As she says, don't let things go that far."

You sat down on the bench, pointedly not looking at Gabriel as he took your forearm in his hands, gently cleaning the abrasion with an antibacterial wipe.

"It's not too deep," Gabriel said. "You don't have to go to the infirmary."
"Good, because I'm not up for explaining this to Angela."

"That was pretty impressive," Jack said casually. "Been practicing with the Shimadas?"

"I think Hanzo has caught on to the fact that I've been trolling him this entire time. I suspect our sparring sessions are his way of getting me back."

"You're very serious," Gabriel murmured, applying ointment and then a UV sealant to the wound. "Instructor Strike is such a strict teacher."

"It's pretty hot. Makes me want to act out," Jack said out of the corner of his mouth, expression remaining flat and verging on bored. He didn't look at you; he just continued to watch Tataryn lecture the recruits. To any observers, Jack was just doing his job, his demeanor remaining professional and disinterested.

"It's Tataryn's fault. He decided I was going to be the scary one on the first day," you sighed. "I know, that's completely wrong. He's the ruthless, sneaky, amoral one. I'm...the sneaky, less ruthless, amoral one."

"Yes, you're completely different and morally superior," Gabriel laughed softly. "I didn't realize you hadn't programmed them not to draw blood."

"Did you read my module description? That's Athena in there."

Gabriel stiffened. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah, and she's been emulating Genji's style."

Shaking his head, Gabriel wrapped your wrist up, his hands warm on your skin. He gave you a steady look. "That's dangerous, Lucky."

"I'll talk to her, make sure she knows to be more careful with the rookies."

"That's not what I meant," Gabriel said. He patted your back. "Come by the office later. I have a mountain of reports to sort." He paused, watching Tataryn demonstrating some kind of knife trick. "We miss you."

"...Well, if someone hadn't put me on newbie duty, I would have time to help out," you said, not a little sourly. "This shit eats up my entire morning."

"Next time don't run off on unsanctioned missions," Gabriel said, giving Jack a hard look.

"Well, I'm satisfied with her work," Jack said so dryly, you could smack him too.

"It's a good thing he's wearing that coat," Gabriel told you as you stood. "Because otherwise you could see just how much he appreciates your performance."

You fought the urge to facepalm and took the first aid kit back, shaking your head.

"Lucky, I am so sorry. I did not mean to-"
"Meh, Gabriel put you on advanced mode. It's OK. I know you weren't trying to hurt me." You sat on your bed, soaking in the emitter radiation and drinking water. "Guess we should have set more specific parameters for advanced mode. Didn't think we were going to use it though. I was more worried about the trainees."

"I'm sorry," Athena said, sounding miserable. "I was focused on fulfilling my mission, which was winning. I did not realize how dangerous it had gotten till after I bloodied your nose and kept going-"

"Yeah you were using some of Genji's moveset. That's pretty impressive and scary."

"He has been kind enough to give me access to his training videos. Emulating the kinetics is fascinating. I...had not realized how powerful those strikes could be in a basic chassis," Athena said. "And...perhaps I was feeling a little competitive."

"I got that," you said, rubbing your tender nose. "I'm not marked as a hostile unit now, am I?"

"I would never- That's not funny, Lucky!"

"Hey, I'm the one with the bruises and pain. It's a legitimate question."

"I would never intentionally cause you damage," Athena huffed. "Even if you are very mean and using guilt as an emotional weapon."

"It's all I've got." You laughed softly. "Me punching you does not have the same effect as you punching me. So let's not pretend like both acts are equal."

"Maybe you should just get better," Athena sniffed and for a moment you forgot that Ziv was halfway across the world. That ass. Because he'd obviously been teaching your AI rude things.

"I tore you up today, didn't I?"

"You keep it up, Lucky. I will remember this for our next match."

Tired and sore, you dragged yourself into the office, and had to quickly shut the door behind you. Gabriel sat in his chair, and Jack knelt between his legs, in full overcoat. Gabriel didn't even look up from his screen, but his fingers tightened in Jack's hair and you took a minute to appreciate the Strike Commander on his knees.

"You just going to stand there and gape?" Gabriel asked gruffly.

"Well, I have work to do and I'm very behind," you said, making your way to your desk. "Because not only did someone assign me a class of trainees, they also made me go hand to hand with an omnic on hard mode. I had to take some time off to heal." You could hear Jack now, slurping at Gabriel's cock. You picked up your coffee and took a long drink, trying to center yourself.

"Didn't realize it was our AI in there. Figured it was something simpler," Gabriel rumbled.
"I'm sorry about that. You still looked good out there."

Jack lifted his head. "I wanted to spar with you," he said, voice gravelly. "But Gabe vetoed it."

You looked between them. Gabriel's plan had actually been less stupid than Jack's and you shook your head, wondering how Captain Amari's hair had not yet turned completely white from dealing with the two of them, Reinhardt, and Lacroix.

Jack smiled at you then lowered his face back between Gabriel's thighs, licking the shaft without breaking eye contact.

"Just come sit with us," Gabriel sighed, leaning back in his chair. He stroked Jack's hair, the blonde man swallowing him back down. You set your coffee on a filing cabinet and drifted over to them. Gabriel patted a free spot in front of him and you sat on the desk. He took your left arm and kissed your bandaged wrist. "Sorry baby. I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

"It's fine," you said. "Sorry I'm so grumpy. I just...they keep looking at me like I'm some kind of hero and that's crazy pressure. I know, I know you guys get it all the time but...it's new and weird for me." You stopped for a moment, studying your gloves. "I figure if what I'm teaching them will help them survive, then I better take it seriously. And I'm sick of getting up at 3 AM, because I have to get there extra early, otherwise who know what Tataryn will get up to with them?"

"It's a lot of responsibility." Gabriel nuzzled your hand and you leaned forward to kiss him.

He groaned into your mouth, not quite drowning out the slick sounds of his cock in Jack's throat. You bit his lip and he tightened his hold on your arms. He was close then. He broke away, grinning at you. "Watch Jack choke on me, hermosa. This is your fault. Seeing you play rough always gets us going."

"I wasn't planning on doing any of that! You interrupted my class! It's your own fault!"

Gabriel stiffened in his chair, teeth clenched as he thrust slowly into Jack's mouth. Jack took it all down, an obscenely pleased smile on his face, his eyes glazed with lust.

"That's it, Jackie. Love seeing you on your knees. You look so good with your pretty lips around me. That needy face you're making, no you can't touch yourself. This is punishment, amor. You shouldn't have run off to Mongolia without me."

Your pulse quickened as Gabriel tightened his grip on Jack's hair, his motions growing rougher.

"I already punished Lucky. Did she tell you about it? We played the quiet game, and she is bad at it. Next time I'll get her a gag." Gabriel locked eyes with you, his smile too playful. "It was fun. Get ready for it-" Gabriel growled as his hips shook. "Take it all, Jackie. Try not to get any on your fancy uniform."

Jack had less trouble swallowing than you did, and he moaned around Gabriel's cock. Gabriel pulled out, letting Jack lick him clean, before tucking himself back into his pants.

"Hmm, damn it's already 1400 hours Jack. Don't you have to leave for that meeting soon?" Gabriel gave a low chuckle and you knew instinctively that he'd timed it this way on purpose.
"Gabe, please. I've been walking around like this for the past two hours-" Jack groaned, resting his head against Gabriel's thigh.

"But our girl hasn't had a turn, and she's the injured party," Gabriel stroked Jack's cheek. "Are you really going to be that selfish?"

Your breath hitched as Jack nuzzled your calves. "Please sweetheart, I can't go all day like this. Let me come now and I'll make it up to you later, I swear."

"He's really going to be that selfish," Gabriel said, but there was no sting in his words. "Your call, baby."

"If either of you complain about the amount of work I'm not getting done-"

Jack rose, bending over to kiss you. "Wouldn't dream of it." He tasted of Gabriel, a little salty and bitter and he ground his hips against you. "Wish I had time to bend you over your desk," he said, nipping your ear.

"Couch," you said, because your desk had work on it, and you knew how messy things could get.

"Ten minutes," Gabriel called out. "Better hurry."

"That bastard. He's going to pay for this," Jack said, kissing the side of your neck. "Are you OK with this?"

"You're making it up to me, yeah?"

"I promise," Jack nodded vigorously.

He sat on the couch and you lay on your stomach, amused as Jack eagerly fumbled with his belt.

Gabriel sat on his desk, watching while you licked Jack's leaking cock.

"Don't tease," Jack groaned, gloved hands fisting your hair. "Please, baby." He squirmed underneath you and you took him all down, nearly choking as he began to thrust. "Such a good girl," Jack exhaled. "Not a cocktease jerk like a certain Blackwatch Commander."

Gabriel laughed. "Serves you right, Jack."

"Come to my room tonight," Jack groaned. "I know you have to get up early, so I won't get rough. I'll eat that sweet pussy till you're satisfied, then I'll take my time with you. Whatever you want sweetheart."

Jack moved at a frantic pace, and you struggled to take it all. Had Gabriel been edging him before they even got to the gym? That was likely and Jack was so easy to get going. You gagged as he sped up, one hand in your hair, the other rubbing your shoulders.

"Oh god, baby. I'm so close." Jack's breathing grew ragged, and you felt him tense, his thighs shaking as he began to spurt in your throat. You took as much as you could, and pulled away with his cum dripping down your chin. You wiped your mouth, breathing hard.

Jack leaned over and ran his thumb along your lower lip. "You got some right there," he growled, pushing his thumb into your mouth and you sucked
it clean. "Fuck, sweetheart. You do that and I'll be ready to go again here in a moment-

"You're just insatiable." You shook your head, smiling as he leaned over to kiss your cheek.

"It's you and Gabe. Drives a man to distraction. Thank you, baby."

"She had you coming in minutes, Jack," Gabriel chuckled. "You're getting sloppy. Maybe all this office work is making you soft."

"Fuck you," Jack glared at Gabriel. "You've been teasing me for hours."

"And look at that. It's 1415 and time for you to head off to your meeting," Gabriel smirked.

Jack bent over to kiss you again, his tongue flicking against your lips. He winked and fixed himself up, buckling his pants and smoothing his hair. "See you tonight, sweetheart."

You could feel the stupid grin on your face as Jack waved and headed out the door. When you looked up, Gabriel was beside you. He sat down, giving you a wry smile. "You were supposed to let him suffer. Spoiling my fun."

"Pfft, you've been mean enough today," you said, holding up your left arm.

He kissed the bandage. "That wasn't intentional, but I am sorry. Let me make it up to you," he said, pulling you onto his lap. He'd enjoyed watching you and Jack, and you could feel just how much.

"I-I have work to do," you stuttered as his mouth latched onto your throat, his beard brushing back and forth against the sensitive skin.

"You'd rather work than do this?" Gabriel asked, as he rolled his hips. His hands ghosted along your sides and he cupped your breasts, squeezing gently while you shivered.

You moaned softly and your eyes fluttered shut, hands already moving to your pants.

"I didn't think so," he said, obviously pleased with himself.

Chapter End Notes

I booked my trip. It's just a long weekend at a friend's house, but I haven't seen her in years and she moved away like 10 years ago, and I have never been down to visit her. So, yeah. It might effect the update schedule next month, but only by one chapter, if that happens.

I need to get back on the job hunt. The hesitance is partially I don't know what I want any more/fear paralysis. I know I don't do convincing interviews if I don't actually believe in what I'm doing. And that's a childish problem, I know. I should be a better actress, but honestly, I'm terrible at faking enthusiasm. I can hide emotion waaaaaaaay better. :D

Anyway, dogs got a doggy playdate last weekend. Went to another friend's house and she has a fenced yard and four dogs and so there were seven dogs in one yard and it
was just nice to sit in the sun and watch them be dogs.

I sound old. Ugh. :P
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

Porn, puns, and precocious pupils.

Chapter Notes

There is some slightly more graphic anal play in the form of rim jobs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You rolled up the print Michael had made and brought Gabriel's present in a little box. You briefly wondered if they were a mistake, but decided that they were such a small thing, he wouldn't mind.

Comm unit in ear, you let Athena know you were on the move, and headed up to Jack's quarters.

You let yourself in, set your bag down, and were pleasantly surprised to find Jack and Gabriel already on the sofa, unpacking boxes of kebabs and shawarma.

"You like hummus, right?" Jack eyed it warily. "Because there's a lot of it and I don't know if I like hummus that much."

"Yeah," you said, thinking of Rivka for a brief moment. "I like hummus," your voice wavered.

Jack blinked and gave you a second look. "Baby, if you don't like hummus-"

"Ziv's grandmother used to make it for me," you said. "I like hummus."

"Oh." Jack gave you a nod, looking like he wanted to say more, then thought better of it. "OK."

Gabriel's jaw tightened briefly, but he swallowed whatever bitter words were on his tongue and leaned over the sofa. "What do you have there?"

You looked down. "Stuff."

"Come sit down," Jack said. "There's yogurt salad - which I think is just yogurt and cucumbers, shawarma, more mystery meat."

"It's lamb, Jack," Gabriel said rolling his eyes.


You smiled and vaulted over the couch, noting that Jack had tucked a plaid blanket into the
cushions, covering up the stain. It looked silly, you liked it. You handed Jack the rolled-up print and Gabriel the small box. "I uh...presents. Just because. They aren't bribes. I haven't done anything, I swear."

Gabriel raised a brow and took the box. Jack slowly unfurled the print of himself with an elderly lab. Atticus, if you remembered correctly.

"Michael painted it. I thought you'd like it," you said quickly as Jack studied the picture. It was big enough to frame, though now that you thought of it, who kept pictures of themselves on the walls? Narcissists, that's whom. Jack could be vain, sure, but he didn't take it that far. "It was supposed to be for something else and then I didn't give it and well, I figured I didn't need an occasion. Because sometimes you just give people gifts, to show you care, right?"

"Thank you," he said softly. "I...this is a surprise." He gave you a crooked smile, leaning over to kiss your forehead. "I like it. It's very thoughtful. Thank you." He looked back at the dog and gaze wavering. He sighed, and you realized that reminding him of his dead dog was probably a mistake. What were you thinking? How was this a good idea? Bringing up the dead dog was never a good idea...

"I'm sorry," you said. "If you don't like it-"

"Nah, just haven't thought about Atticus in a long time." Jack gave a little half shrug. "There isn't a lot of room for a dog in the Strike Commander's world." He carefully rolled the print up and you wondered if you should have gotten him a puppy. But he was right. Who would take care of it? Not you.

A little depressed, you looked over at Gabriel who was eyeing the cufflinks suspiciously. Well, it was official. You were bad at presents.

"Sorry-"

"Stop apologizing. I really like it. It just...it caught me off guard." Jack smiled at you gently. "You're not bringing up bad memories. It's a good memento. Thank you." He got up and pulled down a framed picture of an Orca and stuck the picture over top it. It wasn't crooked, but it didn't look quite right here.

"Jack, that's not how you frame-"

"Gabriel, you can decorate however you want when we live together. But until then, I'm doing things my way!"

"The wrong way," Gabriel muttered under his breath and you laughed, some of the tension seeping out.

"Thank you," Jack said, and sat back down on the couch, a pleased smile replacing any trace of sadness.

"Corazon?" Gabriel held the cufflinks in his palm.

"Yes?"

"Are these...platinum?"

"Yes."
He gave you a confused look. "Jack gets a sentimental personalized gift and you bought me expensive cufflinks?"

"I didn't buy them," you said, rubbing the back of your head. "Umm..."

Gabriel raised a brow. "...Did you steal them?"

"No." You shook your head.

"Whose cufflinks are these?"

"Yours now," you said. "Unless you don't like them. Then they were Lacroix's. I won them off him in a poker game in Cologne. He stopped playing with me after that."

Gabriel stared at them for a moment.

"I thought you would find it funny to wear them in front of him and...maybe that's in bad taste..." you trailed off.

"You beat that James Bond wannabe at cards?" Gabriel laughed.


"He does too," Gabriel smirked. "You mean you want me to wear your trophies and flaunt them in his face?"

"If you want to." You looked over at Jack who was laughing behind his hand. "I guess you could always trade them back to him."

"God, you're petty," Gabriel laughed. "Thank you, baby. I'll save these for when he really pisses me off." He leaned over and kissed you, as one of Jack's arms snaked around your waist.

"Aren't you hungry?" You asked, a little bewildered as Gabriel began unfastening your belt.

"The hummus can wait," Jack said, his teeth grazing your ear. "I have some things I need to make up for, and I want to make sure you know just how much I appreciate you."

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You leaned against Gabriel, sighing happily as hot water rained down on you. The food had to be cold by now and it sat, untouched on the coffee table. The three of you were in the shower with you in the center.

Jack was soaping you down, his fingers wandering as he "cleaned" you up.

"I'll change your bandage when we get out," Gabriel said, rubbing your shoulders.

"OK," you said, shivering as Jack pressed hot open-mouthed kisses to your back going lower and lower. "Don't know if we're ever getting ou-" Your voice went high as something warm and wet probed your back passage. "Jack, what are you-"

"Relax. Already got you cleaned up. Just see if you enjoy it, OK?" Jack murmured, before he slid his tongue against the tight ring of muscle.

You glanced at Gabriel, a little alarmed, but Gabriel just smirked down at you.
You whined softly as he licked, the area so very sensitive. He had you panting as you braced yourself against Gabriel's arms, the slippery muscle teasing you open.

"Do you like it?" Gabriel asked, kissing you. "Because he likes doing it."

You clung to Gabriel. "It's...good. Just..."

"Dirty?" Jack laughed, a finger sliding inside your puckered hole. He sunk his teeth into your cheek and you squealed. "Don't care. Look at you squirming."

Gabriel chuckled. He nipped your ear. "And we just got you cleaned up too. If you let him, Jack'll work you open for us, and we can put you in the middle."

"O-OK," you stuttered. Now two fingers pushed inside your ass and your knees buckled. Gabriel held you up, grinning as you writhed against him. You buried your face against his chest. Jack kept playing with you and soon enough he'd comfortably fit three fingers inside.

"Almost ready-" Jack chuckled.

"Don't worry, he has plenty of mouthwash," Gabriel said.

You ended up on Jack's lap, Jack holding you from behind, your head tucked against his shoulder, your legs tangled with Gabriel's. Gabriel played with your nipples, teeth grazing the hardened points, while Jack tilted your head back for a kiss.

"I still owe your ass a good pounding," Jack purred, one hand cupping your face. "I know, not tonight, sweetheart, but I just want you to know I haven't forgotten what you have coming to you." You moaned as he sucked a mark onto the side of your neck. "You won't be walking the next day, I promise you that."

"Probably because we'll pass out afterward and forget to put up an emitter," you said, breath hitching as Gabriel rubbed your clit.

"Smart ass," Jack snorted, his cock pressed against your cleft. Gabriel was hard between your thighs. "Get on Gabriel's lap. I need to get more lube."

"And by "lap," he means "cock." In case you were confused," Gabriel leaned forward and bit the other side of your neck, a line of rough kisses bruising your skin.

You shifted forward, trying to shove Gabriel onto his back, but he caught you against his chest, lowering his head to nuzzle your cheek. "Gabriel-"

"Nope, you don't get to push me around," he laughed. "Now sit on my cock like I told you."

You huffed in frustration and rose to reposition yourself. With both hands on his shoulders, you straddled him, eyes widening as you lowered yourself onto him. Gabriel held still, letting you move at your own pace, till he was in to the hilt. Breathing hard you wrapped your arms around his neck and you closed your eyes, loving the way he filled you, the way his cock twitched inside you, even though he was holding very still. His chest hair scratched against your skin, and he was always just a few degrees warmer than you expected. You didn't mind.

"So eager," Gabriel murmured, one palm splayed against your back, the other sliding...
between your thighs. "I took you twice in the office and Jack just tongue-fucked you on the couch. Are we not meeting your needs, hermosa? Do we need to have these trysts more frequently?"

"Uh-" This was the most sex you'd had in your life. And he wanted to know if you needed more?

"Yes!" Jack said, leaning over your shoulder to kiss Gabriel. "That's a great idea. And while you're at it, come see me during office hours. Reviewing the facilities budget is killing me."

"Get a couch," you said. "Or better chairs. Yours suck."

"It's to discourage certain types from loitering," Jack said. "You don't need a chair if you're under my desk." He nipped your shoulder and you could feel him smiling at you, his hands kneading your hips.

"I'm not sitting under your desk to do paperwork, Jack."

Gabriel snorted.

"If I get better chairs, will you come work for me more often? You'll need to show off that new wardrobe," Jack teased. "I have a dress code, you know."

"We don't all own silly jackets," you told him as he spread you open.

"I don't care about your coat, baby. But in the Strike Commander's office, we go Strike Commando," Jack said proudly.

You froze, staring at Gabriel. "Did he just-?"

Gabriel rested his face in his palm. "Yes, corazon. He just killed my boner."

Jack laughed. "Come on, it was funny."

"Morrison, please stop talking," Gabriel said.

"Are you telling me to Overwatch myself?"

"I'll put my clothes on and go eat hummus," you said.

Jack chuckled, kissing the back of your neck. "It wasn't that bad-

"We're pretending that never happened," Gabriel said, rolling his hips and you gave a sharp gasp. "Now are you going to sit there making stupid jokes or are you going to join us?"

Gabriel reclined, taking you with him, and Jack held you open, dribbling a generous amount of lube inside you. Jack's slippery cock pressed against your ass. You rested your chin on Gabriel's shoulder, reaching back to spread your cheeks. Jack rubbed the crown against your hole and began to slide in.

"So much tighter when we don't use the plug-" Jack groaned and you whimpered, already so full of Gabriel, that you weren't sure you could take Jack. "Are you OK, sweetheart?"

You nodded, biting your lip as Gabriel gently rubbed your back. There was a little more resistance than usual, but Jack had been generous with the lube. "Just go slow, please."
"Fuck, I can feel Gabe's cock twitching inside you. You sure you're OK?"

"Still recovering from that terrible joke, but I think I can handle this."

Jack chuckled, wrapping one arm just under your breasts. "I'm going to enjoy gagging you again." He nipped your shoulder and you squeaked, jerking forward. "There we go." He pushed and you gave a cry as he got all the way in, his body flush with yours. "Fuck you're tight, baby," he groaned. "Going to have to take it easy tonight."

"Hold her, Jack."

They shifted in tandem, Jack pulling you upright while Gabriel sat up. You closed your eyes, head against Jack's chest while Gabriel rocked his hips. You braced yourself against Jack, shaking as he rolled your breasts in his hands.

"You can go harder," you said, moving with Gabriel. Taking them from this angle was easier and you tried vainly to quicken the pace.

"I don't want to," Gabriel said, with a low groan. "Want to take it slow tonight. Sometimes I just like seeing you melt."

"And he still feels guilty about earlier," Jack said, tongue flicking against your ear.

"We don't always have to play rough," Gabriel said, leaning forward to kiss you. "Unless you don't like this-"

"I always like being here with you," you sighed, reaching out to stroke his face. Gabriel caught your hand and kissed it.

"Don't usually get to do this unless something big has happened," Gabriel murmured. "Want to just enjoy having you and Jack. Just because."

Before you could formulate a response, Jack canted his hips and began to move. You wrapped your arms around Gabriel's neck for stability, but Jack didn't release you. Both of them held onto you, their touches firm, but not restrictive.

"I don't know, Gabe. She gave us presents for no reason. That's a pretty big thing."

"Maybe," Gabriel said. "Or maybe it's normal, you're just lousy at gift-giving."

Jack chuckled, pressing you tighter against Gabriel while he leaned in to bite the other man's shoulder. "I don't mind taking it slow either, baby. Now that I know you aren't going to sneak out afterward, there's less pressure to fuck you into exhaustion."

"What?" You gave a choked laugh as both men began to thrust in alternating strokes. They didn't rush, letting you savor both the fullness and the drag of them against your inner walls.

Jack began to move a little faster, one hand sliding between your thighs to rub your clit. "I like waking up next to you, almost as much as I like wrecking you. You're so pretty spread out underneath me, making those cute noises while I see how many times I can make you come." His voice grew rough and the pressure of his hands grew heavier.

"Jack-"

"But this is nice too," he said, cheerful and light again. "I like looking Gabe in the eye
while we're both inside you. Having both of you together makes everything so much better."

Even though they were not going hard, both men were already slick with sweat. Pressed tightly between them, you relaxed, pleasure washing over you in warm waves. It was a gradual climb, both men taking their time while they caressed your bare skin and kissed whatever parts of you they could reach. You tried to give back in equal measure, but it was two against one, and you squirmed between them, panting softly as they teased another orgasm out of you, Jack's fingers on your clit, Gabriel's mouth on your throat. You bucked your hips, falling against Jack as they held you upright.

Jack came next, purring your name while he filled you from behind, his strokes languid and hard. Gabriel didn't last much longer, and he yanked Jack closer. You couldn't see what he was doing, but Jack moaned against you, and Gabriel growled something filthy in Spanish as you he lost himself in you.

Gabriel lowered his head and kissed you gently. When he released you, he leaned over your shoulder to kiss Jack again.

"Mmm," Jack embraced you from behind. "You want to go again?"

"She has another early morning. So no, she needs to eat and get some rest," Gabriel said, firmly.

"But papi-" Jack teased.

"Go get cleaned up," Gabriel scowled. "I'll change the sheets and reheat the food."

You were back in the shower, giving a longsuffering sigh as Jack soaped everywhere. He had even gotten behind your ears.

He grinned down at you, his sudsy hair falling in his eyes. "You made it here unassisted. I feel like I haven't done my job right." He trapped you against the wall, palms on either side of your head.

"I have to train recruits tomorrow," you scowled.

"I know. But are you sure I can't interest you in a roll in the hay?"

"Eww," you laughed as he brushed his lips against yours. "Did that line ever work for you?"

"You're still here, aren't you?"

"We need to get Gabriel," you said.

"Oh?" Jack raised a brow. "You want all three of us to have sex in the shower? It'll be cramped but we can all fit-"

"No, not tonight. I mean we need to ambush him."

Jack's face fell, but he recovered quickly. "I see. Well, I guess that'll be fun too. You
already said you wanted to see me dom him. And you've missed out the last few times.” He didn't elaborate, so you assumed it was after Candle Arc went to shit. "But you want to collaborate, like you and him did to me?"

"Yup," you said. "And don't you act surprised. You two gang up on me all the time."

"Yeah, because it's fun," Jack laughed, kissing you again. "But I like this idea too. All right. What did you have in mind? Because I have plenty of suggestions..."

You were back in Jack's bed, with a clean dry bandage on your wrist, wearing one of Jack's t-shirts, and sandwiched between Gabriel and Jack, eating hummus on reheated pita. Neither of them had bothered to get dressed, instead they had the covers pulled up over their laps and you were treated to the sight of both of them shirtless, lounging around the bed while you ate dinner.

Gabriel would give you bites of kebab while Jack shared his shawarma. They had plenty and could have easily given you your own plate, but they held onto the takeout boxes, forcing you to let them feed you or steal from their portions. Which you did, liberally, though neither seemed to mind, and you weren't above eating with your fingers, but the pita made a good scoop. You were careful not to get anything on the blankets, but Jack...well, Jack kept crumbling pita on the covers. "You could have just made me a plate," you told Gabriel.

"Mmm, but this is more fun," he said, offering you a forkful of roasted lamb. You bit into it, shaking your head.

"See, if anyone here doesn't deserve to feed themselves, it's Jack." You gestured over to him picking the seasoned grains of rice off the comforter and eating them with a happy head bob.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and stuck a spoonful of rice in your face. "This is really good."

"It's better in your mouth than on the blank-"

Jack just cheerfully pushed the spoon into your mouth. You took the rice, rolling your eyes.

"It would be less messy if-"

"More cucumbers?" Gabriel asked, with a smirk. "We've got hummus for days."

"At least admit that I'm not the messy eater."

"You're not the messy eater," Gabriel said, agreeably and gave you another bite of meat. "We can spoil Jack another night. Another night when I'm sleeping next to him and have to worry about his mess."

"I'm not that bad. I'm not getting any on the sheets, what more do you want?"

"That is an improvement," Gabriel said, rolling his eyes. But Jack missed that, swooping down to kiss your neck.
"See? Stop complaining," Jack said. "Or I won't share my rice."

Reluctantly, you stopped arguing and went along with it. Normally after sex with both of them, you were far too exhausted to talk for very long or do anything besides cuddle and pass out. This was different. Both of them were relaxed, but still wide awake. Gabriel radiated contentment, smiling and laughing more than you'd seen since Candle Arc went to shit. The last time he looked this happy was Christmas.

Jack just kept leaning over you to kiss Gabriel, or ruffle his hair, or steal his food. But he made a point to kiss and cuddle you on the way back. And he couldn't keep his hands to himself, rubbing your shoulders, tweaking your ear, and playing with your hair. You were worried that he was going to get food in it, but he looked so happy, so carefree that you just sighed and let him.

"Are you getting enough to eat?" Gabriel asked, holding out another bite of cucumber.

"Yup." You yawned. "I'm getting sleepy."

"Good," Jack said. "Then I can eat the rest of the shawarma."

"Not so fast, boy scout-" Gabriel reached over you, stabbing a large slice of meat and taking it for himself.

"Gabe-"

"You've been eating all my "mystery lamb." You can share."

"Lucky was eating my shawarma-"

"Don't blame me, Jack. One, you guys didn't give me a plate. Two, if I didn't eat it, it would have ended up on the blankets."

"She's still sassing me, Gabe. We didn't fuck her hard enough. I bet if we'd gone another round, she would've been too tired to eat."

You facepalmed.

"Then I would've been twice as hungry," Gabriel said, and took another piece of Jack's shawarma.

"So wait a minute: all those times before, were you really trying to wear me out so I'd spend the night?" You glanced up at Jack.

"It wasn't the only reason," he said with a shrug. "I like doing it anyway. But it was side benefit. Didn't want you waking up, panicking, and running off."

"Gabriel-?"

"Don't act surprised. I told you that was the plan back at the hotel on the first night," he said, not looking the least bit ashamed. He fed you some rice and yogurt salad. "It worked out well."

"...You could have just asked me to stay," you said. "I wasn't sure if you actually wanted me to-"

"Stay?" Jack asked, grinning down at you, while he nudged you in the ribs with his elbow. "Please?"
"I planned to, anyway!"

"Unless he keeps getting food in the bed, corazon. Then we're both leaving."

"So, tea party after Mihret returns?" Tataryn asked while you belly crawled across the grass.

"Probably. Genji and Jesse keep having scheduling conflicts, and they've both threatened me with grievous bodily harm if I go ahead without them." You lifted your viewing specs and sighed. "What the hell do they think they're doing?"

"...I don't know, but I'm not letting Ana blame us for that." Tataryn sounded amused.

Today was one of the hands-on exercises. It was a combat-sim with real omnics who had to "tag" the trainees with lasers. The guns had real weight and recoil, while the omnics were instructed to engage in touch-combat as well, which was like touch football. If the omnic tapped you, you went down, because that's what would happen in real life. The human team got two hours to prepare their side of the field. It was a capture-the-flag style game and you watched them drag branches, metal, and tarps into the woods.

"Where the hell did they get sheet metal?"

"Mmm, my money is on Chey or your boy Maeda Vargas."

"My boy?" You wrinkled your nose. "He's still a teenager, Tataryn. I don't know what you're implying but-"

"Not like that. I don't know if you've noticed, but he watches your every move like a hawk, and then tries to emulate them himself. He isn't as smooth, of course, but the will and the potential are there."

When you asked questions, Maeda Vargas always had his hand up to answer. At the end of class, he had often stayed after to ask you to clarify a point or give more detail about a strategy. He kept trying to coax war stories out of you... You sighed, watching your batch of trainees trying to construct some kind of trap. "I just assumed he was an eager pupil."

"Not quite. No one else has gotten that response out of him. Shoal and McCree both agree he's smart and paying attention, but he's trying to impress you. Me as well, but definitely you."

It fucking figured it would play out like this. The entire point of you and Tataryn being here, aside from someone's clever idea of punishment, was to find Tataryn a replacement squad member.

"I'm not forming my own team, Tataryn."

"Mmm, you mean you, Mihret, and Lacroix aren't a team? Is it just you, McCree, and the Shimadas then?"

"I'm flexible," you scowled. "I work well with others." Maybe you didn't play well, but work was a different matter. "Anyway, I meant I'm not looking to run my own squad. Obviously, I
"Well, if you want to mentor any of them, Jeong and Forrester both like you a lot, though I think Forrester likes me better," Tataryn sighed, and to your surprise he did not sound pleased by that development.

"Problems?"

"Not yet, but I am too old for teenagers, Lucky. And that realization is depressing in and of itself."

"...Huh," you said and frowned. "Like you just realized this or...?"

"I have known this for awhile," he said, giving you a dirty look. "But when I was younger, it was flattering. Now it just feels...uncomfortable."

"That is a lot more mature than I expected from you," you said.

"Are you making jokes about my feelings?" Tataryn asked, sounding slightly outraged. "And my age?"

"Yes," you said. "Now we should probably get closer and see what they're doing. Because I don't trust Chey not to teach them something crazy." Chey was sharp, and you figured he was the best candidate for Tataryn's squad. Maeda Vargas was a little young for Blackwatch; Jesse had been younger when he joined, but you still felt weird about that situation, just like you felt weird about inviting a teenager onboard.

"...He's smart and capable. But I'm not sure about him." Tataryn said.

"Really? I don't have any strong feelings. He has a lot of Blackwatch potential, but-"

"Life has made him hard. He is not the kind of man I trust with power."

"We don't trust anyone with power," you said. "Especially over us."

"We do. The boss. Ana. I think you trust Morrison," Tataryn said, without a trace of irony. "I want to be very careful about whom we invite in. Especially given what I have learned about Shit Spiders."

"...Yeah, OK." You nodded. "I noticed the attitude, but I'll keep an eye out."

The two of you crept closer, your stealth field up, and Tataryn's face smeared with grease paint. The rookies stood out in Overwatch blues, but the two of you had on camouflaged armor Tataryn wore a cap to cover his golden hair.

"You call that a hole?" Chey scoffed. "That wouldn't hold a rabbit, let alone an omnic."

"Not all of us have your biceps," Lowell snapped. They were knee deep in a trench, Jeong and some of the other trainees helping to dig.

Rolling his eyes, and muttering in Khmer, Chey dropped into the ditch and began to shovel. He moved fast, and while he was no Reinhardt or even Gabriel, he was a tank and the hole rapidly expanded.

You nudged Tataryn.
He shook his head and the two of you watched them dig, cover the holes with metal, then branches. They bickered, usually Chey butting heads with Forrester or Lowell, but it never got out of hand. You could sympathize with Chey's frustration. You'd been older than a lot of the other recruits in basic, not as old as him, but enough to feel the difference in maturity levels.

Maeda Vargas was a quiet one. He just watched them, eyes narrowing as he focused on Chey. He scanned the horizon, and turned to Jeong. "Did you bring the stuff?"

"Of course," she said, winking at him, her smile more playful than you'd seen in class.

Maeda Vargas grinned back mischievously. "All right, so we'll set these in the pits..."

You caught sight of the proximity mines and facepalmed silently. This was not a live fire exercise, damnit. You signaled to Tataryn to back up. The two of you melted back into the forest and headed for the edge of the tree line.

"...I am curious to see what happens," Tataryn said after a moment.

"...Captain Amari will skin us alive."

"But they might not let us do training ever again." Tataryn looked pensive. "I am fine with that."

You thought about it. He had a point. "But one of them could get hurt."

Tataryn shrugged. "Teach them to play with proximity mines."

You shook your head. "Tataryn."

"Lucky." He winked.

"Think about the paperwork." And the fact if there were serious injuries, they would have to get Jack and Gabriel involved.

Tataryn rolled his eyes. "Of course you are right. Boring, but right."

"Let's circle around, like we're checking on their progress. See what happens."

Tataryn grinned, wiping the paint off his face. "Oh, I see where you're going with this. All right."

The two of you strolled into the forest, taking another route. You didn't attempt to hide your presence, making a beeline for the recruits.

They had finished laying the branches over the sheet metal and had covered the area with leaves. It looked stable enough, and you approved of the measure, because the metal would hold humans, but crumble under an omnic's weight. Still, you weren't going to walk onto it.

You caught sight of Jeong, in a tree, while Maeda Vargas strung razor wire across the pathway. This was not your fault. This was not your fault. You didn't provide them with proximity mines and razor wire. You didn't tell them to use disproportional force on a goddamn training
exercise. Sure, you had covered these techniques in class, but where had they even gotten this shit?

Tataryn was beaming with pride, and for a moment you wondered if he was their supplier. Because despite his good cheer and friendly demeanor, he really did not want to teach another unit ever again. He was just too smart to show it.

"Agent Strike!" Lowell shouted as you stopped right in front of the pit. Jeong and Forrester's eyes widened, and panic crossed Maeda Vargas' face. But Chey just stood there, watching, expression very neutral.

"We just came to check up on your preparations," Tataryn said, hands on his hips. "Everything going well?" He stepped onto the metal and frowned, looking down. "What's this-"

"NO!" Forrester shouted. "Get off of it!" Her eyes were comically wide and you smothered a laugh as Jeong nearly fell out of her tree.

"What? You dug a pit. How deep?" Tataryn began stomping on the metal, and you raised a brow.

"Uh, you might not want to do that sir," Lowell said. "Please take a step backward."

"Oh?" Tataryn looked at you. "Did you put in punjee spikes? Wood isn't going to pierce omnic armor."

He was enjoying this. You rolled your eyes.

"Uh...not spikes, sir. Please get off the trap, please?" Lowell asked.

Tataryn made a face. "Why?"

"Because we put live proximity mines in there?" Lowell said in a small voice. They winced as Chey glared at them.

"Huh, that is a good reason," Tataryn said, not moving.

"Who has the flag?"

Maeda Vargas waved the blue Overwatch flag at you from his tree. Razor wire glinted in the sunlight and you squinted at him. "Who gave you razor wire?"

"I...found it," he said, cringing.

You waited.

"Uh...in the armory..." He slowly slid out of the tree. "When someone left the door open..."

You sighed. "This is not a live fire exercise. I appreciate the effort you've put into this, but if any of you get blown up or shredded, there are going to be problems."

"And paperwork, lots of paperwork, and that makes Strike Commander Morrison, Commander Reyes, and Captain Amari very, very unhappy," Tataryn said with a stage whisper. "And I have seen what happens to agents unfortunate enough to incur the wrath of the Overwatch founders." He gave you a grave look, and you nodded solemnly, thinking of Ziv.

Several of them blanched.
"Can we get a do-over?" Lowell asked.

"...Nope, the game begins in thirty minutes. I want all unauthorized implements off the field before then," you said. They were going to lose, and they were going to lose badly, which while unfair, might give them more ideas on how to improvise. And really, that was the point of this exercise. You did appreciate them planning beyond the rules, but when you saw Lowell handling proximity mines with shaking hands, you were confident that you were doing the right thing. Even as one of them lit up and began beeping.

Tataryn moved faster than you, grabbing the disk out of Lowell's hands and hurling it away from the group.

You clenched your teeth as an explosion rocked the forest. It only brought down a tree or two, but now you were going to have to explain this to Captain Amari and the idea of that conversation made your stomach churn.

"Right, so whom here is actually certified to handle ordnance?" You asked, already knowing the answer.

"Uh..." Lowell carefully set the mines down and backed up.

"Jeong, Tamboli, and Hristov," Forrester said, standing ramrod straight, her black hair falling in her face. "They handled the setup. We were trying to stay within regulations, ma'am."

"Are there any other prohibited surprises you have for our friendly omnic training partners?" You asked, staring directly at Maeda Vargas who was partially concealed behind his razor wired tree. Tataryn smirked at Chey who glared at you both. Maeda Vargas shrunk under your gaze and you waited. He slunk over to you and handed over three EMP grenades.

You sighed and pocketed them.

Jeong had already began carefully take down her side of the razor wire.

"Well, the exercise is going to proceed as planned," you said, getting several groans and dark looks from the group. "And afterward, we're going to sit down individually, and talk about what you've been up to, and just how you got access to some of these items."

Several of them paled and you shook your head. What the hell had they been thinking?

Chapter End Notes

The summary was kind of a lie, because there's a lot of fluff too.

Sorry about the late update. I kept getting distracted this week by tumblr anons with their fluff, angst, and puns. Uh huh, that's my excuse, blaming those anons. Yup. :P

That being said, headcanons and drabbles keep popping up on my tumblr. They’re too short to add here right now, and kind of unpolished, but if you're looking for little bits of angst, fluff, and humor in the IAL world, come on over.
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

In which you face multiple dilemmas and Genji is more of a shit than usual. (Tataryn and Lacroix are shits, but that is to be expected.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Your class got *trampled* by the omnis. They put up a spirited fight, considering their resources. But judging from the recordings Athena made, they were too busy bickering over whose fault it was that they got caught and cursing you and Tataryn, to bounce back. They had made plenty of mistakes, and now it was your job to make sure they learned from them.

You and Tataryn sat in Captain Amari's office, watching her read your report. She remained impassive as she read and when she finished, she shut off her screen, rubbed her forehead, and stared at the wall for an uncomfortably long period of time.

"...They show a lot of initiative," Tataryn offered.

"Good problem solving skills," you added.

"Excellent stealth and acquisition abilities," Tataryn said.

"Went above and beyond," you said.

"Weren't so good at improvising on the fly," Tataryn acknowledged.

"Team cohesion does need work," you agreed.

Captain Amari held up her hand and you both feel silent. "You know, I was only joking about you corrupting the new class. Obviously, I was mistaken."

You shot Tataryn a worried look.

She clasped her hands under her chin. "I'm concerned that allowing you to continue working with them will do more harm than good."

You felt a pang of disappointment. Sure, you didn't like getting up at 3AM, but you'd come this far...

"We can't un-teach them, Ana," Tataryn said. "You tasked us to show them how we do things on the black ops side, and we did. Maybe they were not ready for that knowledge, or maybe they are more talented than we anticipated, but we did what you asked and we did it well."

"Too well, Fedya," Captain Amari said, narrowing her eyes. "What passes for discipline in Blackwatch is not going to fly in Overwatch. I don't need an entire class of brilliant hothead mavericks running amok."
"So we rein them in. Teach them discretion," Tataryn said.

"Do you actually know enough about that concept to teach others?" Captain Amari's eyes were on you.

"I don't know," you admitted. "But even on a bad day, I wouldn't have added ordnance to a glorified laser tag training exercise."

"...So are you asking me for another week?" Captain Amari asked, silkily, and you glanced over at Tataryn. He gave deliberate nod.

"Yeah, we can do that," you said.

Captain Amari smiled thinly at you. "Don't disappoint me."

It was only after you and Tataryn slunk out of her office that you realized she'd gotten you both to ask her to extend your sentence. Son of a bitch, she'd played you like a zither.

"Well, we weren't burnt to ashes," Tataryn said after a moment. "That is a plus."

"Yeah," you agreed. "But we've been...manipulated."

"I know. It is wiser to give her what she wants, Lucky." He paused. "I am sorry, I have been meaning to ask you. Is that...rice in your hair?" He pointed to the spot and you reached around, and a few sticky grains came away in your hand.

"Goddamnit, Jack." You facepalmed then. "Don't ask."

"...The Strike Commander has some strange proclivities."

"No, he's just a messy eater," you said, patting the back of your head and combing your fingers through your hair.

Tataryn raised a brow, stifling a laugh. "I see. None of my business what you get up to in your spare time."

"I'm serious! He was eating and- Stop making that face at me, Tataryn!"

Tataryn's shit-eating grin just widened. "I am not judging you," he said brightly. "Congratulations on being so...open-minded."

Huffing in frustration, you stomped off to find Lacroix. He had a better understanding of how to motivate people and while you had the shape of a plan in your head, you knew his input would be invaluable. But first you had to make sure you didn't have any more of last night's dinner on your person.

Lacroix laughed for a minute straight when you told him what happened. Wiping tears from his eyes, he handed you a cigarette and then proceeded to laugh at you some more. You lit the cigarette and waited for him to calm down.

"They had proximity mines, punjee pits, razor wire, and EMP grenades for a training
exercise? Obviously they are so smart, they are idiots. No one asked them to reinvent the wheel."

"Lacroix." You scowled at him. "Focus."

His eyes widened. "So defensive... Oh, I see, you are protective of your pupils. How adorable."

You rolled your eyes.

"Yes, I have looked over this crop. Chey and Maeda Vargas are my top picks for ringleaders, but I suspect there were others?"

"...Yeah. There are a disproportionately high number of unorthodox thinkers, Lacroix." You narrowed your eyes, pieces coming together. "You vetted several of them. Did you know-"

"One way, or another, Blackwatch needs capable agents. I'd prefer to get them and train them before they're scooped up by less competent agencies. Yes, I had some input. Just like I had some input about you taking on an instructor position."

"...And what did you recommend?" Of course, he hadn't warned you. He'd just carried on, satisfied that everything was going according to his sneaky little plans.

"Against it, of course. You don't have the temperament to teach," Lacroix said, looking you in the eye, a shrewd smile spreading across his untrustworthy face.

"Obviously, you were wrong about that."

"I was, wasn't I?" He said, and you cast a doubtful eye on his claims. No, Lacroix wanted you teaching them, just like he wanted more potential Blackwatch agents. He was just needling you now. The real question, was what did he want you to show them?

"And now?"

"Now, they have made a mistake. You will rake them over the coals. You will make it clear that this behavior was unacceptable. And then you will show them how they should have done it. You will not hold back."

"I'm going to really let them have it or really tell them what they should have done?"

"Both," Lacroix said, smugness oozing from his tiny pores. "Not all of them are Blackwatch material. But if they can learn from this mistake, they are one step closer."

"...That's a dangerous game, especially since we're already on thin ice with Captain Amari."

"It's the game we play, Chanceux." Lacroix smirked at you. "And you are getting rather good at it."

"They...dear god." Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd shed his overcoat, and it hung on Ana's coat rack. He sat on the floor shaking his head. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Just their egos. Lucky and Tataryn have been more conscientious than I expected. They..."
caught it early on.” Ana tossed her hat onto the coat rack and put her feet on her desk. "There's some damage to the trees. We might have to chop some down for safety, but I think we can make them do that."

"It is good that they are...creative," Wilhelm said, carefully pinching the handle of the teacup between his thumb and forefinger and delicately sipping it. Hunched over in a chair too small for his frame, he held the saucer in his other hand. "I laud their enthusiasm."

"You surprise me, old friend." Gérard sat in the other chair, looking far too pleased with himself. "I would have thought you would be upset about how they made...unauthorized requisitions."

"I am not condoning their thievery," Wilhelm said, blowing gently on his tea and managing not to spill it. "But I am moved by their dedication. I know what it's like, trying to impress your superior officers. We were all young and foolish once."

Gabriel snorted, leaning against the door. Wilhelm had never grown past the foolish phase. Jack was snacking on a box of shortbread, while Ana made more tea. Cramming everyone in her office was tricky, but Wilhelm's still wasn't set up, Gérard's was far too small, and you had access to both his and Jack's office. They didn't want you walking in on this meeting.

"I warned you Tataryn and Lucky didn't have the experience to do this unsupervised," Gabriel said.

"You underestimate her, Gabriel," Gérard said so mildly, it couldn't be anything but a rebuke.

"I'm not saying she can't do the job. She can, obviously," Gabriel said, annoyed at Gérard's smug little smile. "But between integrating her omnic and cyborg combat module, and this, she's giving them too much, too quickly, and miscalculated how far the recruits would go. They need more oversight."

"A growing pain," Ana said. "One I've tasked her to remedy. Tataryn, is providing support, but Lucky is the one running the show. Which surprised me. He has more leadership experience, but he's taking the subtle approach and letting her direct the class."

"He's pulling his weight, right?" Jack asked, giving Gabriel a look.

"Yes, they're getting along very well," Ana said, lips quirked upward. "So you can imagine what the rumor mill sounds like."

Wilhelm and Gérard exchanged amused head shakes. Gabriel glanced at Jack who had stopped mid-bite, eyes icy. Jack gave him a pointed look. Gabriel had already had this conversation with Jack. Yes, he realized he'd assigned you a very "pretty" bodyguard. Maybe he had underestimated the attention Tataryn's proximity would draw, but he wasn't wrong to do it. Not after what happened at the day spa.

"It'll die down. Both Lucky and Tataryn have reputations that they don't actually live up to," Gabriel said sharply. He knew you only had platonic feelings for Tataryn, just like he knew Tataryn rarely fraternized any more. When necessary, he took his indiscretions off base. But his flirtations gave everyone the wrong idea.

"That is unnecessarily harsh," Wilhelm said, shaking his head. "I do not know Agent Tataryn, but Lucky's growing reputation as a capable agent is well-deserved."
"...That's not what I'm talking about, Wilhelm, and you know it," Gabriel snapped.

Gérard just chuckled. "Reinhardt is too noble to pay attention to gossip."

"No, I have just made it clear that Lucky is an exemplary agent and I will not tolerate anyone slandering her in my presence," Wilhelm said.

Gabriel raised a brow, frown deepening. He had not been aware of this. And he still wasn't sure why Wilhelm decided he liked you so much. Your interactions with him were minimal and you'd only been on two combat ops together: Gérard's Code White in the Alps, and the day spa incident. Even then, the two of you had not worked together closely on either of those missions.

Ana and Gérard did not look the least bit surprised. And Gabriel realized he would have to ask Ana about it.

"You are a stalwart friend, Reinhardt," Gérard said with a small laugh, that somehow managed not to be mocking.

"I am a Crusader at heart," Wilhelm murmured. "Lucky has made it clear that if she attempts to contradict the rumors, it just makes them worse. Her situation requires that she leaves many things ambiguous. I am free to straighten out misconceptions and my reputation is somewhat different than hers. I do not have the skillset for deception and long games. I am not suited for secret missions and deep cover." He gave Gérard a rueful look. "But in this, I can be her shield."

"It is a good metaphor," Gérard said giving Gabriel a sly look. "Don't you agree?"

Gabriel cocked his head to the side, surprised by Wilhelm's confession. He really was going to have to ask Ana about this later. He remembered Wilhelm delivering you that giant bear after Candle Arc. What exactly had you done for the Crusader? Gabriel gave a slow nod.

"Yeah." He looked at Jack, who actually liked Wilhelm. Jack was smiling gently at the other man.

"We appreciate it, Reinhardt." Jack offered him some of the shortbread and Wilhelm carefully plucked one piece out of the box.

"It is what friends do." Wilhelm shrugged. "Now, what are we going to do about this batch of excitable youths?"

Gérard laughed. "I am so glad you asked..."

Reinhardt Wilhelm was a blowhard simpleton, in Gabriel's opinion. His values were archaic, his attitude ridiculous, his laugh, annoying. He was best suited as a figurehead, far away from those who did the real work. He was a modern Don Quixote, and far less charming because there was no excuse for that level of naïveté in this day and age. Gabriel's opinion on all that had not changed. But, Gabriel conceded, maybe after today he disliked Wilhelm just a little less.

You and Tataryn made them clean up the practice area. They chopped down the damaged trees, dragged the debris away, and put away the spools of razor wire. They grumbled under their collective breaths while you and Tataryn oversaw the process.
If you had been feeling extra cruel, you would have eaten dinner in front of them. As it was, you just watched them with a flat unimpressed gaze, drinking your fifth mug of coffee, while Tataryn cheerfully called out instructions.

Afterward, you'd sent them back to their barracks, privileges restricted. Tomorrow you would deal with them individually.

Once they were done, you headed back inside. The sun was setting, and you'd have to meet with Shoal and Jesse. Next week's classes would be shorter than this week's. And both Ziv and Genji should be back from their rotations soon. Then you could finally have the tea party.

You swung by the cellblock, knowing the guards wouldn't let you see Lao alone. That was fine. She still wasn't taking your visits. You'd stand outside and say a few words to her, and sometimes she would look up and tell you to "go away." Sometimes there would be no response. Tonight it was the latter.

Shrugging, you left, intent on heading back to your room for a shower. But then you spotted Maeda Vargas tailing you in the cafeteria. He was trying to be sneaky, and to be fair, he was better at it than Ziv, but he had no reason to be on this side of the complex at this hour.

...Of course. You were probably better off talking to him alone. He liked Tataryn, but you'd been watching him all day, and Tataryn's assessment had not been wrong. You were the agent he wanted to impress.

You ducked into the kitchen and turned on the kettle. Arms crossed, you leaned against the counter, waiting for him to arrive.

The teenager set one foot over the threshold and his eyes widened as he saw you standing there. He froze for a moment.

"Uh..."

You raised a brow.

"I uh...wanted to talk to you, ma'am," he said, fidgeting, but not backing off. He wasn't done growing. Wiry and very tan, he had thick dark curls and almond-shaped hazel eyes. He would be a heartbreaker when he was older. It wasn't just the genetics. One look and you recognized that cavalier disregard for conventional authority, it was the angle of the eyes, the set of the mouth. Some people found it compelling, but you just knew that look from your own face.

"We are going to have individual sessions tomorrow, Maeda Vargas."

"That's really a mouthful," he said nervously. "You can call me Távio. My full name is-"

"-Octávio Felipe Maeda Vargas," you said, because you knew that they would not stay labeled forever and how the hell were you supposed to grade them if you didn't know them on sight? "I'm your instructor. You're Maeda Vargas, unless my understanding of Portuguese surnames is wrong."

"No, no you're right," he said. "I..."

You gestured to the table and went to the pantry to grab yourself a sachet of chamomile tea. Yes, you really needed to stop filching Jesse's teas. You'd buy him more later. You filled your mug and sat down, not offering Maeda Vargas any. Inhaling the steam, you watched him squirm in his seat. Now that you were no longer in the hot seat, you wondered if this was how
Captain Patel had viewed you, a talented kid with more luck and grit than sense.

Probably.

"I'm sorry we fucked up," he said. "I...It was mostly my idea. I got into the armory. I convinced Jeong and Forrester that we were going to show everyone what we could do. I got carried away."

You nodded, but didn't speak, watching him shrink with each admission.

"Lowell...had qualms. But I told them that we needed to show initiative and they should stop being such a wimp. They were probably the only one who openly protested our tactics as a bad idea." Hmm. You hadn't expected that.

"Are you falling on your sword?" You asked, tone flat.

"No! Maybe? I don't know. I just wanted to make sure you knew the truth. Forrester is overly responsible. And so is Jeong. I don't want them trying to take the blame for something they didn't do."

"What about Chey?" You asked, casually.

Maeda Vargas' eyes darkened. "He's just a bastard."

You took a sip of tea. "So you broke into the armory alone?"

There was a long silence as he stared at the table.

"I gained unauthorized access to the armory. It was my idea."

He didn't lie to you, but he didn't give anyone up. You smiled inwardly. "So are you willing to be expelled in place of your peers?"

He looked up, alarmed. "I-I don't want to be. But I am the most culpable."

You nodded. "I see. Is there anything else you wish to say?"

"I'm sorry I let you down, ma'am." He swallowed thickly, Adam's apple bobbing. "It was a stupid risk, and I didn't realize it till Lowell almost blew themself up."

"It was," you agreed.

"I'm sorry." His voice cracked.

You watched him. The slump of his shoulders, the shakiness of his breathing, the way he couldn't quite meet your eyes. Maeda Vargas was a decent actor, but too proud to pretend to be ashamed when he wasn't. So yeah, you believed that he was sorry. You still let him hang there in silence.

"But that doesn't fix anything, does it?" He concluded.

"It's the correct sentiment and a good start. But it's more important to own your mistakes and learn from them. And you can't convince me of that through words alone."

You finished your tea. "Go to bed. We will talk in the morning."

"Ma'am," he said, standing up and saluting.
"Why the tension?" Gabriel asked, rubbing your shoulders. You lay facedown on his bed, already melting under his touch. "Your trainees already out of control?"

"It's already been a week. We expected this much sooner," Jack said with a laugh.

"Quit pretending like you don't know all about it," you griped. "This was a bad idea and I'd rather be out in the field being shot at."

"Yeah, it is kind of soothing, isn't it?" Jack said, leaning over to kiss your cheek. "Compared to UN budget meetings, paperwork, teaching..."

"You're not helping, Jack." Gabriel's strong fingers kneaded your back and you groaned as he began to work your too tense muscles. "Are they unrepentant?"

"Worse, they're a bunch of kicked puppies. Chey excluded." You shook your head. Tataryn might have better luck with the other man. Chey didn't precisely disrespect you, but there was no connection there. He knew you were skilled, but you were younger than him and you wondered if that played into his apathy. "Maeda Vargas followed me into the kitchen to apologize. I suspect to clear his conscience more than anything. I didn't absolve him. Just listened and told him to go to bed."

"Oh, harsh," Jack laughed. He sat on the opposite side of Gabriel, gently rubbing your thighs. They weren't sore, but you weren't going to tell Jack to stop.

"It was. He poured out his heart and everything." You shook your head. "The kid wants my approval and I certainly don't approve of what he did, but I'm pleased to see that he can at least offer a decent apology. He knows he fucked up."

"A little fear is good for them," Gabriel said. "Let them think about what they've done. You can be terrifying." He nuzzled your neck. "But your strong point isn't screaming at people. You're better off wielding silence like a weapon."

"You're very good at harsh truths too. Said bluntly and without any mercy," Jack added.

"But you're just too cute when you're angry, corazon. A hissing spitting kitten." Gabriel continued massaging your back, the tension slowly draining away.

"Really, Gabriel?" You looked at him over your shoulder and scowled.

"Yeah, you're fucking adorable when you're bloodthirsty," he said, digging his thumbs into your low back and you dropped flat again, groaning under his touch. "But I might be biased."

You recalled how he looked at you at the day spa and concluded that yes, Gabriel was biased, and you probably weren't that cute when you were angry. He was just weird.

"From what I can tell, the recruits really like Tataryn and you've put the fear into them."
Jack moved down to your calves. "Your disappointment is as cutting as any anger you might demonstrate. But I think you've learned that from Aishani and Ana," he continued. "It's a good technique."

"...I guess," you said.

"My advice is to tailor the approach to each one. Maeda Vargas responds to you? Then you should be one of the instructors sitting in on his session."

"Yeah, I have a plan," you said. "Going to pair them up with people they don't normally work with, preferably someone with opposing viewpoints. Assign them two things. The first is an individual essay: they have to write a report telling me where they went wrong, the possible ramifications, and how they should have done it. Then they work together to analyze the op and to compensate for where they both screwed up."

"That's...more complex than I was expecting," Jack said.

"Shoal and Tataryn's idea," you said. "Need to build better cohesion anyway."

You didn't specify that your input was to make the recruits angle the re-plan as if they were still going to conduct a surprise live fire exercise against the omnis. You wanted to see how creative they would be about not getting caught. Inevitably, some would choose just not to do that. That was fine. You would grade them on how convincing and well-thought out their methods were. That would satisfy Lacroix's curiosity and give you a better glimpse into their thought processes.

After all, if they were going to break the rules, they should do it right.

---

Shoal, Jesse, Tataryn, and you split them up based on whom they were most likely to connect with: the meetings were two instructors, one student. Forrester was partial to Shoal and Tataryn. Lowell seemed to like Jesse and you best. Jeong and Maeda Vargas favored Tataryn and you. Chey seemed to respect Tataryn the most, and Jesse sat in on his session.

Through the numerous meetings, the truth slowly trickled out. Chey, Jeong, Forrester, and Maeda Vargas had waited for some idiot to leave the armory door ajar, walked in liked they belonged, and walked back out with the goods. You'd already confirmed this from Athena's review of the security footage, but it was good that all involved were admitting their culpability.

Chey told Tataryn he was just curious if they could pull it off. You didn't like that attitude, and neither did Tataryn, because he was old enough to know better.

Forrester blamed herself, like she was already their CO. You rolled your eyes. Her sentiment was genuine, but she definitely wasn't Blackwatch material.

Jeong said she handled the explosives, therefore she was the most at fault, because Lowell never should have been near them. She spent most of the meeting staring at her boots and apologizing profusely. You weren't sure if she had the temperament for Blackwatch, but she was at least smart enough to know where she went wrong and you suspected she wouldn't be making
this mistake again.

Lowell apologized for going along with it, never actually coming out and saying that they had opposed the strategy or tried to talk their peers out of it. But then, they hadn't gone beyond that. You found their judgment to be sound, but their actions to be lacking. Still, Lowell didn't make excuses and you respected that much.

The spare instructor offices had just enough room for a large desk, and a couple of chairs. You and Tataryn sat on one side, Maeda Vargas on the other. He looked rough, eyes bloodshot, hair lank. Obviously he hadn't slept well last night. You'd made him wait till last.

"For someone so clever, you're an idiot," you told him. You'd been on the receiving end of that statement so many times, and yet, it was amazing that it fit another person so well. Hmm. You didn't need to think too hard about that realization.

Maeda Vargas looked torn, like he was happy that you acknowledged his intelligence, but also could tell, by the tone of your voice, that you were still displeased with him.

"I have to agree with her. You think circles around some of the others, but you end up disorienting yourself."

"Our practice omnics do have escape routes, but they are allies and self-aware. You were just going to blow them up...?"

"...I didn't realize. I thought they were just bots." He tucked his chin against his chest.

"And you didn't think to check?" You tapped your gloved fingers against the desk. "That's unforgivably sloppy."

"I-I...yes, it was." He did not raise his head.

"We can't afford those kind of mistakes in the field."

He nodded forlornly.

"What did you think was going to happen once you "won" the game?"

"We...well, I thought we'd be the class that broke the mold. We're clever and we won, and while we might get in trouble, we'd still have been impressive. Maybe gotten picked for good assignments right off the bat. Like maybe we'd impress Commander Wilhelm, or Captain Amari, or even you...ma'am." Even as he explained the sentences trailed off, like the rest of the realization was hitting him.

"And what would you have done if someone got hurt, or worse?"

"...We were being careful, up to the point when you found us. Then we...panicked."

"That's how battle works," Tataryn said. "Plans often don't hold up."

"I get that. I...I am sorry." He shrugged. "I...don't know how to fix this."

"Well, the good news is nothing is actually broken. You fucked up big time, but no one is hurt, and there was minimal property damage. You have, however damaged our trust in your good sense," you said and he flinched.

"We are going to do two things. You and Lowell are going to write individual reports
explaining what you did wrong. Then you two are going to work together to fix all the mistakes you made in the exercise. If you're theoretically still going to break the rules, fine, but you both need to make an argument and a plan the entire thing better," Tataryn said, leaning back in his chair. "And you need to be prepared for the potential consequences."

"And then, we will be having a live fire exercise at the end of the week," you said. "Where you will only use authorized implements. But I'm sure you can see how this all ties together."

Maeda Vargas raised his head, eyes wide. "You mean I'm not kicked out?"

"Not yet, but there's still time," Tataryn said with a smile.

He looked at you, hesitantly. "I haven't ruined everything yet, have I?"

"No," you said. "You made a mistake, and you're lucky the consequences weren't more severe. Now you're going to show us that you have learned from it and we can trust you to make better calls in the future. The brass are watching us all more closely. Show us that our faith in you isn't misplaced."

Straightening up in his seat, Maeda Vargas nodded vigorously at you, eyes wild. "I understand, ma'am! Thank you so much! I won't let you down! Thank you!"

"Go coordinate with Lowell. They're very nervous about this upcoming exercise, I think you of all people understand how important team cohesion is, even if you disagree with a person's viewpoint," Tataryn said.

"Yes, sir! I'll consult them thoroughly! You can count on me!" Maeda Vargas saluted you both and nearly ran out of the room, completely reinvigorated by the new mission.

You glanced at Tataryn. The mood swing and abrupt change in gears left you shaking your head. "I feel old."

"I feel sorry for Lowell," Tataryn said, but he was smiling.

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**Hey Lucky!**

**Super excited about this weekend! I was just checking to see what you were wearing, because I don't want to be the only person wearing a dress. I mean, I guess if Hanzo or Genji decide to wear dresses, I won't be the odd one out, so maybe while you're at it, you can tip me off to what they're wearing too? (Dress? Suit? Pajamas?) I know the restaurant is cocktail level, but I'm a disgustingly rich entrepreneur and the head of a secret society. What's the point in all that power if I can't dress how I like? (But seriously, I don't want to clash with the group. I'd really appreciate a heads up!)**

**Thanks,**

**Feng**

**P.S. I haven't forgotten about the dinosaur! We're still mapping genome composites!**

**P.P.S. The Bayan brothers are fucking adorable, Lucky. Like, they're such sweet cinnamon rolls, I**
just want to punch Nguyen in her stupid face for them! I totally owe you.

P.P.P.S. Tell Jack I said "hi!" Like in a cool mature way, not a creepy fangirl way.

Well, fuck. You stared at the message on your screen. You'd forgotten all about that. You were supposed to go out with Shoal, Jesse, and Tataryn this weekend as a celebration for the end of your teaching sentence. Was this the dilemma of a social life? You wracked your brain, trying to come up with the last time something like this had happened. Usually it was missions that interrupted your social gatherings.

You had agreed to Feng's invitation first, and to be fair, you were going to Shanghai. You'd just have to bring them something back. Sighing you sent them messages of your regret and went across the hall to Genji's room.

You knocked, and he opened the door, clad in sweats.

"Hey, what are you and Hanzo wearing?"

"...That is a very odd question, Lucky." Genji looked down. "Obviously, I am wearing exercise gear. I'm a little concerned as to why you have a sudden interest in my brother's clothes-"

"I meant to the thing in Shanghai this weekend."

Genji laughed. "Oh, good. I was afraid you were trying out some weird new pickup line."

"...Fuck you." You sighed. "Feng wants to know if anyone is wearing a dress."

"I probably will not," Genji said. "I can ask Hanzo to, but it is unlikely. His shoulders are rather broad. Maybe he will try a skirt but-"

"Look, what are you guys wearing? I need to know if I can get away with the Assassin Butler outfit or what."

"You and Hanzo might match if you go with the blue one."

Eww. No Assassin Butler then. And if this was a fancy restaurant, you might be mistaken for the help. Again.

"So he's going to wear a suit?"

"Probably," Genji shrugged.

"You?"

"I don't know." He shrugged again. "If I wear this, he'll have a meltdown. What do you think?"

"Oh definitely. But Feng's so excited about dressing up..." You shrugged. "Your call."

Genji sighed. "You know how this is going to look, yes?"

"I can pretend to be Feng's date, if you're worried," you said.

"...We both know Feng's going to be drooling over Hanzo."
"I'll be Feng's really disgruntled date," you said with a shrug.

"It's not going to be fun."

"You're the one who volunteered to go," you said. "And I don't know if you've noticed, but Feng is insanely excited about this."

Genji shook his head. "Lucky, I haven't gone to any of these trendy hotspots since..."

Since before.

"Oh. I see." You leaned against the door. "I can make an excuse for you then."

"Unnecessary. I'm just not looking forward to going out there...like this." He didn't look at you.

"I know there's a way to rock that. Gabriel and Amélie are both more accomplished...fashionistas than me. You want their input?"

"I know how to dress, Lucky," he said, a little exasperated. "I just choose to avoid the general public. I scare them."

"Me and Feng will beat up anyone who looks at you funny."

Genji just shrugged. "Thanks. Oh where would I be without your expert defense?"

You rolled your eyes. "You're such a shit."

"Wear a dress, Lucky. I'm sure you'll look great," he said and shut the door in your face.

You stared at it for a moment, fuming. "You're damn right I will!"

"Chanceux, you really should petition for...larger quarters. I know Jack could make it happen."

You shrugged. "I'm fine. I kind of like my neighbors and I don't need that much space." Yes, you liked Jesse, Genji, and Vo, even if they were all unnecessarily difficult.

Amélie sat on your bed looking skeptically at your desk and chair. Reinhardt's bear took up an entire corner and your plants sat on your dresser. She narrowed her eyes as she noticed the one that was missing.

"The orchid is in Jack's bathroom, better humidity," you said quickly.

Her frown faded. "Jack takes care of it?"

"Err...he does a better job than me."

Amélie cocked her head to the side. "I would not have expected it."

"He's got surprising depths."
She just laughed. "So you are going to a fancy night spot and the dress code is on par with a cocktail party. You know Hanzo is wearing a suit, and Genji is being difficult. Ms. Zhai wishes to wear a dress as well?"

"...Yeah. I was going to wear Assassin Butler, but-"

"No. You should wear a dress, so Ms. Zhai does not feel self-conscious," Amélie said, and you understood that statement actually meant, "No. You should wear a dress because I spent all that money, so you could look like a civilized human being."

"Fair enough." You got the message, loud and clear.

"I think the midnight blue one would work. Hair loose. Smoky makeup. You have the matching shoes, right?"

"...I wasn't sure which stockings would match. I have gloves."

"Don't bother. You said Genji is self conscious about his cybernetics. How is it going to make him feel if you can cover your scars and he cannot? If he is going to be brave and expose himself, the least you can do is be supportive."

You blinked slowly. Motherfucker. That hadn't even occurred to you, because you were kind of dumb. It wasn't fair of you to expect Genji to go out there and deal with people's stares alone. Sure, you and Feng could beat them up, but... Some battles could be won before there was ever a real confrontation.

"Yeah, you're right," you said. "I...I can do that," you said with more confidence than you felt.

"And honestly, Chanceux, your scars are nothing to be ashamed of," Amélie said, a little exasperated. "You are a woman of character and grit. Anyone who cannot see that is not worth your time. Anyone who is squeamish about the stories written in your skin, is too weak to waste your thoughts on. They have no power over you. And you should give their opinions the regard it deserves: none."

"It's not like that," you said. "I'm just more comfortable not drawing attention to myself."

Amélie's skeptical look made you wince. Because she wasn't entirely wrong. You were self conscious of some parts of your body, especially standing next to her.

"I understand that sometimes you must be subtle and avoid attention, but when you go out with the On Sing Dragon Head and the scions of the Shimada clan, you are not trying to blend in. You will stand out. You should stand out. You should look beautiful and dangerous. And you will."

"I don't think Genji is advertising his status-"

"Not the point, Chanceux!" Amélie threw her hands in the air. "You are going out with Hanzo Shimada, Zhai Feng, and a mysterious cyborg. You are going to attract attention. So you will look your best. Obviously, you don't need expensive clothes to validate your worth, but you will feel better if your garments are flattering."

You sighed. "You are not wrong."

Amélie wrinkled her nose at you. "Of course I am not!"
"...I mean, you're right. I just...you know, it takes me awhile to process things." You shook your head. "OK, I'll wear the dress. I'll leave my gloves and stockings off. I'll strap on my back sheathe for my tanto-"

"Thigh holster," she said. "Back holster for your gun. Everyone will think the blade is for show. It is sexy and given your companions and the venue, no one will try to take it from you."

You nodded slowly, because that was good advice.

"And I will see if Genji needs any recommendations. I am sure he will do fine, but it would be striking if you could coordinate complementary looks."

You almost told her not to, because Genji would take offense. But then, Amélie could finesse just about anyone. And she even if she could not convince Genji to bend to her sartorial whims, she would not give offense. So you bit your tongue and nodded.

"Thank you," you said.

"I am very excited. This will be your warm-up for our Lyon date." Amélie clapped her hands together.

"...Wait, what?"

"I know Gérard mentioned it to you, Chanceux." Her voice was soft and suddenly you had visions of alarm klaxons.

She was talking about the upcoming Kwento mission. You'd forgotten about that. Oh. "Yeah..." you said weakly. "I remember. It just slipped my mind..."

Amélie huffed. "I realize I am no jet-setting crime lord heir, but honestly Chanceux, that stings!"

Shitshitshitshitshit. "I didn't forget! But I can only deal with one big social thing at a time. I'm just not getting enough sleep, Amélie. I've been coaching new recruits for over a week and I'm getting up at 3AM every morning. And I'm still trying to keep them from blowing themselves up! I'm just...really kind of dumb right now."

"Gérard did say they were...spirited." Amélie examined on flawless violet nail.

"And I have to standup Shoal, Tataryn, and Jesse, because...I might have accidentally double-booked for this weekend."

Amélie arched a brow. "Chanceux!"

"I know! I fucked up!"

"You're becoming such a social butterfly, so in demand," she sighed, hands clasped in her lap, a soft smile on her face. "You've come so far, you're making me proud." She beamed at you.

You blinked. You would never truly understand this woman. But you were so very glad that she was on your side.

Chapter End Notes
Keeping stupid hours and trying to be productive. Writing a smut scene that won't end and damnit it's making me angry because smut scenes take me 3x as long to write.

Work is work. New fiscal year, so who knows what happens next?

Realized that maybe I need to figure out what I want in life, but also I should fix my personal habits first. Like not caring that all my college friends are more "successful" than me. Like forgiving my sister for being...herself. Like getting out there, grabbing the world by the throat, and squeezing. Things like that. But fuck, it's hard. I'm petty by nature.
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

You can't separate work from your love life or your social life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You stared at the document on your screen. O-K. Lowell and Maeda Vargas had gone...further than necessary. They had written their essays and turned them in early, also submitting battlefield diagrams, formal apologies, and a video of them reading said apologies.

Their individual essays covered different topics. Lowell addressed their lack of fortitude in the face of peer pressure and also the stupidity of handling proximity mines when one did not have the training. Maeda Vargas seemed to have a good grasp of where he went wrong, covering the things you had chewed him out for and then, it looked like he had consulted Lowell to talk about unit cohesion, communication skills, and not being an intransigent dickhead.

You rubbed your forehead.

"What's wrong? Did Vo destroy something expensive again?" Gabriel asked, glancing over at you.

"Here, take a look at this." You forwarded him the entire submission.

Gabriel played the videos first, squinting at the screen. "...Huh."

"I just asked for two essays," you said. "I got those...and more."

"...You need to wear them down more. If they have this much energy, you aren't working them hard enough. You have Chang's contact info in the directory, ask her for recommendations."

"...Yeah. Good idea," you said, still in a daze. You read their collaborated solution. They had put together two plans. One was how to keep the class in line. It required a bit of social engineering, but since Maeda Vargas had been the ringleader, you figured he could convince his peers of either argument. Interestingly, enough, their second plan involved using live nonlethal munitions to stun and capture the training omnis. It was a decent plan. You could spot a few holes, but it was a hell of a lot better than what they had tried to pull.

Maybe you wouldn't have to call Chang after all. That would be a hell of an awkward conversation. "Hi, how are you? Yes, I wanted advice on tormenting overeager youth through physical activity? Yes, I have seen the light, and find great joy in the suffering of others. Please, teach me your ways."

Hmm. Yeah, you weren't going to call Chang. Not unless they really fucked up.
Tataryn brought cracklings to the live fire exercise. It was rubber bullets and laser grenades, but still, someone could get hurt and probably would. Jesse had large bags of popcorn. Shoal procured a large bag of ketchup-flavored chips, which really made you wonder about her. Your offering was spicy garlic shrimp chips, and the four of you sat on the sidelines, checking the view screens, snacking, and getting updates from Athena.

"So how did you like handling all those porous young minds?" Tataryn laughed, because he already knew the answer.

"I am never doing this again." You shook your head. "It was exhausting and I can't even look after all my plants, let alone people."

"What's this I hear about you bailing on us tomorrow?" Shoal demanded.

"...I had a prior commitment I forgot about."

"She's going to Shanghai with Genji and Hanzo. Apparently, Zhai Feng wants to show them around town," Jesse said, a little too cheerfully to be genuine.

You raised a brow, unsure where that pettiness came from.

"Huh. Wait...the fucking Triad head? That crazy blood-drinking girl? The one you didn't think was going to last the year?" Shoal stared at you incredulously.

"...Things have changed," you said, resting your face in your hand. "We are now actively rooting for Feng."

"We...as in you and Blackwatch? Overwatch as a whole?"

"Yes," you said.

Shoal thought about that for a moment. "Is this work or fun?" Shoal demanded, outrage coloring her cheeks.

"...Both? I don't know." You shrugged. "I have to dress up and wear heels, and Genji is already acting squirrelly about the whole thing. And I'm sure you've seen how "fun" Hanzo is."

"I know the kind of fun I'd like to have with him," Shoal muttered, and you couldn't tell if that was sexual or not. "So why are you going? Wait, is this some kind of top secret mission?"

She leaned back in her seat.

"I'll call it a diplomatic endeavor, and leave it at that," you said.

"...That is a bullshit answer," Shoal said. "But I will accept it. If only because I don't want to buy you any drinks, you jerk."

Tataryn just laughed and ate more chips. "I am sure we can find ways to entertain ourselves without Lucky," he said, winking at Shoal and she grinned back at him. Then looked at you quickly to see if you were going to react. Later she would ask if you and Tataryn were a thing, if only to make sure she wasn't stepping on your toes.

You waved your hand. "Go for it. I'll bring you back some souvenirs or something." You shook your head. "Unless it goes like my last Shanghai trip. Then I'll just be annoyed."
"What happened?" Shoal asked.

"She got shot and two other agents were ambushed," Jesse said, now looking slightly concerned. "Are you sure this is a good idea, sugarpie?"

"No, but not for those reasons. Feng is more trustworthy than I expected," you said. "But we're going to be in public and both she and Hanzo are big targets."

"Yes, you can't go anywhere nice," Shoal said. "Corporate buildings, patisseries, day spas, trade conventions..."

"Shut up." You threw a shrimp chip at her and she caught it in her mouth, grinning. Jesse's frown deepened. "You are going armed."

"Yeah, this isn't going down like the goddamn day spa," you scowled. "...What is that idiot doing?" You stared at the screen.

"Oh, Maeda Vargas. He's...climbing the tank. Fast little bugger," Shoal said, leaning forward.

The four of you watched as he lifted the hatch, tossed in a laser "grenade" and neatly ran across the field right smack into a force of training omnis. One tapped him and he dropped dramatically.

"Avenge me, Lowell!" He shouted, one hand over his heart as he sprawled out in the grass.

And then a second party, including Lowell and Jeong blindsided the omnis from the opposite direction. You smiled wryly. So he hadn't just been running haphazardly through the field. The squad took down the omnis, Maeda Vargas cheering from the ground.

"That boy is having too much fun," Tataryn said.

"Yeah...I hated basic," you said.

"We are much more engaging than basic ever was," Shoal said. "So anyway, what I'm hearing is that you're ditching us, the ones who actually know how to party, for junior crimelords at some stuffy shindig in Shanghai? You're ditching us? Your fellow instructors?"

"I said I'll bring you something," you said, throwing your hands up in the air. "I'm sorry!"

"Can't believe she's bailing on us, McCree. Now we have to have a super epic party without her."

"We could just have an orgy," Tataryn said with a straight face.

"...You're going to miss the orgy, Lucky. Wow. What a loser," Shoal giggled.

"Yeah. Well, my reputation has more sex than humanly possible so-"

Jesse snorted but didn't comment.

Tataryn nudged him with his elbow. "You think that's true?"

"Look, no single human being is going to get laid as much as Lucky's reputation. If rumors
are to be believed, she's banged pretty much everyone in the upper hierarchy, most of Blackwatch, Gérard and Amélie Lacroix, some of the medical staff, and everyone here. Like even if you were in a committed relationship with one very active person, you still wouldn't be able to keep up with the rumors," Shoal said, laughing at your face.

Jesse and Tataryn started laughing, for admittedly different reasons.

You just ate a whole handful of shrimp chips and turned your attention back to the viewscreens. Because you did not need to hear this bullshit.

Your trainees killed it and managed to follow the rules. Captain Amari would not be mounting your head on a pike or making you stick out the remainder of the training period. Hooray!

You hung around to congratulate them, noting that Lowell and Maeda Vargas were getting along very well now, an odd combination to be sure, but hey, as long as they kept the peace and didn't break into the armory or blow themselves up.

"So wait, this is your last week teaching us? We have two weeks of training left!" Maeda Vargas crossed his arms.

You pursed your lips, noting that Jeong and Lowell had gravitated to your discussion. "The black op session was only supposed to last a week."

"So if we screw up again..." Maeda Vargas grinned, his smile a little too sharp for your tastes.

"I will personally take you out back with a shovel," you said, your cadence eerily like Captain Patel's. The trio flinched. Hell, you would have too, except that would have ruined the scariness you were trying to convey.

"So, do you have advice for us?" Lowell asked.

"Rein this idiot in," you said, looking at Maeda Vargas. "Put yourself out there more. You do better work together."

A shy smile spread across Lowell's face and they stared down at the shoes.

"So if we want to join the black ops program...?" Maeda Vargas exhaled slowly.

"We don't usually take green recruits," you said and his face fell. You felt like you'd kicked a puppy, a bad puppy who ate your candy and peed in your shoes, but a puppy nonetheless. "But, we will be watching your first year as agents very closely. And the three of you have a lot of potential."

"What does that actually mean?" Maeda Vargas asked.

"Don't screw up and come talk to me in six months. You need some basic Overwatch agent experience before I feel comfortable bringing you in."

"What about Chey?"
You squinted at him. "Chey isn't your business. And he has field experience. You don't. But after six months as a full agent, you will. We'll see if you're ready then. This isn't a guarantee. You have to put in the work and you've got some distance to cover. It could be six months, it could be two years, it could be never. But I expect that the three of you will catch on fast."

Maeda Vargas nodded slowly. Jeong cocked her head to the side. Lowell shifted back and forth on their heels.

"Can we...message you if we have questions?" Jeong asked.

"We learn better face to face," Maeda Vargas said quickly.

"Yes, that would be better," Jeong amended, nodding vigorously.

You stared at their hopeful faces and sighed. "Yeah, message me if you want to talk. I'm not always on site though, so there might be a delay."

"Since you and Agent Tataryn aren't going to be our instructors any more, do you want to come to our celebration tonight?" Lowell asked.

You blinked.

"...We understand if you can't," Jeong added quickly.

"But you should. You should totally drink with us, ma'am. We'll buy!" Maeda Vargas said.

"I'm afraid I have a prior commitment," you said, shaking your head.

Lowell stared at the ground.

"Oh," Jeong said in a small voice.

Maeda Vargas bit his lip, looking like he wanted to say more. And you realized then that while it was true, you sounded like you were blowing them off. Well shit.

"...But I will try to make your post-graduation celebration," you said. "No promises though, because I have at least two field ops coming up and...well, that's black ops. Your personal life comes second."

"So wait, drinking with us counts as a personal and not professional?" Jeong asked.

You sighed deeply, as the three of them smirked gleefully at you. "Drinking is only professional if you are maintaining cover or engaging in diplomacy."

"That's a yes!" Maeda Vargas said, elbowing Lowell.

Jeong giggled.

And you didn't have the heart to contradict them.
You put in your hoops, the ones Jack gave you for Christmas, wondering if they would survive the night. The dress fit perfectly, and the heels were far more comfortable than you anticipated. Maybe that would change after an hour. You took Amélie's advice on smoky, dramatic eye makeup, loose hair, and red lipstick.

The dress shimmered even in the lowlights of your room, and the crystal beads should have been too much, but they were the same shade as the fabric, so they lent it sparkle without being gaudy. You stared at the gloves on your dresser. You had dark blue satin ones that would match. Hell, the black leather ones would look fine.

You glanced down at your leg. The mottled skin no longer looked painful, but it was still warped and unpleasant. You shook your head. Jack and Gabriel never looked at your wounds with pity or disgust. None of your friends did. Amélie was right, of course, and you knew that on an intellectual level.

But the extra attention...That would bother you and you knew it. However, sometimes sacrifices needed to be made, and this was a small one.

You strapped your tanto to your right thigh and looked at yourself in the mirror. This wasn't like the suit. Professionalism had gone out the window along with subtlety. You looked pretty and dangerous, pure femme fatale. Your scars only added to that.

All right then. It was almost time to go. Feng had sent a private shuttle to pick you up, and that seemed a little extreme for a night out, but then you pictured sitting on an Orca, trying to keep your dress nice. Nope.

You pulled on the knee-length black dress coat, Amélie had purchased for you, and realized that you still had to walk to the shuttle bay. Great. Taking a deep breath, you looked into the mirror, staring yourself in the eye. "I do stupid things for friendship," you said. "But so do my friends."

Nodding to yourself, you grabbed your matching clutch, went across the hall, and knocked on Genji's door.

There was a shuffle and the door opened. Genji stood there in a three piece suit, red tie, pocket square, and scarf, black waistcoat and jacket. There were holes for his tubing, and the metal plate of his jaw was still in place, red lights matching the his accent pieces. His hair was spiked as usual, and he wore a long black coat. You could see the wakizashi on his belt. He must have the katana in a spine sheath - it wouldn't show as obviously under the coat.

He looked at you with uncertain eyes, the scars of his face very prominent.

You cocked your head to the side. "Very nice," you said.

Genji gave you a once over, his eyes lingering on your left leg and then your bare hands. There was a moment of silence and he looked at your face solemnly.

"Do I have lipstick on my teeth or something?" You gave a wide, panicked smile.

He shook his head.

"Do I look bad?" You wondered aloud. "Because Amélie and Captain Amari swear this color and cut are flattering."

Genji gave you a small smile, and shook his head. "You still match Hanzo," he huffed,
"Well, shit," you said, crossing your arms. "Amélie made me wear this."

"You look good," he said.

"You do too," you said. "I'm still feeling awkward as fuck, but at least I don't look it, right?"

Genji nodded slowly. "And I?" He spread his arms, letting you inspect the cut of his suit. It was all very flattering. But it wasn't the suit he was worried about, now was it?

"Dude, you look like a fucking anime boss," you said. "You're effortlessly channeling the stylish badass thing. And maybe you do look a wee bit like a mafia don." You held your thumb and forefinger about half an inch apart. "Just a little, and in the best way possible."

He exhaled. "Not entirely what I was going for, but thank you." He stepped out of his room, shutting the door behind him. "You realize we still have to walk to the docking bays, yes? Dressed like this? The rumors are going to get worse."

"Pfft, I don't even care any more," you said. "Besides, the current contender is Tataryn. I'm really good with switching out soon."

Genji chuckled. "You match Hanzo."

"Oh. Yeah, well, whatever," you said cleverly. Shrugging, you and Genji headed out, both of you standing a little straighter than before.

There hadn't been a lot of people hanging around the halls, but there had been enough, and you wondered what the rumor mill would look like next week.

Hanzo was already in the waiting area, tapping his foot impatiently. And you were suddenly glad you had not worn the Assassin Butler suit, because Genji was right, you would have matched. The dress might have coordinated with his outfit, but you didn't match, thankfully.

Hanzo looked good too. Not that you needed to tell him that. Clean-shaven, with his hair in a ponytail, he was already pretty. He wore a black pinstriped waistcoat with blue trim and a blue tie and pinstriped pants. Underneath the vest, he had on a white collared shirt, blue kanji on the left sleeve; the right sleeve was covered in black leather, a reinforced pauldron on his shoulder, and his bow was in a leather bag slung over his shoulder.

"Genji, we don't match. You had me panicked for nothing."

"You coordinate," Genji said.

If Hanzo was surprised by your appearance, he didn't show it.

"There you are."

You turned around to see Jack and Gabriel entering the room, still in their work clothes. Jack's eyes widened as he took in your form, his gaze lingering on your exposed skin. A small smile crept across his face.
"You look good, sweetheart," he murmured, ignoring the Shimadas.

You glanced at Gabriel, who was watching you hungrily, his nostrils flared, and eyes dark. Suddenly, you wanted to stay in tonight.

"Doesn't she look good, Gabe? You're awfully quiet..." Jack chuckled.

"Shut up, Jack." Gabriel crossed the distance and leaned over to kiss you, his hands warm on your shoulders.

"So do you like it or not?"

"Don't know yet. Let me see you without the jacket." Gabriel just smirked at your breathless glare.

You pulled the jacket off and let it hang over your arm. The dress caught the light and you obligingly spun around in place so they could inspect it.

Gabriel tilted his head back. "Are you sure you have to go to Shanghai tonight, *hermosa*?"

"Yes, I already agreed to go, too late to back out now," you said regretfully.

Jack came up behind you, leaning over to kiss your neck. "Wish we could come."

"You *are* both invited," you said.

"...Maybe next time," Gabriel said, thoughtfully. "When will you be back?"

"Tomorrow, probably," you said.

"Have fun," Jack chuckled, and nipped your ear before running his fingers along one earring and down the side of your neck. "I'm glad you like them." He lightly tugged the earring for emphasis.

"We'll just be here thinking about all the fun you'll be having and how we're going to top that," Gabriel purred in your ear.

You smiled. "OK."

"Don't get arrested," Gabriel said as he turned to look at the Shimadas. Hanzo had averted his eyes and Genji was staring at the wall, an exasperated look on his face. Like your PDA bothered him. Which actually, now that you thought about it, it might.

"Yes, we'll try to keep her out of trouble, sir," Genji said dryly.

"Good luck with that," Jack said. "We don't expect miracles."

"Hey!"

"Behave," Gabriel said, voice gravelly as he leaned over for another kiss, his mouth was insistent against yours and you were not actually the one who needed the reminder on how to behave. Eventually, you had to break away, unwilling to get hot and heavy in front of Hanzo.

The bay door opened and to your surprise, Feng stepped out in a knee-length jade green wrap dress, her arms bare, and her hair up in a high ponytail.
"...You guys look fabulous!" She squealed, and to her credit, did not openly drool at Hanzo. "Hi Jack! Hi Gabriel! Can I call you Gabriel? I've heard so much about you and it's all pretty damn adorable! Oh, should I not have said that in front of your subordinates? Well, sorry about that. I'll uh, reign it in, and...huh." She paused. "Well, no matter. You do you."

Gabriel's brows knitted together. "What?"

"We should go now," Genji said, nudging Feng. Hanzo was already boarding the shuttle.

"Oh? We should? OK! Hi Jack! Bye Jack! Nice seeing you! Don't worry, I'll have them home tomorrow. I'll make sure Lucky has fun, and I have plenty of bail money! You can count on me!" Feng looped one arm around yours, and giggled.

You waved, and suddenly saw what had Feng so amused. Turning your head you covered your mouth. The two of you hurried onto the shuttle.

"You look fine," she said in your ear. "You can touch up your makeup on the ride over, since he is wearing most of your lipstick."

"I've got snacks, drinks, candy, card games, and...oh. That's not mine!" Feng said and hurriedly shoved something under the seat cushions.

The four of you were spread out on three plush red couches, seatbelts discretely affixed between the cushions. There was a bar, a bolted down table, and a very large view screen. You sat beside Feng, watching Hanzo lounge and Genji try to look relaxed. They both just looked stiff.

"Don't play cards with these two. They cheat," Hanzo said, maintaining a polite, if disinterested demeanor.

Feng's eyes brightened. "Really?" She gave Genji a bright smile. "You want to hit up the casinos in Macau?"

"...Then we really will get arrested," you laughed.

"Only if we get caught," Genji said, examining his gloved hands.

"Can I get you some sake? I have dry and sparkling variants. Maybe some passion fruit, guava, or pineapple mochi to go with it?"

"I like mochi," Genji said. "Is this Hawaiian style?"

"Yup, it has a butter mochi base, so there's plenty of coconut milk in it, but I guess the tropical fruit gave it away. Had a client bring some in and now I'm hooked. Ordered more. A lot more." Feng got up and went behind the bar, grabbing bottles, glasses, and boxes as she went.

You wondered if Zheng was listening in. No, you knew she was, you just wondered if you were supposed to pretend otherwise.

"Can I just say you all look amazing? Like Genji you are the best dressed cyberpunk ninja I've ever seen. It's a great look. And Hanzo, I don't know where you got that suit, but I want one." Feng bustled around, setting boxes of mochi on the table and then the little sake cups. "Lucky, I
was expecting you to be all formal and intimidating, but instead you look super hot and gorgeous, but also like you're going to snap someone's neck between your legs and I'm totally good with that. What did you want to drink?"

"Sparkling sake, please," you said as she poured a glass for you and herself. Hanzo and Genji chose the drier, more astringent stuff and you took a bite of the pineapple mochi, enjoying the chewiness and the subtle coconut milk richness, blending with the sweet pineapple filling. "That's nice."

"I know. I want to buy that company! But they're not for sale. So I just placed a massive order and am now eating my way through it. I probably should not be allowed to shop late at night. I don't need to buy desserts in bulk." She shook her head. "I also don't need to buy office supplies, candy, and travel mugs in bulk. Hey, do any of you need pens? Because I bought a pack of like 400 gel pens and honestly they're going to dry up before I get around to using them all..."

You blinked.

"That was too much information," Feng sighed and drained her sake. "Sorry. I just get excited and talk. And then everyone is like "...wow, Feng. You're insane." And I just shrug sheepishly, like "why are you even surprised? At what point did I claim to be the stable responsible one?"

"Have some more mochi," Genji said, nudging a box toward her.

"I could use some pens," Hanzo said, after a moment of sipping his sake. He gave himself a refill, not actually making eye contact with the rest of you.

"They are really nice pens," Feng said. "Not expensive works of art that you keep in the boardroom as pseudo-dicks to brag about, just very smooth for writing. And coloring. I like coloring." Feng paused. "Don't judge me, it's soothing, OK?"

You leaned back on the couch, and downed your sparkling sake. It was light and subtly sweet. "So, how are things?"

"Busy." Feng rolled her eyes. "Everyone simultaneously wants me to take charge and make things work efficiently, while also catering to their individual concerns and having me reassure them that yes, they are special. We are...working on a balance. But at least Fa is gone, yeah?" She frowned at the wall. "Wish he hadn't pushed it this far, you know? He wasn't a total incompetent. Really could have used his help on the boring shit. But what's done is done and you know, it's nice being able to take a bath without someone trying to kill you."

"Yes, it's good help or peaceful baths. You can't have both," Genji said.

"You are a much bigger smart ass than I was led to believe," Feng said, pointing at him. "I approve."

"You are less of a fool than I expected," Genji said. "But only just."

"Pfft, I have the rest of the night to impress you with my foolery," Feng laughed. "So what's up with you guys? Or is it all classified, if-we-told-you-we'd-have-to-murder-you stuff?"

"Yes," Genji said, sipping his sake flashing a cheeky grin.

"Well fine, I can just talk about my life," Feng shot back.
"How is Bayan adjusting?" Hanzo asked quickly, finally reaching for a piece of mochi.

"He's doing OK. Misses his friends. Still gets a little mopey about everything, and that's to be expected. But damn, he's a good guy. So smart and helpful. I think he's fitting in well. Jalair is actually really excited to join the White Rabbit legal department. I got some passive-aggressive inquiries from some of Nguyen's people. I just told them that yeah, the Bayan brothers work for me now, and really do they want to come to my house and pick a fight with my people? I know she's not going to forget this, but whatever. Nguyen's cybernetics team is shitty anyway. Too much emphasis on combat-readiness and not enough focus on versatility. Like those prostheses can't be comfortable." Feng shook her head. "Yeah, you can kill half a dozen men with your enhancements, but they're too bulky to let you tie your shoelaces. That's not good engineering. That's just...dumb."

Genji raised a brow. "I did not realize you were getting into the cybernetics business."

"We do a little bit of everything," Feng said, with a modest shrug. "I'd rather just produce them in-house for our people, for security reasons, but since we're already investing a significant amount of resources into the project, we might as well see how we can do on the market." She looked at your fingers for a moment, blinking, like she hadn't realized they were inorganic.

"You want to form a *keiretsu*?"

"We've had an equivalent for a long time," Feng shrugged. "I'd like to be doing more on the R&D side. You know, we have the supplies, the research power, and the money. Why not?"

"You were a history student?" Hanzo asked after a moment, like he was trying to reconcile the image of who Feng used to be and what she was now.

"...Yeah, totally unrelated to my current field, I know. I've been doing my MBA on the side, and some other relevant business degrees, because it makes the cousins happy. Mostly I just throw out ideas, show the company how to get to where I'm visualizing, and keep people in line. Yeah, Aunt Zheng's been giving me some hardcore science lessons, but I'm never going to be a geneticist. I will however, know what they're talking about when they give me research proposals and grant requests."

"That's impressive."

"I'm motivated. Because as long as we're successful, I get to stay in charge and keep my family at bay. If I fuck up, well...it won't be pretty."

You weren't sure if she meant the cousins or her parents, but either way, she was right. It would not be pretty.

"And I convinced Li to get on board and try to help me run White Rabbit. It isn't going so well, because he's boring, naggy, and has a stick up his ass. There's a learning curve, but he's the anal retentive type you can trust keep things running. Really. I just replaced Fa with Li, but...I can't do anything bad to Li, he'll tell Mom," she said shaking her head. "Honestly, he just needs to get laid, and he's just too shy about meeting guys, but whatever. Not my problem."

"Brothers," Genji said with a head shake.

Hanzo gave him a sharp look.

"Brothers," Feng commiserated. She looked at you. "Sorry, don't mean to leave you out of the conversation."
"Oh no, Lucky has Mihret and McCree. She understands," Genji laughed.

"McCree isn't...Whatever. And Ziv definitely isn't a brother. More a burden I have to bear, for the rest of my life," you sighed and poured yourself more sake.

"...That is the definition of "brother,"" Feng muttered and Hanzo flinched.

Genji watched Hanzo squirm, not quite reveling in it, but not diverting Feng either.

"They're not all bad," she said as she saw Hanzo staring at his shoes. "You have some insanely rocky patches, sure. Hell, I went years without talking to Li because...well, for reasons that seemed good at the time. But now aren't so important. If you get past those issues, mainly pride, maybe you can do cool things together. Like reengineer dinosaurs. Take over the family business. Eat lots of desserts. You can't just erase siblings, not if there's blood and history between you. They know too much and there's no one else in the world who remembers your childhood tribulations and your parents' quirks quite like they do."

Genji's expression softened.

Hanzo raised his eyes, hesitantly.

The brothers stared at each other, but no words were exchanged. Hanzo looked away first, but Genji's expression was contemplative, not angry.

"It's a good goal," you said after a moment.

"Yeah. And we might actually accomplish things, if my brother can get his head out of his ass." Feng laughed. "Stranger things have happened." She poured you all more sake and bit into a square of mochi, grumbling to herself.

You knew Feng could not be as oblivious as she pretended and you wondered then what her angle was.

"So, I've never been here before, but it has rave reviews," Feng began as you walked into the restaurant, colorful glass fractal sculptures hanging from the ceiling. They looked like someone had gotten a little too excited with a cake decorating tool and decked the halls with glossy multicolored frosting flowers, ribbons, and curlicues.

You were high up in a skyscraper, one with a shuttle dock and sky bridge, just off the Bund. You glared across the river, recalling your last trip here.

Genji was getting sidelong stares and not-so discrete looks, but then, so were you. You just squared your shoulders, and gave Genji a pained, but tolerant smile. He nodded. To your surprise, Feng looped her arm in yours and walked straight up the maître'd. You glanced over your shoulder, Hanzo and Genji strolled behind at a leisurely pace.

"Zhai, party of four," she said. The woman nodded, not quite making eye contact and led you to a round table off to the side of the open dining room. The color scheme was indigo and white, and there was a lot of glass, but you were high up and meant to enjoy the view. The skyline was bright and you sat down beside Feng, a little surprised that she hadn't tried to get closer to
"So Lucky, inquiring minds are dying to know," Feng grinned as the maître'd distributed menus, bowed, and quickly backed away.

"...Just you, Feng. Just you. I'm happier not knowing," Genji said surveying the open dining room. He sat on your other side, posture stiff.

"So maybe it's just me who wants to know, because Genji is a mad spoilsport, but how serious are you, Jack, and Gabriel?"

You were glad you weren't drinking anything just yet, because you would have choked.

"That's kind of personal," you muttered.

"We're friends! Friends ask personal questions! It's like, part of the job description! Do you want to talk about the weather all night? It's warm and smoggy out there with a chance for acid rain. Oh boy, that's so exciting." Feng rolled her eyes.

"We're the kind of friends who drink, watch films together, and don't talk about feelings," Genji said.

"Oh," Feng said, sounding a little disappointed. "Well, I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable. Sorry."

"Jack and Gabriel have been together for a long time. I'm just...going with it," you said, staring at your wine glass.

"You're happy right? Because as hot as they are, if they don't make you happy-" You looked over at Feng who studied your expression with great intensity. She leaned too close, inches from your face, squinting at you, like maybe she could see into your skull and pick out the truth.

"Yeah. They make me happy." You fought the urge to back up.

"I am making you uncomfortable," she said with a headshake. "Wow, I'm sorry. You're usually so professional and cool. I didn't realize feelings were your weakness."

"Feelings and cake," Genji said.

"What kind of cake?" Feng perked up.

"All cakes," Genji said with a smirk.

You nodded solemnly. "All cakes."

Feng grinned at you. "I bought this really awesome strawberry cake for tonight. It's at my condo. We can totally swing by after for cake, drinks, and Super Smash Brothers. Because I know you're awesome as Samus, Genji."

Genji blinked slowly. "...Yes." He stared at her for a moment too long.

You leaned back in your chair, a little surprised by how tame Feng had been tonight. Sure, she still spouted off most of the thoughts that went through her head, but she hadn't actually gone on tangents about how attractive Hanzo was or behaved inappropriately. It was a pleasant surprise.

The waiter cleared his throat, sweating as he stopped in front of the table.
"I am sorry for the wait. I am Xie. I would be happy to take your order. But if you're not ready, I can go stand over there." His eyes darted between Feng and Hanzo and then flinched as you and Genji turned to look at him. He was round guy, soft and baby-faced. And he smiled weakly, his chin wobbling.

"I'm ready," Feng propped open her menu. "I want to try the chicharrones de pollo sin hueso marinated in mushroom soy sauce, pomelo juice, and shàoxīng jiǔ."

"I'll have the five spice spare ribs in black bean sauce and the stuffed chayotes in garlic sauce," you said.

"I want the spare ribs as well," Genji said. "And the fried plantains with málà seasoning and dry chilies."

"I would like the bistec de palomilla with Sichuan spicy bean sauce and garlic chives." Hanzo closed his menu, bearing suddenly regal and eyes sharp. "What kind of Malbecs do you have?"

The waiter stuttered as he recited the wine list and you looked over at Genji who wore a faint smile, like Hanzo being a wine snob was old hat. Well, it didn't actually surprise you.

Feng raised a brow.

Hanzo picked one, and while you recognized the brand name, you didn't know enough about vintages to make any judgment, except that it was expensive.

"Yeah, we're going to need some baijiu too. I don't think a malbec is going to go well with my chicken."

"I know what I'm doing," Hanzo said with a huff.

"Yes, dear," Feng said, rolling her eyes.

"It will pair well with strong meaty flavors. I realize you think that you can only drink whites with white meat however-

"Please, tell me all about it, dear," she said caustically.

Hanzo glared at her. "You can order your baijiu, woman. No one's stopping you."

"You're so generous, dear," she said, smirking now.

Hanzo's expression was thunderous. His brows knitted together and for a moment, you glimpsed the man who would have run the Shimada clan with an iron fist.

The waiter quaked.

Feng yawned, patting her mouth. "I'll take a bottle of Màotái too."

The waiter looked helplessly between Hanzo and Feng.

"Why are you looking at me?" Hanzo snapped. "If she wants Màotái, she can have Màotái. I'm not her father."

"He's afraid to offend your expertise," she said with a sardonic grin. "Stop worrying, Xie. This is a culinary disagreement between Hanzo and me. He is too professional to retaliate against
bystanders. We will resolve it by ordering both. See? No problems."

The waiter nodded weakly. "Yes, ma'am."

"Hanzo, get that look off your face. You're terrorizing the staff."

Hanzo glowered at her, but forced himself to relax, pursing his lips, like he'd eaten something sour. It was no happier, but far more comical and maybe a smidgen less intimidating.

Feng just leaned forward, resting her chin on her hands and she batted her lashes at Hanzo. It was definitely more a taunt than a flirtation.

Genji snorted.

"What's going on with you and McCree?" Genji asked as the two of you watched Feng and Hanzo square off.

"Nothing," you said, with a shrug.

Genji sipped his water. "You used to spend a lot of time with him."

You shrugged. "I still do. Just busier with all the work I'm doing."

"...You know what I mean. The two of you used to always be laughing and joking together. Now I rarely see you alone with him."

"It's nothing like that. You know whom he's pining over," you said sharply.

"That's not what I meant," Genji said. He looked at Hanzo who was now back to giving Feng a murderous glare. "Things haven't been the same between you two since Lucerne."

You sat back in your chair, a little shocked that Genji had called you out, in a fancy restaurant no less. You shrugged. "OK."

"You should talk to him," Genji said, after a moment.

You studied your cloth napkin, folded like a swan, or maybe a duck. Hell, it could have been a Loch Ness monster. The fact Genji, of all people, was bringing this up meant that maybe you were more obvious than you thought.

"I'm not mad at him. I have Jesse's back, you know that. He does too."

"Things aren't right between the two of you. He knows. You know. Stop pretending like that's not the case. It's been a few months. You should talk about it while the rift is still small." Genji studied his metal arm.

"...I don't think there's anything to say."

"You made up with Reyes awhile ago. Just because you didn't get into it with McCree, doesn't mean everything is fine."

You frowned at him. "Didn't think you were so meddlesome." Or insightful.

"It's no fun when people interfere in your business, is it?" He laughed at you and you were tempted to throw your drink at him. "What's wrong? Can't handle the taste of your own medicine?"
"You're such a shit, Genji."

"You're welcome, Lucky."

The food arrived faster than you expected, a side bonus of eating out with mafia heirs. Feng got out some kind of pen-sized scanner and discretely checked each dish and drink. She then smiled brightly at all of you and nodded.

You had a water glass, a wine glass, and a small ceramic cup for the baijiu.

The ribs were falling off the bone soft, cooked in an umami-rich, savory sauce and fragrant with anise, cinnamon, pepper, fennel, and garlic. You sighed happily. The meal was served family-style, and you used the serving spoons to ladle the plantains and chayote onto your plate.

"You can use your chopsticks; you don't even need to reverse them," Feng said. "I can't catch anything from you and vice versa."

Hanzo sipped his malbec and made a point to take some of her chicken. "This goes fine with the malbec. In case you were wondering."

"It's really nice with the bai jiу," she said cheerfully.

Hanzo just took a big drink of his wine.

Genji had been drinking baijiu, and he seemed slightly less tense. "Good choice in restaurants, Feng. I've never had Cuban-Chinese and I thought you couldn't really get much of it outside New York or Havana."

"I don't know how culturally authentic it is. I think the chef just likes fusing Latin and Chinese dishes, but I'm not complaining. It's still tasty."

"These ribs are great. I should order some to go for Gabriel," you said.

"Get some for Jack too," Feng said. "How do you like the Máotái with your ribs?" She poured you a little cupful, her smile angelic.

The hair on the back of your neck stood up straight.

Suddenly Hanzo was pouring red wine into your glass. "Try the malbec; this was an excellent vintage." He stared at you expectantly.

"Genji, you got to taste this with me..." you said slowly.

"I like the baijiu," he said, not even looking up from shoveling plantains into his mouth.

Hanzo gritted his teeth. "Genji will eat anything. You have culinary skill. Your professional assessment is required."

You never though Hanzo would actually ask for your opinion. It was surreal.

"Well?" Feng giggled, because she was a troublemaker.
Glass shattered then, someone screamed, and you heard the familiar crack of a gunshot. You were halfway out of your chair when the man in the rabbit mask began to shout. Three more gun-toting men in tracksuits, wearing squirrel, raccoon, and panda masks rushed in forming a perimeter. Rabbit had a semiautomatic rifle. The rest carried mid-range pistols.

Feng tugged on your wrist and lowered her hand, palm downward. You sat.

"Nobody move! This is a robbery. Just throw your purses and credit chips into the bag and no one gets hurt!"

"Are they serious?" You tilted your head sideways. You figured there were more discrete ways to try to assassinate Feng or Hanzo.

Feng shrugged and went back to eating her chicken. "Fuck if I know." She chewed, watching them lazily.

Genji and Hanzo looked at each other and kept eating, though Genji adjusted his coat and Hanzo angled his chair outward a few degrees. The docking bay wasn't far from the restaurant. Well, if they had the right kind of transport, yeah, they could rob the restaurant on a skyscraper and not worry about elevators. You mentally mapped the route and wondered if they could get out in time.

The food on your plate still steamed with heat, and the aroma made you salivate. You took another bite of fatty rib meat. It half-melted on your tongue, the flavors well-balanced, smoky, rich, and savory, with a hint of sweet. You probably should have been paying more attention to the robbers, but these were some really delicious ribs.

Hanzo poured himself more malbec, and eyed your glass. Genji refilled his baijiu cup and you knew he had to be doing this just to annoy his brother. Not that you blamed him.

"He said not to move!" Panda snarled as he waved his gun at your table. "Hands where I can see-"

Feng's elbow shot out and suddenly Panda was on his ass, gasping for air. He dropped the gun, and Feng discretely kicked it under another table. Then she took another bite of chicken and a swig of baijiu.

"Hey, what's going on here?" Squirrel came over to help his comrade up, and Hanzo poured the rest of the malbec into Feng's empty wine glass and whirled, smashing the bottle into the side of Squirrel's temple. The robber dropped, broken glass littering the floor. Hanzo wiped his hand on the napkin and went back to eating his beef.

"I'm not drinking all that," Feng said, pointing at the wine glass and pouring herself more baijiu.

"You should at least try it," Hanzo said, looking exasperated. "Lucky, taste it and tell her it's good."

"No, she needs to try the baijiu first," Feng said. "It's not as heavy."

"Just cleanse your palate in between," Genji said, hogging all the fried plantains.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Rabbit and Raccoon sidled up to the table.

"We're eating dinner, obviously," Feng said.
"This is a robbery, bitch!" Raccoon shoved the barrel of his gun in Feng's face. And she stared at the barrel, as it blocked the route from the plate to her mouth. "You stupid rich fucks. You wouldn't survive a day in the real world! You don't even know when you're in danger-"

You smacked the barrel upward with your right hand. Feng leaned backward her chair, balancing it on the two back legs, as you smashed your left fist into Raccoon's face and down he went.

"What the-" Rabbit never finished that question.

Genji slammed the pommel of his katana into Rabbit's nose. The man dropped and blood began to seep through the mask.

"Be careful, Genji. No leakage near the table. We're trying to eat," Hanzo scowled.

"I will be more conscientious of such things in the future," Genji said with a mock bow.

Hanzo just shook his head.

Feng got up and delicately kicked the guns out of Rabbit and Raccoon's reach. Quickly, a group of waiters rushed the downed robbers while the hostess collected the guns. The dining room was oddly silent, and while you could feel the stares of the other patrons, something worse was brewing nearby.

"Now, you need to try the baijiu," Feng beamed, taking another bite of chicken.

"And the malbec," Hanzo said, sternly.

Out of excuses, and robbers to take down, you complied. You took your time, trying not to flinch as Hanzo and Feng watched you eagerly. The Máotái brand baijiu was a smooth rice liquor and you liked it. You took a bite of rice and a sip of water before trying the malbec. Silently, you prayed to St. Lacroix the Refined for inspiration.

Genji was laughing at you. You could see it.

Feng and Hanzo leaned even closer. You weren't sure if they were even in their chairs any more.

"The baijiu really complements the richness of the meat, but the malbec blends well with the spice of the sauce. They are both excellent choices," you said, palms clammy.

"Oh, you are smooth when you want to be," Feng laughed.

"For such a crude mouth, she actually has a refined palate," Hanzo said, and you rolled your eyes at him while he drained the rest of Feng's untouched malbec.

You took the rest of your food to go. Poor Xie looked like he was going to cry when he came over. Feng just asked for the check, all grace and pleasantries. But her shoulders tensed as you and Genji boxed up the food.

Quaking, with his arms tucked close to his body, Xie brought the check in a leather folio.
Hanzo reached for it.

Feng deftly batted his hand away.

Genji made grab for it, faster than you could.

Feng tried to block him, but Hanzo intercepted her hand.

You made another lunge for it.

But this was Feng's territory and Xie practically threw the folio at her and ran.

"I'm the eldest-" Hanzo said.

"Are you sure you're older than Lucky?" Genji smirked.

"That's rude and you shouldn't be speculating about her age," Feng said with a laugh, keeping the invoice just out of their reach. "No, I'm the hostess! You came all the way out here to visit so it's my treat."

"I ordered the malbec," Hanzo said.

"Yes, we know." Feng stuck her tongue out at him.

"It was more expen-"

"How would you know? You don't have the check, I do. The Máotái brand is actually more expensive."

"You're overpaying then," Hanzo sniffed.

"For the malbec, sure. But I'll do what I can to keep my guests comfortable," Feng said. "Even put up with their mediocre tastes."

Genji covered his mouth.

Hanzo blinked, and in the time frame he was too stunned to react, Feng waved down Xie, paid the bill, and crossed her arms triumphantly.

Hanzo gawped at her.

"The bill's paid. If you're sore about it, you can spring for the xiāo nóng bāo on the way home."

"Oh, I should pick some of those up too. Gabriel likes soup dumplings. Jack just scalds his mouth on them..."

Feng snorted.

The restaurant presented you with a couple more orders of ribs, fried plantains, and four bottles of Máotái. You weren't sure if that was them being generous or Feng getting them to troll Hanzo. Either way, the four of you left before the police arrived.

You boarded Feng's shuttle and on a whim, fished around the couch cushion she'd buried something under. That thing she swore wasn't hers. You found a large well-worn blue sea turtle plush and promptly adjusted the cushion, pretending like you hadn't seen it. It was really cute
though.

Feng's chosen xiǎolóngbāo vendor had a small outdoor stall open late and the order was already prepped to go. Hanzo paid, and you wondered, not for the first time, the state of his finances. But Genji didn't look worried, so you wouldn't be either.

"Did you guys want to go clubbing or see a show?" Feng asked as you got back into the transport. "There's opera, which is an acquired taste. We can see some movies. Do a VR experience. Wander the Bund like knights errant..."

"I heard you had cake," you said.

"Strawberry cake," Hanzo murmured.

"I've got ice wine, champagne, and moscato if you're feeling a dessert wine pairing," Feng said.

"Champagne," Hanzo said sharply.

"Cretin," Genji said in a high-pitched voice. "That's just what the nouveau riche would say!"

To your surprise, Hanzo laughed. You chalked it up to the bottle of malbec, he had, after all, drank most of it on his own.

Chapter End Notes

There was a mixup with the flight stuff, but I think I got it sorted. Oh boy.

Yes, I described Scion outfit Hanzo with Young Master face and hair.

Not much to report. I'm trying to reign in the petty tendencies at work and weeded for the first time this year. Ugh. I hate yard work. If only because come summer, there are all kinds of bugs in the grass and they love me. I am delicious. My cousin and I can be outside with the dogs for ten minutes and when we go inside, he's fine and I have like ten bites. Mosquitos like the shadiness, and we have chiggers and clouds of biting gnats.

Trying to get the plot back on track. All this fluff is making me soft. ( ° _ ° )
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

Slumber parties and the hint of normalcy.

Chapter Notes

I broke 500k yesterday. Yeesh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Feng's condo was deceptively normal, despite being high up and having access to a shuttle dock. It was a little cluttered, with golden hardwood floors and an expensive entertainment system. You eyed the vault on the wall, and the kinetic barriers around the windows. It was mostly western in furnishings, but you still took your shoes off at the door and put on a pair of house slippers, there were an assortment, and they all had a weird onion-octopus on them. Feng had a lot of cute things on display: stylized chubby animal teapots, Sanrio-themed coasters, sushi-shaped throw pillows. There were several gaming consoles in the entertainment center.

"Hey, turn on the view screen and the Nintendo, will you?"

You suspected it was Zheng who powered everything on. Feng set all the food down on the coffee table. There were large onion-octopus cushions on the floor and you watched Genji take off his coat, set it on the rack, and settle down on one of them. He grabbed a controller off the shelf and began flicking through the game selection.

Hanzo began unpacking some of the soup dumplings and Feng returned with plates, utensils, and a large pink and white cake, covered in whipped cream and strawberries.

Hanzo settled on the loveseat, closest to Genji and watched the screen with some interest. Genji handed him a controller. Feng sat down beside you and began picking at the dumplings. You were a little surprised that she was hungry still, but then you remembered that she had some kind of enhancements and it probably fucked with her metabolism.

"I feel bad, like you came all the way to Shanghai just to eat and hang out in my living room. You sure you don't want to go out and look for crime to fight or buildings to bungee jump off of?"

"Nah, it's been eventful already. I don't mind just staying in and gaming. We don't...normally."

"Does Athena cheat? Because I know Aunt Zheng does," Feng said.

"No, we're just really hard on controllers..." You did not look at Genji, but he was the main culprit, though Gabriel had been known to accidentally destroy them when playing Mario Kart with Jack.
"Oh, yeah, the metal prostheses. Hey, you should be fine with these. I...uh...sometimes I get rage-y and would squeeze the normal ones too hard and well, I was spending a fortune on controllers. Had some of the R&D guys improve the ergonomics, structure, overall design. Mine are pretty durable now, and universal. They can be calibrated for all gaming systems. I can't sell them yet because of IPR bullshit, but most everyone in On Sing has them and we've patented the shit out of them. We'll get them on the market eventually."

"That's...impressive," you said.

"I didn't do the work. I just emphasized that having a dozen different controllers was stupid and expensive, and couldn't we stick it to all those other companies? Spite is a great motivator." Feng poured herself some Máotái and you held out a glass.

"Are you feeling all right? You've been kind of...reserved."

"Me? Reserved? Did you not hear all my bizarre stream of consciousness rants? Or are you just that good at tuning people out?" Feng stared at you incredulously.

"There has been a distinct lack of flirtation from you," you said.

"Oh Lucky, I would, but I think Gabriel would kick my ass. It'd probably be a sexy ass-kicking, but then Jack would also be disappointed in me and that would make me sad." She giggled. "No just kidding, I know what you meant." She stared thoughtfully at her nails. "A lot of that stuff was said when I was trying to be formal, and got really fucking nervous, and just...panicked. I might have blanked out just how much I word-vomited. Not really an excuse, but for the most part I don't actually like making people uncomfortable. Also, you're all my guests and that would just be rude. Want me to cut the cake?"

"Please," you said.

"I'm less nervous now," she said. "Yes, you're all very pretty, but...I think I'm getting used to it." She winked at you as she handed you a plate of cake. "Sorry, you just don't dazzle me any more."

"Well, it was fun while it lasted." You just took the large slice of cake from her and drank your baijiu.

"So how did you know I used to play as Samus?" Genji asked.

"...Aiya, I knew you forgot," Feng sighed. "And to be honest, I'm probably weird for remembering. But one time, when my mother was doing who knows what, Dad had Li and me with him for a visit to Hanamura. We were both really young, I don't think I was in school yet. He said it was for work, and he had a cover job as a university professor..."

"And for whatever business reason, he had a meeting with Father. We saw your father around periodically," Genji said. "I...remember him leaving you two in the garden."

"And you invited us to go play Smash Brothers," Feng said. "And Li said something dickish about not wanting me to play and Hanzo ripped him a new one, verbally. Chastised him about being a good older brother and how could he be the eldest with that kind of attitude?" Feng gave a wry grin. "It was a turning point for Li. Sure, he got the lectures from our parents, but having an older, cooler boy call him out like that? He became a better brother. It didn't stick his entire life, but we were pretty close till he went off to college. But that's not a very interesting or original tale."
Hanzo blinked.

"So yeah, I think fondly of you both, even if we were kids and we never really knew each other." Feng shrugged. "No, I'm not nursing a lifelong crush. I just remember thinking, "that Hanzo is a good brother. And that Genji is a cool guy." I didn't make the Yakuza connection till I joined On Sing." Feng laughed and served everyone cake. "And by then...well, things had changed."

"I don't remember any of this," Hanzo said slowly.

"I didn't expect you to," Feng said with a shrug. "It just stuck with me, that time when you were a good, dutiful big brother and you gave my brother shit for not being one; just like I remember Genji being fun and silly. We've all changed a little," she said, picking up her fork.

You cut your cake with your fork, admiring the alternating layers of whipped cream, sponge cake, and strawberries. Asian sponge cakes skewed on the fluffier side and it felt like air on your tongue.

"This is good cake," Hanzo said.

"It is," you agreed.

Genji just held out his plate for another slice.

None of you could beat Genji at Super Smash Brothers, now that his controller could withstand his grip. Hanzo just buckled down and tried harder, button mashing at an amazing speed. Feng played as Kirby, seeming to enjoying eating everyone more than actually trying to win. You cycled through the characters, regularly coming in at last place.

That was OK. The controllers held up, even when Hanzo threw his and you squeezed the d-pad just a little too hard.

The xiāolóngbāo had cooled a little and you grabbed a pair of chopsticks, taking a break to bite into the juicy dumplings. The wrapper was chewy, the filling a burst of savory meat and vegetables, and the "soup" was just the right temperature now, no longer scalding hot. You got blown off the screen in the game, your avatar screaming as they went splat, so you happily ate the dumplings instead.

"Think we could get some of these controllers for the rec room?" Genji asked.

"Yeah," Feng grinned. "I'll send some back with you. I know you have to have them inspected, but no selling proprietary secrets, OK?"

"On second thought, I'll just keep them all," Genji said, not looking up from the screen.

"You don't understand how many handhelds he's gone through," you laughed. "He's not allowed to game on his Blackwatch phones any more, because he breaks them."

"So what I'm hearing is that the market needs more cybernetic-friendly accessories." Feng got out a tablet and scrawled a few notes. "Hey, you want to be one of our play-testers? I'll send
"...I might be able to do that," Genji said, not looking up from the screen.

Hanzo reached over and grabbed a dumpling. "So are you legalizing most of your businesses?"

"Yes and no. We're taking advantage of some of the Special Economic Zones to really maximize our wiggle room, and we have different charters and identities registered in tax havens abroad. You know, the usual gray areas. But by nature, we are...secretive and prone to acting outside the law. Hence all the moral charters and oaths to keep us from going too far. I'm trying to stay within the spirit of the Triad way, but our patron deity, left-handed Guan Yu, is kind of a dick. So by nature, we're not exactly used to being the "good guys." I'm trying, but I'm still not sure how we're doing." Feng shrugged.

"Your foray into med-tech and entrepreneurship is further than I ever got," Hanzo said, staring at his hands. "But I had more...familial constrictions."

"Oh I have those too," Feng scowled at the ceiling. "But I have figured out how to bulldoze my way through the cousins and that is progress." Feng nodded to herself. "White Rabbit Enterprises is my brainchild. I want to do cool, legal things that will give some of the family the option of going legit."

"That's an admirable goal," Hanzo said, and you discretely looked to see how much he'd had to drink. There was another empty wine bottle on the table, and it wasn't you who drank it. "I...wish to do something similar with the Shimada, should I seek to reclaim my seat."

Genji did not look up from the game.

"You make it sound nobler than it is. We're criminals, no question there. And yes, it is glorious to get rich. But, I know we can turn a profit, gloss over some of the more annoying laws, and make the world a better place. For On Sing, it's just a matter of diversifying our portfolio, you know?"

"Triads and Yakuza are not so different," Hanzo said. "We are outsiders with a warrior code."

"Yeah," Feng said. "Though, that's changed. Or maybe we were never as benevolent as we like to pretend." She gave a wry smile, popping a dumpling into her mouth. "Still, I can sympathize with Blackwatch. Sometimes you have to break the law to do the right thing. Sometimes you have to pick the lesser evil. But you can't ever get comfortable with that mindset, because it just pushes you further and further down the rabbit hole." Feng nodded. "I know I have extremely questionable ethics. And that's OK. Li, for all his whining and moaning, has a pretty decent moral compass, even if he's prone to being a shitty brother. Though, honestly, I like listening to Bayan more. He's cuter, nicer, and got a better delivery." Feng inclined her head at Hanzo.

"I wouldn't mind seeing him next time," you said, testing the waters and Hanzo looked between you and Feng with great interest.

"I invited him tonight. But he declined, said he wanted to monitor some of the new cybernetic recipients. He's got a great work ethic..." She trailed off. "But yeah, I know he was making excuses." She shrugged again. "You're welcome to drop by the lab for a visit. I was hesitant to force the issue. He's still pretty embarrassed about what happened."
"Next time then," Hanzo said, and he looked like he meant it.

"Someone play Mario Kart with me," Genji said, staring straight at you.

Rolling your eyes, you helped yourself to cake and champagne, before scooting over in front of the screen.

Feng poured everyone more drinks. Hanzo and Feng started discussing the structural differences within their family businesses while Genji pretended not to be listening in. You still continually lost to Genji, and that was OK, you were pleasantly buzzed, and there was cake. What more could you ask for?

Feng was a surprisingly good hostess. Though, maybe your standards were a little low. She had pajamas for all of you: t-shirt and long pants with that weird little onion-octopus on it. And she got out the sleeping bags, though it didn't look like Genji was getting off the Nintendo any time soon. He'd found the newest Fire Emblem game.

You took the floor, while Hanzo sprawled out on one couch, and Feng sat on the other. You had not expected the night out to turn into a gaming slumber party. It was so painfully normal, but so alien, you didn't comment. You just went with it.

"So how does it work?" Hanzo asked, sleepily while you fluffed your pillow.

"How does what work?" You asked.

"Three people?" Hanzo said, turning over and away from you.

Feng snickered and you saw Genji actually pause the game.

"Are you asking about sex?" You wondered, staring at Feng's ceiling.

"No! I know how- Forget I said anything," Hanzo mumbled.

"I don't know how the relationship works," you said. "Because I'm pretty aware that I'm in over my head." You adjusted your blanket. "I mean, I like both of them. They like each other. They like me. We're not all at the same stage, but...we're getting there. I think. I'm the slow one."

"Yes," Genji said, not even turning around.

Feng giggled in the darkness.

"Fuck you," you muttered.

"That period before she actually figured it out was agonizing for the rest of us. The sexual tension was ridiculous, and there she went, in complete denial about it for months. In fact, she would still be at it if McCree hadn't finally sat her down and told her to do something about it." Genji sounded slightly disgusted. And you remembered Jesse's visible frustration at your hesitance. It had been awhile since the two of you had just been...buddies. You winced. Genji wasn't wrong about any of it.

"It's not just chemistry," you said.
"Really? Because all that flirting between you and Jack was definitely not just friendly banter." Feng leaned over the couch, reaching for another dumpling with her bare hands.

"There's plenty of sex, and it's the best damn sex I've ever had," you said, partially because you'd had too much alcohol, partially because on some level, you'd been dying to admit it to someone else. "But I don't know, we just...spend time together. We eat, talk, watch bad movies. Gabriel reads to me. Jack and I play chess." You blew out a breath. "It gets messy some times, but in this case, having a third person to mediate actually seems to help."

The following quiet was contemplative. For a moment, you expected Hanzo to say something bitchy. But then snoring began. You'd poured out your deep dark secrets, and put him to sleep. That ass weasel.

"I find putting a pillow over his face to be an effective muffler," Genji said, returning to his game.

Feng started laughing then. "I have extra ear plugs..."

She'd put on more weight, which was a good sign, and Angela had made progress with the skin grafts and some of the cybernetic removal. She stared at him flatly, her expression pinched and hard.

Gabriel leaned forward, not the least bit impressed by her attitude.

"I was expecting to see more progress."

"Sorry, I'm failing to live up to your expectations, sir," she snapped. "I thought you were just going to lock me up and forget about the embarrassment that was Bái Shé. Or did Lucky manage to pull some of her tricky shit and get you to think you'd changed your mind?"

Gabriel wondered, for only a moment, if she knew about your relationships. "And how would she do that?"

"Come on, Commander, you're not blind. She's fucking sneaky. Gives lip service to the brass, does what she wants, and talks everyone else into her too-clever plans. Makes you think there's no chance of them failing." Lao glared at him.

"She comes up with flexible solutions," Gabriel said with a frown. "That's not such a bad thing in Blackwatch. But no, Lucky didn't want to force you into therapy. That was my call."

Lao deflated a little. "Why?" She gritted her teeth. "I thought I was a treacherous lost cause that got her unit killed."

"You know some of the shit I said was just part of the interrogation, right?" Gabriel put his hands flat on the table. "You were a Blackwatch agent once. Whether or not you can be again is another matter. But you were one of mine and the least we can do is try to get you to the point where you can live a life outside of confinement."

Lao stared at him, her expression lost. "But you said..."
"I said a lot of shit," Gabriel said sharply. "I even meant some of it. But I know you saw Captain Patel and Lieutenant Sato perform an interrogation or two. Remember all that it entailed? After what happened, you had to expect a rough reception."

The girl put her head down on the table.

"I hate you," she said without feeling.

"I don't care," Gabriel said.

"I hate myself more," she kept her face on the table. "I did a lot of shit as Bái Shé. And it was my fault she almost died."

"...Somewhat. Agent Strike is also a goddamn idiot who was fully aware of your capabilities and still faced you down without waiting for backup. She bears some of the blame." Gabriel tried to keep his voice even, but some of the anger slipped out.

"No, she was just trying to help," Lao sniffled, not looking up. "She's not in trouble, is she?"

"She was," Gabriel said sharply.

Lao winced.

"What's it matter to you now? You aren't taking her visits," Gabriel said, neutrally. "I thought you hated her."

"I do. I don't care if she got in trouble or not," she added quickly.

There was a long silence as Gabriel watched her sit up, wiping her face discretely.

"I don't care," she said. "I was just curious."

Gabriel said nothing, watching her tuck her chin against her chest and stare at her lap. He rubbed his temples, wondering how much he'd missed in the first couple of interrogations. That wasn't quite right. He had been thorough and mission-focused. He had torn her apart for relevant Talon information, leveraging her feelings for you and your dead squad to get her to talk. But he had done so with disregard for her fragile psyche. He'd broken her down a little too well, and now that sat badly with him.

"I don't...blame you for stabbing her." Not any more, anyway. Not since you were alive and reconciled with him. If it had gone any other way, Gabriel knew he might not have been able to let go of that grudge, but as it was, he could put his feelings aside and do the right thing. "I am fully briefed on the conditioning and the kill orders."

"You don't know Lucky very well then. I'm pretty sure at some point, all her friends have wanted to stab her. Or at least punch her in the face," Lao said sullenly.

Gabriel laughed. "Oh?"

"She must be on good behavior around you, commander," Lao said, a faint smile playing on her lips. "She has this way of finding the worst trouble and ending up in the middle of it, all while proclaiming her innocence."

"...I may have noticed something like that," Gabriel said, inclining his head to the side.
"The jury is still out on whether or not that's intentional."

Lao shook her head. "I know...I know it's not all her fault. She's just a shit magnet." She gnawed on her lip. "You were there for the Ninth Circle. I mean Black Base Delta. What happened?"

Gabriel took a deep breath. "That information is classified. But I'll tell you what happened to your squad mates, if that's what you're asking."

She nodded slowly. "I think it's time."

So Gabriel told her what he knew. Half a dozen mercenaries stormed the med ward and gunned down everyone inside. He couldn't confirm that Agent Razafindrandriatsimaniry had been there, but he was listed as on-duty at the time. Agent Nwazue had lured several mercs into a lab and blown it up. Agent Valdez had gone down fighting, you and Lieutenant Sato rushing to his aid. Sato had fallen in combat next. Then you had found Aishani mortally wounded and ready to make her last stand. And after that, you'd both cut it far too close. He glossed over the details of that last part, just mentioning that you'd sustained some serious injuries.

Each death was a blow, and halfway through she squeezed her eyes shut, unwilling to look at him, her breathing ragged. But when he paused, she waved her hand, asking him in a hoarse voice to keep going.

When he was done, they sat in silence. He slid some tissues across the table and she took them, not making eye contact.

"I...didn't realize it happened like that. I figured Lucky was in the woods hunting or something and missed the whole thing. She used to sneak off all the time. I mean, not shirking, just...wandering off on her own."

Gabriel nodded.

"I didn't blame her for surviving. Logically, I knew even if she had been hiding in the woods, there wasn't much she could have done to save anyone. But, I guess it kind of makes me feel better to know that she was there. That she didn't miss it all. I know that's fucked up, but..." She sighed.

"But it makes it easier to accept."

"Yeah. I still can't see her right now. It's too much."

"Do you want to request to have her banned from visitation?"

Lao stared at him hopelessly. "That's an option?"

"It's within your rights," Gabriel said carefully.

"...I don't think that will be necessary. She leaves when I tell her to." Lao crumpled the tissues in her flesh hand. "So what's next, commander? Where do we go from here?"

"I can't afford to trust you. But I do believe in giving you a chance."

"Or enough rope to hang myself," she said.

He gave a slow nod. "Yeah, that's a possibility too."
"And Lucky didn't put you up to this?"

"She may be my assistant, but she doesn't know my every move, agent."

Lao froze at the title, her eyes widening slightly.

"You go to therapy. You shake that programming. You keep having those sessions with Agent Lacroix. Prove yourself, agent, and there's a light at the end of this."

The three of you got back mid-afternoon. Hanzo had changed back into his suit, and it still managed to look wrinkle-free and nice. You and Genji still had on your onion-octopus pajamas. Feng said they were "Pachimari" and Genji seemed unusually pleased with his. Your fancy clothes were in a nice dress bag, and you had food for Jack and Gabriel, and two bottles of Máotái - Hanzo had given you his right in front of Feng. Which was fine, she'd gifted it to him with a smartass comment about how he needed to develop taste.

Genji had kept his, and a few gaming controllers.

All in all, that was the best mafia slumber party you'd ever been to.

You got back to your room and hung up your dress, pleased that it had taken no damage from the robbery. You found a vase of white lilies, with violet speckled centers, on the dresser with a note:

Something came up. Have to make a visit to Helsinki. Sorry, I couldn't be here to show you just how much I liked seeing you in that dress. We are going out soon. Don't worry, I'll pick Jack's outfit.

Love,

Gabriel

You stared at his signature, cheeks warm. You tucked the note into your drawer and checked your messages.

Ziv had sent you one with a date, underlined. That was it. You assumed that was the day he would be returning. You'd try to schedule the tea party for after it.

Jack was off-site too. There was urgent politicking to be done in Geneva. You could hear the resentment in his angrily typed words. The undertone of "I'm not going to kill Petras, I'm not, and it's killing me instead" bled through the entire message. You could empathize. You had a whole mental file of Petras death scenes compiled. Right now your favorite one involved staking him out for teams of rabid weasels while coated in hot sauce. The capsaicin would burn his skin and send the weasels into an even more volatile frenzy. It didn't have to be weasels. It could be raccoons. Or monitor lizards. You weren't that fussy.

Lacroix wanted a meeting when you had time. Sighing, you changed out of your fun new pajamas and left to discuss your next outing.
You put the food in Jack's fridge. Neither man was due in tonight, but Jack's bed was the most comfortable and you didn't think he would mind you sleeping here. There was still a toothbrush for you in the bathroom and while it was strange to be here without Jack, it didn't feel wrong.

His bed was unmade, big surprise, and you straightened the blankets before getting in and fluffing the pillows. It was soft and welcoming, but you weren't quite warm enough. Sighing, you got up, grabbed one of Jack's Overwatch hoodies out of a drawer, and put it on. The pillows smelled faintly of Jack's soap and Gabriel's curling custard. You pulled the blanket over your head and closed your eyes.

The low voices woke you, if only because you hadn't expected to hear anyone in the Strike Commander's quarters. You reached under the pillow, gripping your tanto.

"Why is she here?" Gabriel asked, sounding irritated.

You released your grip on your tanto, relaxing until you thought about what he said. Did they need some more alone time? Were you imposing? You exhaled slowly. You hadn't exactly asked to use Jack's room while he was away. Maybe you had overstepped.

"Because my bed's better," Jack said sounding incredibly smug. "She likes big heavy blankets, Gabe. And I leave cake and beer in my fridge for her. I set some pretty irresistible bait."

You blinked. Wait, what?

"I have better food," Gabriel grumbled.

"You do." You heard the familiar smack of one of Jack's obnoxiously loud kisses. "But she gets cold. If it's bothering you, ask her about it."

"...It's not a big deal," Gabriel said, tone still a bit sharp.

"Then why are you looking so sore?"

You could easily picture Gabriel's sullen expression in the face of Jack's amusement.

"Just get some more blankets," Jack laughed, like he expected Gabriel to be contrary and ignore the advice, solely because he'd recommended it. Clothing rustled and you heard the heavy thud of Jack's overcoat hitting the floor.

The mattress sunk as someone climbed into bed beside you.

"Hey honey, we're home," Jack murmured, pulling the covers back. You blinked rapidly, feigning like you were just now opening your eyes. "Aww, did I wake you?"

"That's a stupid question," you said, yawning. "You don't just yank the blankets off someone's head if you plan on letting them sleep."

He chuckled, and curled against you, kissing the side of your head. He paused, eyeing the hoodie. "Did you get cold, baby?"

You shrugged. "A little."
"I'm sorry," he said, looking unspeakably pleased and you weren't entirely sure why.

Gabriel sat down on your other side, still in his Blackwatch hoodie and fatigue pants. You sat up, leaning forward to kiss him. Instead, he pulled off his beanie and put it on your head. He pulled it too low over your eyes and you huffed.

Then he kissed you, warm hands pressed against your cheeks, mouth gentle against yours. You sighed happily, glad that you hadn't misread the situation. Jack wanted you here. Gabriel did too. You were just exceptionally dumb when you first awoke.

"You're back early," you said lifting the hat up.

"Had a girl to we wanted to see," Jack said, running a hand along your side. You bit your lip as he kissed the back of your neck.

"I bet you thought you were funny, running off with your lipstick on my face," Gabriel growled softly.

"It looked good on him," Jack said. "I was tempted to let him walk around like that."

You couldn't hide your grin. "You were the one getting me all hot and bothered before I had to go out."

"Did you have fun?" Gabriel asked, reclining on his side, propped up on one elbow, his other arm draped over your waist. "I didn't hear about any terrorist attacks. And obviously you didn't need us to come bail you out of jail or back you up in some ridiculous hostage situation."

"Yeah, we went out to eat and then..." Oh. Yeah. You'd forgotten about the robbery attempt. For a moment, you contemplated not telling them that part. But then you couldn't count on Genji, Hanzo, or Feng to keep quiet about it. Honesty was probably the best policy.

"What else? Did Feng spend the night throwing awkward pickup lines at the Shimadas?"

"...No, she was actually pretty well-behaved, considering. Says it's nerves that make her spout the really awkward stuff. She reined herself in this time. Still flighty as a hummingbird on speed, but kept it mostly platonic."

"So it was completely uneventful?" Jack asked, skepticism plain on his face.

You sighed. "There was an armed robbery in the restaurant. We uh...took care of it."

Gabriel snorted. "You're joking."

"...We kind of sat there and took turns disarming the gunmen when they came over to our table. They weren't very good robbers," you said with a shrug. "Hanzo and Feng were actually more focused on their proxy war over which drink paired better with the meal. That part was...uncomfortable. They made me judge the taste test. The pressure was pretty intense."

There was a half a minute of silence.

"The dress is intact, right?" Gabriel said. "Because if anyone gets to rip it off you-"

"Nobody is damaging that dress. It was insanely expensive!" You scowled.

Jack laughed. "So then what? A night of clubbing? Did Feng hire a troupe of acrobatic
strippers and burlesque dancers to act out a musical based on the Kama Sutra? Did you attend underground bare knuckle death matches? Did she finally get Hanzo Shimada to make the dragon dance?"

You snickered. "We went back to her condo for cake, snacks, and video games. Then we all fell asleep in the living room in sleeping bags, except Genji. I think he stayed up all night playing Metroid. Maybe it was Fire Emblem. I don't know."

There was a longer silence this time.

"You had a...mafia slumber party? With video games and cake?" Gabriel said the words with a soft, almost reverent incredulity.

"Yeah, it was fun," you said. "Genji beat everyone at all the video games. But that's OK. I had cake. Oh, and I brought food home. There were these really delicious ribs and soup dumplings..."

"You know...I was a little worried when you said you were going to Shanghai to hang out with Zhai Feng the fucking bio-hacked Dragon Head of the On Sing Triad. I was expecting assassination attempts, or AI terrorism, or even a hybrid omnic-kaiju attack. You just...talked, ate a bunch of food, and played video games?"

"I swear. You can ask Genji. Or Hanzo. Or Feng. She offered to take us clubbing, or to the opera, or other shit, but we went back to her place for cake and-"

Gabriel laughed. "OK, I get it. Say no more. It must have been good cake."

"It was nice," you said. "Normal. I think. Though I'm not really sure what that means any more." At least it was more normal than any co-ed, international criminal syndicate, cyborg ninja slumber party had a right to be. "I had a good time. I think Genji did too."

Gabriel's gaze softened. "That's good. I wasn't sure if keeping his brother here was a good idea. But..."

"I think it's progress," you said.

"Yeah." Gabriel sighed. "Good to hear."

Jack kissed your neck.

"Aren't you hungry? The food was really good."

"Oh, we both have something we've been craving since yesterday. But it isn't food, hermosa."

You swallowed your words as Gabriel pulled off his shirt, Jack's hands already sliding under your clothes.

Chapter End Notes

Super fluff ending! It was inspired by an anon who mentioned Lucky should sleep in Jack's hoodie and Gabriel's hat while they were away.
Was super sore from weeding last Friday. (Because I'm old?) And then had terrible stomach pain whenever I ate starting Saturday and ending yesterday. (I think the Witch Baby cursed me again, but I digress). I reluctantly took the dogs for a run, even though my legs were still annoyingly sore, and when I got back, there was a little soreness, but now I feel better. WTF? Lactic acid buildup? Or a body conspiracy?

I'll be out of town 5/18-5/22, so I don't know what my update schedule is going to look like. The smut chapter is 11k+ so it's about two chapters in one. So between being sick, fighting the chapter, and going on a short vacation, I'm pretty sure that's going to interrupt the twice/week update schedule further along. Just a head's up.
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

There are people out there worse at diplomacy than you are, not a lot, but they're there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You are slouching. If you keep that up, I will have to tape you in place like we did your breasts," Amélie giggled her arm looped with yours.

You rubbed your forehead.

Amélie smacked your hand. "Stop that! You will smear your makeup!"

"I'm not even wearing-"

"Look less constipated, Chanceux. We are having fun. You are sexy. I am elegant. Everyone wants to be seen with us. We are beautiful, mysterious, and completely unattainable. But they can bask in our glory and maybe we will deign to smile at them and make their night just a little more fabulous." Amélie tossed her head, her pale slender neck drawing several looks. She wore a blue sheath dress with a halter neckline, its dramatic cut showed skin, but stopped on the right side of scandalous. The hem was asymmetrical, ankle-length in the back, but around the front it gradually shortened to above the knee to show off her legs. Her stilettos matched the dress, and she walked with inimitable grace. Her hair was up in a chignon, and her gold wrist cuffs matched her earrings and the pins in her hair.

You were in the purple dress, the one with the plunging neckline but a long skirt, discrete slits cut in the fabric for freedom of movement, or more likely so you could show off your legs. It was a flattering shade of purple for your skin tone, and Amélie insisted that you wear gold jewelry as well. She loaned you a cascade of gold chains that layered from your neck to between your carefully taped breasts. Your hair was up, and she had chosen a pair of earrings for you, gold pendulums on long chains that you simply threaded through your ears.

You still weren't sure how to persuade Amélie to see things from your pragmatic, but less stylish standpoint, and appealing to her better nature had not helped. So you were unable to convince her to let you attend as the Assassin Butler and were now stuck in an evening gown, at some terribly haughty ballroom in Lyon, with minimal weaponry. Sure, your gloves matched the dress, and your prostheses were primed. You'd come armed, a pistol in the small of your back, your tanto strapped to a sheath on your thigh, so as not to interfere with the lines of the gown.

Making a half circuit of the ballroom, you kept an eye out for Lacroix. You were Amélie's "date" feeding into the rumor that they were separating. You weren't sure what made them choose that cover story, but both of them seemed terribly amused by the idea, like it was so outrageous that people would be fooled. Amélie had made a point to be seen out in staged scenes with a variety of people. Tataryn, Jesse, and Diallo had all been photographed with her, their faces carefully concealed. It must have been a slow news cycle, because the gossip rags ate it up, loving that the prima ballerina might return to the stage after her marriage disintegrated, and they openly
wondered if she could displace any current leads all over Europe.

You flinched as Amélie playfully bit your ear. "Really?"

"Look less unhappy, Chanceux, or I'm going to start taking it personally." Amélie leaned over, her perfume winding around you, not too heavy, but impossible to ignore. "You are my escort. I paid good money to get you here."

She laughed as you nearly choked on your tongue.

"You're awful," you said, shaking your head.

"Relax. You are so tense. Would you like a drink?"

"Not while I'm working."

"Tsk, you need to take a deep breath. You are wound too tight. Tonight, we just blend in. Make contact. You don't have to treat it like a combat mission."

You sighed, because Amélie was right. You were a civilian. You were undercover. You were not at all waiting and hoping for a random terrorist attack to interrupt all the hobnobbing. Nope. Not you.

You leaned against her arm, pretending for a moment, that she was someone else. If you and Gabriel were at a fancy function, you would still have to be business-like. The same went for Jack. It was hard to relax in a room full of people, most of them with wardrobes that would feed a small family for a few years.

"You are slouching again. Next time you are wearing a corset."

"Amélie, you are merciless."

She laughed, a throaty bedroom sound. A few heads turned your way. "That is precisely what Gérard says. Usually in private."

You shook your head. "I don't need to know that."

"You are silly, Chanceux. It is so very cute. Oh, what is he wearing? That fits him like an apron fits a cow."

You watched a delegate in a bad suit slink by. The material was good quality, but it obviously didn't fit him properly and the cut was ten years out of date. ...How did you know this? Which Lacroix had infected your brain? Shaking your head, you realized you had some soul-searching to do.

"I think the apron on the cow would be cuter."

"True," Amélie laughed. "Ah, there she is. Oh, I like that. I couldn't pull that off, but she does it so well."

Adaeze Kwento wore an off the shoulder gown in black, with red and green accents, and a vibrant emerald gele covering her hair and fanning out in a halo around her head. Her jewelry looked like rough cut rubies set in gold. In her mid-forties, Kwento was an attractive woman, tall, with full lips, a broad forehead, and sharp eyes.

Kwento turned from the diplomat she was speaking to, her gaze falling on Amélie and you.
You tilted your head in acknowledgement. You didn't see what Amélie did, but you felt her move beside you.

Kwento smiled at Amélie, her expression friendlier than you expected. Of course, Amélie had a way with people. Then she began to make her way over to you.

"So pleased to finally meet you Ambassador Kwento," Amélie reached out, firmly grasping Kwento's hand and shaking.

"I have not had the pleasure...?" Kwento had a rich voice and she smiled at you both.

"I am Amélie Lacroix, née Guillard," she said brightly.

"The ballerina!" Kwento raised a brow. "I had not expected to see an artist at one of these events. How charming. And please, introduce me to your friend." Kwento released Amélie's hand and extended hers to you.

"This is Chanceux. She is my very good friend," Amélie beamed, and neither you nor Kwento were sure how to take that.

Kwento studied your face, like she thought she should know you. Her smile was relaxed, so obviously she didn't recognize you.

You pressed the q-drive into her hands and she hesitantly stopped shaking, discretely slipping the device into her sleeve.

"Should I be worried?" Kwento asked, still keeping a light tone.

"Not about us," you said with a smile.

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Both of you had imbibed a few flutes of champagne, but you didn't think Amélie would be this affected.

"No, no, Chanceux! Blow kisses at me! Like this!" Amélie giggled and puckered up, batting her lashes. Lithe and playful, she looked sexy doing it. You felt ridiculous in comparison. "Come on! Don't be shy!"

Rolling your eyes, you air-kissed your hand and flung the imaginary kiss across the sidewalk.

"...That is a truly pathetic attempt, Chanceux. Like this." Amélie licked her lips and it was almost obscene the way she moved her mouth. You couldn't do that in public. Hell, you weren't sure your tongue moved like that. "Come on! Do better, or I shall be cross at you all night."

Cocking your hip out, you leaned forward, knowing the tape would hold your breasts in place. Smiling sardonically, you pursed your lips, looked her in the eye, and blew.

Amélie held up her phone.

"I knew you could do it! Gabriel will love this shot!"
"Wait what?! No!"

"Too late. Already sent!" Giggling, and obviously not as drunk as you thought, Amélie looped her arm in yours and continued the walk to the hotel.

Shaking your head, you sighed. She enjoyed this way too much.

You had a missed call and single message from Gabriel that read "Call me." Rolling your eyes, you sat down on the bed and kicked off your heels.

"What?" You said, when he picked up the line.

"I missed you too," he said, voice throaty. "What exactly are you wearing?"

"An evening gown and tape. Lots of tape..."

"So nights out with Zhai and Amélie warrant fancy clothes, but how come you never dress that way for me?"

"Because it's a pain in the chest and we don't go to fancy places. I'm on a mission-"

Gabriel chuckled. "So what I'm hearing is that I need to plan a business trip with formalwear."

"Please don't. You guys would look great, but Amélie keeps threatening me with dire consequences every time my posture slips. I have been menaced with a smoking curling iron, a corset, and lots of socially-correct things that I don't understand. Send help."

"Is that all you wanted help with, hermosa?" Gabriel's tone was buttery smooth and rich with promise. You shivered.

"They're in the next room," you said.

"And? You can't keep it quiet?"

"They're adjoined rooms," you scowled. "I'm Amélie's date."

"Really?" Gabriel didn't sound quite so pleased. "And you made contact tonight, as her date?"

"Ambiguously, yes. Amélie is the star attraction, not me."

"I would argue that."

"I hate playing the honeytrap," you said tautly. "Amélie has more charisma and the role suits her better."

"All right," Gabriel said, sounding too amused by your discomfort.

"She's really good at it," you said, a little defensive.

"Amélie has her charms, but she's not the one I'm interested in. Are you planning on
sending me any more pictures?" Gabriel murmured. "Or are you going to leave me hanging?"

"...I'm not sending nudes, Gabriel." You rolled your eyes. "What are you, sixteen?"

"Didn't ask for nudes. I like pinup shots just fine. You don't make that pouty sex kitten face nearly enough." he laughed.

"It wasn't that bad," you scowled.

"On the contrary, I like it a lot. Amélie sent quite the picture. Didn't you pose for it?"

"She tricked me! And I'm terrible at selfies. Look, I'll dress up for dinner or something, OK? Now I need to get some sleep because I have socializing to do tomorrow and you're supposed to look well-rested or something. I don't know. Half these people drink mimosas for breakfast and subsist on sneaking nips of alcohol all day. I doubt they'll notice all my slipups. But Amélie will."

"I guess that will do," Gabriel sighed, sounding terribly disappointed. "I miss you. Jack misses you. He keeps stopping by the office, sleeping in my room, and asking if he can requisition you for office work."

"Like real office work or...?"

"I'm sure he intends to get work done, but I already know how you two clowns operate." Gabriel laughed. "He likes having you around. I think he gets lonely in that big ugly office of his."

You smiled. "I miss both of you too," you said, suddenly feeling very alone. When had you gotten to the point where you said things like this? It was a short mission and you weren't even that far away... "I should get some sleep," you said, even though you didn't want to hang up.

"All right. Good night baby. Look forward to seeing you at home."

"Yeah," you said. "Me too."

Going to sleep that night, the expensive hotel bed felt too cold, and your thoughts drifted to Zurich and the men waiting for you there.

---

You were doing brunch at some boring old-money restaurant. The staff knew Amélie and the two of you were ushered to a table with a pristine white tablecloth and cloth napkins in a silver napkin ring. You eyed the napkin ring, discretely weighing it your palm. It was a little big to slip over your finger, but in a pinch, it was heavy enough to punch someone with.

"Chanceux, ma chérie, stop weaponizing everything," Amélie sighed as she sipped a Turkish coffee in a tiny little mug.

You eyed the silverware. "How do you know I'm not plotting to steal everything?"

"Because we both know that isn't real silver. And you get this uncivilized look in your eye." Amélie covered her mouth as she yawned. "What are you in the mood for?"

"I'm hungry," you said. "But I don't want anything too heavy."
"Then I recommend the eggs Florentine. I shall have their house strawberry conserves on brioche. Don't worry, if you are good I will let you try some."

Sighing, you kind of wished Lacroix was there, if only to distract Amélie. After you ordered, the two of you drank your coffee in peace. Lacroix was probably sulking in the hotel room. Sure, he was running the op, but you knew from experience that he preferred to be on site for the action.

"Oh my, don't look now, but it seems we have guests."

You were composed enough not to turn, instead sipping your coffee, your hand resting on you tanto. Today's outfit was more bearable, cropped black trousers with a pair of red heels and a red off-the-shoulder sweater in a flattering cut. Another Amélie pick, and of course, it looked effortlessly amazing. Amélie went with a coral shift dress and pearls, and she looked vintage Jackie O in the best way possible.

"Ah, Ms. Lacroix. What a charming coincidence. Do you mind if we join you?"

"What a pleasant surprise, ambassador. Please sit." Amélie stood and pulled out the chair beside her with an elegant sweep. You rose to greet Kwento and froze when you turned. Kwento had not come alone. Alongside her was a bipedal omnic wearing saffron and red, a necklace of orbs adorning his neck. Nine cyan blue lights formed a square pattern on its forehead and its face was almost comically mournful, eyes and mouth set at a sorrowful angle. The face did not look human at all, but something about it dipped too far into the uncanny valley. Perhaps it was an emoji gone terribly wrong. Perhaps you had lingering issues. But it didn't matter now: you swallowed your discomfort and pulled out the chair. Its feet did not quite touch the ground.

"Thank you," it said, voice smooth.

"You're welcome," you murmured, feeling the buzz of something along your gloved prosthetics. You curled your fingers, wondering if it was trying to ghost you like Athena had.

"Do you normally attend breakfast armed?" It asked mildly and you weren't sure if it was talking about your tanto, your pistol, or your prostheses.

"Chanceux believes in being prepared," Amélie said with a gentle smile and you held your tongue.

Kwento didn't appear the least bit surprised, in fact, her look for you was not quite as friendly as it had been last night, but that was to be expected, given the contents of the drive. She wore a turquoise suit, too bright and vibrant for this restaurant. It looked good on her and you liked it.

The waiter came and did a double take when he saw the omnic beside you.

"What would you like today?"

"Grits with condensed milk, scrambled eggs, and black tea," Kwento said, not even looking at the menu.

"I am fine," the omnic said.

You sipped your coffee, and studied your left hand. The buzzing had stopped, but you did not like that it had...reached out.
"I'm sorry, where are my manners? This is Tekhartha Zenyatta. He is a former Shambali monk with a strong interest in social reform."

"Amélie Lacroix. Enchanté." She extended her hand and Zenyatta clasped it between both of his.

"And you as well," he said.

Amélie didn't flinch, bat an eye, or waver. She just flashed a dazzling smile that nearly shorted out your brain. How were you supposed to follow that? They finished shaking and it was your turn.

"Lucky Strike," you said, forcing yourself to relax and let those metal fingers close over your flesh ones.

"Peace be upon you." Zenyatta, to his credit, did not make any quips about your name, though Kwento looked amused. But she didn't comment on whether or not it was your real name.

"Thanks, and you too?" You winced at your fumble and retracted your hand.

"You are very tense."

"I'm hungry," you said, because it was true.

"There is disquiet in your soul."

"...I can be pretty unpleasant when I'm hungry," you said.

"It is true. Her vocabulary becomes monosyllabic, she hunches over, and she begins to grunt and growl like a bear. It is adorable." Amélie laughed softly.

The food arrived and you silently cut into your eggs Florentine, savoring the creamy hollandaise sauce on poached eggs.

"You wanted to try my conserves?" Amélie asked, offering you a neat square of brioche. You blinked as she fed you, her smile wide and delighted. The strawberry gel was rich with fruit and sugar, and you caught hints of champagne and vanilla.

"That is pretty amazing," you said.

"The only reason I chose this establishment," Amélie said, leaning closer to Kwento. "It is a bit staid for my tastes."

"We are scandalizing the other patrons," Kwento said, not looking the least bit concerned. She tasted her grits, made a disappointed face, but kept eating, looking somewhat satisfied by the tea and eggs.

"I suspect it is my presence." Zenyatta's tone did not change.

"It could be my table manners," you said, trying to be polite. Though your table manners had been good. There had only been two forks and they looked identical, but you used the outermost one.

"So how did you meet Dom Zenyatta?" Amélie asked.

"Just Zenyatta, please. I am no longer officially affiliated with the Shambali."
"He found me. Our interests align." Kwento smiled with genuine fondness at the omnic.

"And what are those interests?" You asked, casually sawing through your muffin.

"Building a peaceful society for humans and omnis alike," Kwento said, like it was the most obvious thing.

"A worthy goal," Amélie said.

You focused on your food and the sounds and movement in your periphery. There was very little you could add to this conversation, and Amélie was the best equipped to handle Kwento. But both Kwento and Zenyatta kept looking at you.

"Will you tell me why I make you so uncomfortable?" Zenyatta asked and you nearly choked on your food.

You looked to Amélie for help, but she was watching Kwento, who was watching you. Goddamnit.

Patting your chest, you gulped down water and struggled for an answer. Only the truth came up. But saying "yeah, robots are creepy as hell and I have unresolved personal trauma" seemed uncouth.

"I rarely deal with omnis outside of combat settings," you said. "I am ignorant of the cultural mores and do not wish to give offense."

"Do not be discouraged," Zenyatta said. "Everyone begins in ignorance."

You looked back down at your food, not at all liking his tone.

"So have you been through Lyon before?" Amélie asked, knowing full well that this was Kwento's first trip. But you appreciated her diverting the conversation away from you and your issues.

You ate in silence, willing yourself invisible. But you could feel the omnic monk observing you, even if he did not look your way again during the meal.

Kwento seemed to forget you were there, engaged in a lively conversation with Amélie and your mind wandered to the monk's combat capabilities. Kwento would not be out with a bodyguard, and while not all omnis were combat-rated, you knew instinctively that placid facade aside, Zenyatta was a force of his own.

The meeting went smoothly without any further input from you. Kwento was going to make a "surprise" visit to Zurich and meet with Lacroix and perhaps Gabriel. You suspected Zenyatta would be with her. Amélie seemed pleased by the turn of events.

The drive had contained information about two different corporations attempting hostile takeovers of one of Numbani's human-omnic joint-owned enterprises, as well as a predicted assassination attempt on Kwento, and an invitation to come to Zurich. The information was all correct and highly-detailed; Lacroix had overseen the intel gathering and Ziv had triple-checked
everything. You had "obtained" the legal paperwork filed by both Pan Tek and Vishkar as well as some pretty damning internal memos.

You were headed back to Zurich now, Lacroix and Amélie happily chattering away in French while you tried to sleep.

"And Chanceux did so well," Amélie said. "A little stiff, but she tried and it was nothing out of the ordinary for the venues."

"You are too easy on her," Lacroix said. "She needs more practice."

"I do not think she is happy if there is no action," Amélie said. "She gets bored with all the polite conversation."

"It doesn't matter. This is work, not pleasure. Chanceux can learn to stand up straight, dress properly, and emulate a civilized bearing."

You opened one eye. "You know I can hear you both, right?"

"Well yes, what is the point of us reviewing your performance in English, if you aren't listening?" Lacroix said. "It was passable, but Amélie carried the bulk of the work. I expect better from you in the future."

You swallowed your retort, because Amélie had singlehandedly conducted the charm assault. You were just there as physical backup. "Yeah, OK."

"You did well," Amélie said. "It gets easier with experience."

"But there is much room for improvement," Lacroix finished, giving you a sardonic look.

You just closed your eyes and pretended to go back to sleep. Kwento would be traveling with Zenyatta, and you wanted to stay as far away from that omnic as you could.

You finished your next "report" to Petras and forwarded it to Lacroix for inspection. Maeda Vargas, Lowell, and Jeong had all sent you separate queries about career paths and combat strategies. They had also included eagerly-worded invitations to lunch. Feng sent you a status update about Bayan, asked if you wanted in on the product-testing she was offering Genji, and hinted at another outing. Maggie had received the news about "Family Day" and was already bombarding you with questions and suggestions about things she wanted to do and people she needed to meet. Thankfully, Michael was a little more reserved, just asking if you were going to be there. Amélie wanted to know the theme of the tea party and you hadn't a clue. Tea? Parties? Snacks?

You had a lot more messages now, and some of them were even work-related. You reached into your desk for a piece of candy. Gabriel had a medical checkup, and while he swore up and down it was routine, you weren't entirely convinced. But right now, there was nothing you could do.

The door opened and looked up, prepared to ask how it went. It was not whom you expected. Standing there, looking broader, more muscled, and surlier than ever, was Ziv. He had
a jacket slung over his shoulder and his t-shirt was entirely too tight. So were his jeans and they were hanging a little too low for being in your office. Who let that boy out dressed like that?

His hair had grown too. You were a little surprised they hadn't made him shave it off, but then this hadn't been a formal camp experience.

"I heard you replaced me," Ziv said, stalking in and shutting the door behind him.

"...What?" You narrowed your eyes. You hadn't hired any new hackers. What was he on about?

Ziv slammed his palms down on your desk, glaring at you. "I was only gone for six weeks and you replaced me!"

"Ziv, there is no one in my life as irritating as you. Rest assured, you still hold that spot," you said, suddenly annoyed. He'd been gone for six weeks and literally you had received no word from him. Pictures and numbers did not count. Also, he was back sooner than you expected; had they gotten sick of him and booted him? Because you had trouble envisioning him gaining an early release for "good behavior."

"Ben zona! Don't lie! McCree and Gérard were both telling me all about Newbie Maeda Vargas! Athena told me about him and his stupid plans! The promising maverick recruit who wants to be just like Lucky Strike! I've seen the little shit! You replaced me with a younger, cuter model! How could you?"

"Well, to be fair, he does answer my messages," you said, crossing your arms.

Ziv's brows furrowed and he spun around, back to you. "I sent you pictures," he muttered.

"Uh-huh," you said. "A montage of scenic southern California framing your middle finger."

"I didn't know what to say," Ziv muttered, shoulders drawn up.

"Well, to be fair, he does answer my messages," you said, crossing your arms.

Ziv's brows furrowed and he spun around, back to you. "I sent you pictures," he muttered.

"Uh-huh," you said. "A montage of scenic southern California framing your middle finger."

"I didn't know what to say," Ziv muttered, shoulders drawn up.

"Well, Lacroix told me, according to your letters to him-" he winced at your tone. "-just how happy you were with me. So I drew the logical conclusion."

"I was being dramatic," he said

"I figured. Until you just didn't answer my messages."

"I didn't know what to say," he repeated.

You sat back in your chair, waiting.

Ziv kept his back to you. He took a deep breath. You stared at his back, waiting. He took another breath. "Ben zona, you shouldn't have gotten into it with Morrison over me."

"What?" The word came out with genuine confusion. Where had that come from?

"You shouldn't have," he insisted. "Gérard told me about how ugly it got."

You cursed Lacroix's flair for dramatic meddling. It hadn't been that bad, though you had asked, Gabriel, Captain Amari, and to some extent, him, for advice. So maybe that was kind of a big deal. "Ziv, stop being stupid, Lacroix got into it with him too! You were there! For fuck's sake, what's the difference?"
"...It's Gérard's job to advocate for me. Not yours," he muttered.

_Fucking ingrate._ You took a deep breath. "So you thought I'd just sit by and not do anything? Just watch you get kicked out? What kind of friend do you think I am? Are you my hacker or not?"

"...You have Lao back now," Ziv said, still not turning around.

"What?" You stared at him incredulously. "Ziv, sit your butt down and talk to me, because I have no idea where your head's at, besides up your ass, as usual."

Sighing, Ziv pulled up a chair and plunked down, staring at you sullenly. He met your gaze, and whatever he saw on your face had him avert his eyes.

A little shaky, you opened a bottle of water. "Let's start over. Hi, Ziv. We haven't talked in awhile. How are you?"

"...I'm sorry," he said, hanging his head.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" You sputtered, water going down the wrong passage. Coughing violently, you glared at Ziv until you could breathe properly again. "For fuck's sake Ziv, I have no clue what you're thinking."

"I should have written you back. I shouldn't have been a dick. I should have thanked you for shielding me from Morrison." Ziv winced, looking miserable. "I was...really fucking embarrassed by how badly I screwed up. And that you have to keep bailing me out. So, I...reacted, and I made it worse."

The two of you sat there, you trying to process Ziv's rollercoaster of emotions, Ziv just staring at his feet.

"...You are _still_ shit at apologies," you said, taking another gulp of water.

Ziv shrugged. "I'm sure I'll get plenty of practice."

"That's not reassuring." You got up and walked around your desk. "You're an asshole. Lao is still under confinement and refusing my visits. So, your job is pretty damn safe. Unless you go rogue again." You blew out a breath.

"Seriously?" Outrage twisted Ziv's expression. "After all you did for her..." He trailed off. "Ah... Pot meet kettle." He jammed his hands in his pockets. "You have terrible taste in hackers," he said.

"I'm just willing to ignore some of their rough edges because they're good at their jobs. Also, they mean well, even if they're goddamn assholes." You reached over and hugged Ziv and he froze for a moment, before squeezing you back too tightly.

"I'm sorry," he said again, voice shaky. "I didn't mean to be a dick. Sometimes I can't help it. I just...I figured I'd talk to you later...and I kept putting it off."

"And suddenly you're back in Zurich and you realized that you blew me off the entire duration of your sentence."

You let go of Ziv and he gave you a sheepish look. "Yeah."
"You look...grown up," you said. "Like you finally hit puberty. Do I have tell you where babies come from? Because to be honest, it's pretty gross.

"Fuck you," Ziv scowled. "You somehow got a whole fan club while I was out."

"Yes, apparently you were the one scaring off anyone who wanted to be my friend."

"Shut up," Ziv glared. "I did not! You just didn't know how to talk to people."

You laughed at that.

"I can't help that you don't know how to make friends!"

You laughed even harder, the irony almost too much to bear. "Ha! I have a social life now. I think I accidentally joined the Ukrainian mob, and Feng had the Shimadas and me over for a slumber party in Shanghai. Also, Bayan."

"I heard," Ziv said grimly. "I want in on the Blackwatch Prank Club."

"...Tataryn told you?"

"Athena."

You snorted. "Of course."

Ziv rose and he gave you a wry grin. "Thanks for...being a good friend." He hugged you again and you patted his back. "I'll try to do better."

The office door opened and Gabriel came in, eyes widening slightly. He shook his head and shut the door behind him.

"Damnit, we're having a moment!" Ziv scowled as he turned around.

"Yeah, in my office, Mihret," Gabriel said, sitting down at his desk.

Ziv muttered something impolite in Hebrew.

You sighed. "Ziv-

"I'm going to go meet this Maeda Vargas kid," he said under his breath. "Teach him to try and cozy up to my..." he trailed off.

"I don't know why you're blaming me. Lacroix's the one who recruited most of them. You should probably fact check whatever stories he's been feeding you. Something you could have done with me, if you weren't ignoring my messages."

Ziv's eyes narrowed. "I'm going to go talk to Amélie."

Uh oh. Suddenly, you were worried, and you weren't sure exactly why.

"Say "hi" to Winston first," you reminded him. "He's missed you too."

There was a sheepish pause.

"You already saw him, didn't you? ...I'm the last person you visited, aren't I?"

Ziv just whistled as he walked out of the office.
"Can we send him back?" You looked at Gabriel's amused expression. "I don't think the attitude adjustment training worked."

Chapter End Notes

And Ziv is back! Hooray! He's still awful! I wrote this chapter ages ago, then had the whole "Instructor Strike" arc keep getting prolonged, so yes, we're finally moving the plot along. *whistles innocently*

My headcanon Zenyatta is masquerading as placid and calm, but is really super snark chaotic good (is that really good though? IDK). He uses his shiny wit as a didactic tool. Uh-huh. He isn't taking pleasure in your discomfort. Nope. How could you even think that? Meatbag. I suspect Lucky has some issues with omnis, especially after surviving the omnic crisis. :D

Thank you to Elle for her very generous gift. I am still floored, like Owen Wilson "whoa." I will try to get two updates out next week, but I am on day 2 of a 8 day working streak and who knows how that will go. (Plus that whole going out of town for 5/18-5/22). I write on a desktop with one of those dramatic split keyboards to stave off carpal tunnel (and I suspect it works considering how much typing I've done in the past 6+ months). So that's not coming with me while I travel.
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

Late night at the office. NSFW.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was another late night at the office, and to be honest, you had missed it a little. Maybe not the administrative minutiae, but these quiet nights alone with Gabriel while the two of you worked. Not to mention Jesse had screwed up your filing system and your desk setup. You were still getting everything back to the pre-Lucerne standards.

Gabriel growled at his screen, and you looked up to see him hunched over in his chair, glaring at whatever he was reading.

You checked the time and winced. It was later than you thought and Gabriel had missed dinner. You hadn't eaten either, but you weren't the grumpy one right now.

"Hey, do you want to take a break?"

"No, I want to break Petras' skull open and dig a rusty-" He paused, looking up. "Maybe I need one. You worked through dinner too," he said, sounding a little calmer.

"Both of us did," you said. "I can go to the kitchen-"

"There's leftover pizza in the fridge," he said, getting up. "I'll heat it up, unless you want me to cook."

"I just want to finish this budget shit and then call it night." You shook your head. "Ops are so expensive." But you wouldn't cut corners, even if funds were limited. Your people came first, and the money was there so you could do things right. You just had to be smart about it.

Gabriel reheated the pizza, and set a plate on your desk alongside a bottle of pineapple juice. He'd been buying a lot of the stuff lately. He pulled a chair up beside you and looked at the screen. "It's getting late, baby. You can work on that tomorrow."

You almost protested, but then realized if you stopped, he would too. And he could use always use the rest. So you nodded and took a slice of pizza. "Jack still in Geneva?"

"He's supposed to be back tonight. He's got Wilhelm and Gérard with him playing politics again. Wilhelm is surprisingly good at the charm offensive. That, or people are just too afraid to be nasty to his face." Gabriel looked like he wanted to say something else, probably something mean, but he stopped himself.

"Thanks for food," you said, smiling both at the food and his self control.

"You're welcome." He leaned over and dabbed at the corner of your mouth with his napkin, his hands warm against your face. "I want to do that dinner soon. Gérard and Amélie have
"You just want to get dressed up," you said, rolling your eyes.

"It's a side bonus," he agreed. "I'm more interested in seeing you and Jack dressed up."

"Is that one of your things? Fancy clothes?" You asked, sipping the juice.

"What do you mean?" Gabriel asked, lips curving upward. "I like looking good, yes."

"I mean, is that a turn on? Up there with being called "papi" and goading innocent agents into sparring matches?"

"You're hardly innocent, chica." Gabriel's nostrils flared. "But yes, I like seeing you all made up and proper. Because then I'm just going to be thinking about how I'm going to have you a disheveled wreck by the end of the night."

You shook your head, heat pooling between your legs. "You're as bad as Jack."

"Worse," he murmured, leaning in. Your breath hitched and he stopped, nose almost touching yours. He ran his thumb along your lower lip. "I have to admit, I'm very partial to you in pretty dresses, because of that first time. Makes my dick stand up just thinking about you waiting there in that little black dress and heels. It's not how I thought it would go, but I don't regret it at all."

"What do you mean?" You kept your eyes on him.

"Wasn't planning on waiting till the ball. Figured something would eventually happen here. It's where we spent the most time together, after all." He nipped your lower lip then and you smacked his arm.

"Gabriel!"

"You're going to tell me that you never thought about it?" His voice was low and smooth.

"I...I was in active denial!"

"So you weren't touching yourself at night, thinking about me and Jack?" He asked. "At all?"

"I didn't say that."

"Some of the fantasies went just like this. Late night. You and me alone. Something gives, and you end up underneath me, getting your brains fucked out on my desk." He paused. "Obviously, I wasn't going to initiate, because...well, abuse of power. But you know, if it stayed in my head, no harm done. I've spent a long time thinking about it."

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Well, I did just offer my desk. You love to go on about how yours is for working." Gabriel finished his pizza.

"Huh, I guess chivalry isn't dead," you said dryly.

"Or if you're too tired, we can call it night." He grinned wolfish at you. "My bed is softer than my desk."
He was incorrigible. Shaking your head, you glanced at the budget report. "Let me give this one more review. Then we'll see how I can help you, commander."

"Is that so?" Gabriel raised a brow. "Going to pretend like you're as clueless now as you were back then?"

"Are you asking me to roleplay? As myself?" You laughed softly.

"It is part of my fantasy," he said, completely serious.

The tension in his jaw surprised you. You leaned back in your chair, feigning disinterest. "All right, commander. You go back to your desk, and let me finish my work. I'll help you with your issue once I'm done. You owe me something nice for this. I'm requesting carne asada fries."

Gabriel drew back, smiling faintly. "This is your job, agent. I don't know why you think you deserve carne asada fries on top of your paycheck."

"Not everyone is willing to keep your workaholic super soldier hours, you know. That's why you burn through so many assistants."

"Just who do you think is in charge here, agent?" Gabriel huffed.

"You are, of course. Now go back to your desk and let me work. Unless you'd rather balance the ops resource budget."

"You're getting cheeky," Gabriel growled, laughter in his eyes. "Keep sassing me and you'll be doing extra PT and combat modules."

"Can't do paperwork if I'm doing pushups," you said, turning back to the screen.

"Some day that smart mouth is going to get you into trouble," Gabriel said, returning to his desk.

You checked the numbers, more out of habit than necessity. You had most of the work done. Tomorrow you'd see how it fit against the entire Blackwatch budget and if you needed to do some creative accounting to compensate for any shortages. You could also consult Genji; he had emergency Blackwatch funds squirreled away in several offshore accounts. Hell, you'd had him help you hide your personal funds and the ratline survival funds for individual agents. Everyone from Captain Amari to Ziv had backup identities and escape routes.

You could feel Gabriel's impatient gaze on your face while you worked. You shivered, the skin along your spine already too sensitive. Nervous energy prickled along the back of your neck. A little anticipation was good for you both.

Smiling to yourself, you looked up to see Gabriel glaring at his computer. He typed away, fingers striking the keyboard a little too hard.

"Commander, we don't have the budget to keep replacing your office supplies."

He snorted at that. "I'm tense, agent. Are you volunteering to step on the mat with me?" He looked up at you, impatience smoldering in his eyes.

"Maybe another time," you said, breath catching. "Do you want me to loosen the knots in your shoulders. I know Jack normally does it for you, but..."
Gabriel cocked his head to the side. "Are you OK with that?"

"You've done it for me before," you said.

"Once, and you panicked," Gabriel said, his smile not entirely happy. "Should I be worried? Are you going to ask me for an extravagant favor?"

"I already did: carne asada fries," you said. "With homemade pico, fresh guac, sour cream, and cheese. That's pretty lavish."

Gabriel laughed at that. "You need to work on your negotiating skills, agent. I have better things to offer than that."

"All right, how about some fresh horchata?" You crossed your arms. "Because I can't think of anything better right now. What are you suggesting? Cake?"

"Why don't you come over here and find out?" Gabriel rolled his shoulders, frowning as he massaged his left one.

You took your gloves off and his gaze darkened. He leaned forward in his chair, letting you sink your prosthetic fingers into his taut shoulder. You had much better control now and you kneaded carefully, conscious of your own strength. He made a guttural sound, dropping his head while you used your right hand on his other shoulder.

"You're so tense," you said. "Something bothering you?"

"The usual," he murmured, exhaling slowly.

"Politics? The weight of the world? Bland food?"

"Add smart ass, short-sighted agents to the list and you've got it all," he said with a grunt.

"You flatterer, you," you laughed. He groaned softly while you loosened the knot in his left shoulder. He hadn't been faking the stress. You leaned in, inhaling his scent. He smelled good, like chypre cologne and gun oil, and you sighed.

"Getting tired already, agent?"

"Nah, just trying to get this muscle relaxed. You're so tense. Hold still." You bit your lip, curling your metal fingers, digging your knuckles into the knot. He growled as you moved them in slow circle.

"Careful."

"Am I being too rough, sir? Do you need me to be gentle with you?"

Gabriel gave a sharp laugh. "Aren't you a smug little shit?"

"I'll keep going then," you said pressing harder, and he hissed.

"Don't get cocky, chica. There's only so much pushing I'm going to take from you."

"And then it's penal workouts, eh?" You laughed, because the banter was half the fun. "I'm going to call your bluff on that one, at least till the budget review is done. Besides, I'm doing you a favor. This is one locked up shoulder. You really need to relax more. You should have done something about it sooner."
"...Yeah," he said. "OK."

"Maybe you should take a vacation soon, too. Don't worry, you can leave me and Jesse in charge. We probably won't burn down the UN or declare war on Oasis. Probably."

Gabriel choked and began to laugh. "Damnit!"


"I don't know. What do you suggest?"

"Somewhere relaxing. So I vote a tropical island with good swimming and a fair amount of solitude. Don't want the paparazzi getting shots of the Commander Reyes in a Speedo. Or maybe we do? That could definitely deflect some of the UN scrutiny and be a PR coup. Hell, we could do an Agents of Overwatch calendar as a fundraiser..."

Gabriel snorted. "You are terrible at this." And you weren't sure if he meant roleplaying, seductive small talk, or persuading him to take a vacation. Maybe it was all of the above.

"...Sorry. I haven't taken a travel vacation since I was a kid," you said, chest suddenly tight. "I don't really know what to tell you."

Gabriel slowly turned his head to look at you. "So are you asking to tag along?"

You blinked, unsure of how to answer that.

"Don't worry, agent. I'll put you to work. Someone has to make the fancy little drinks and slather me in sunscreen. I'll even return the favor. Equatorial sun is brutal. Can't have you scorching that pretty hide." He grinned up at you, teeth bright in the soft office light.

"I uh..." You really weren't sure how much of this was roleplay and how much of this was...something else. And now you were afraid to break character and ask.

"And Jack will need all the help he can get. He burns like a lobster," Gabriel chuckled. "So how about it, chica? Behave yourself and you can stowaway with us to Vanuatu."

You exhaled slowly. "It's not nice to tease, sir."

"Just repaying the favor," he said, flashing a crooked smile.

"I'm not-"

"Aren't you?" You took a step backward and Gabriel was on his feet, the chair shoved back against the wall. He stared down at you, pupils dark, jaw clenched. "The way you push me? The double entendres? Those sideways glances you cast in my direction when you think I'm not paying attention?"

You swallowed, wondering how much of that he noticed before the Overwatch ball. Had he been that observant? Had you been that obvious? Your breathing grew shaky as you met his almost accusatory gaze. "I'm sorry-"

"I don't want your apologies," he growled. "Do something about it, or leave it alone. I'm tired of waiting, hermosa."

"But Jack-"
"The only thing that's going to bother Jack is that I got to you first," Gabriel snapped. "Don't pretend like you're not shooting him the same hungry looks that you've been sneaking my way. Because I've noticed that too. We both have."

Had you really been that blatant? Your heart pounded, and it was a struggle to crush your fight or flight instinct. You shuddered as Gabriel leaned over you, hands cupping your face.

"Gabriel-"

"I'll keep it simple, chica. Do you want it? Yes or no?" His lips ghosted along your cheek, not quite touching, just the warmth of his breath against your skin, traveling down your neck.

You nodded slowly.

"You have to say it, baby," he exhaled in your ear.

"Yes, please-"

He moved fast. One moment you were on your feet, and the next he had you pressed against the wall, his mouth covering yours. He kissed you hungrily, more teeth and tongue, all nips and pressure. You moaned softly as he ground against you, his knee sliding between your thighs, one hand cupping the back of your head, the other wrapped tightly around your waist.

"About damn time," he muttered, kissing your throat. "Get over there, hermosa. I want to taste you." He pushed you lightly in the right direction and you wobbled on shaky legs. Apparently you were moving too slow, because he picked you up and dropped you on the edge of his desk.

"Gabriel-"

"I like the way you say my name," he murmured. "Lay back. Let me give you a reward for being so brave."

You reclined, propped up on your elbows, Gabriel's hands yanking off your boots and unfastening your belt. You lifted your hips and he slid your pants off smoothly. He ran a finger along your panties, tracing your slit as he held your gaze.

"Already so wet," he chuckled, voice low. His tongue flicked out to moisten his lips and the heat in his eyes made you wonder if the desk was a bad choice. Not much cushioning here, and he didn't look the least bit gentle. Gabriel pulled up his chair and sat down, placing your knees over his shoulders. "You look as good as I imagined, lying here on my desk." He cupped your ass and lifted you to his mouth, placing a gentle kiss on your inner thigh. "Do you taste as good as you look?"

Heart pounding, you slid your right hand into your panties, not breaking eye contact while you slipped a finger into your pussy and pulled it out, dragging it along Gabriel's lips.

He sucked your finger to the third knuckle, groaning as he swirled his tongue around the digit. There was a sharp ripping sound and you swore as he tore your panties off.

"Damnit, Gabriel!"

"I'll buy you more," he said sharply and lowered his head, flicking his tongue against your clit.
All your protests evaporated and you gave a soft whimper.

He lapped at your clit, fingers sliding into your slick pussy. You threw your head back, eyes squeezed shut as he moved at a slow hard pace, not coming up for air, refusing to let up. His thrusts grew rougher as he curled his thick calloused fingers inside you. The pressure on your clit grew and you writhed on his desk, panting as he played with you. He wasn't teasing. He wasn't testing the waters. He was devouring you, fingers stretching you wide, getting you prepared for his cock. The thought made you clench and he growled as you squeezed his fingers.

"Don't stop, please-" you pulled his hat off, tossing it over your shoulder so you could tangle your fingers in his hair.

"Wasn't planning on it," he rasped, before licking your slit, his fingers still moving at a rough pace. "Love how you taste, hermosa. Tell me how much you want to come." The sheer lust in his voice wrapped around your core and you tightened your grip on his curls. "Tell me that I'm not the only one who's been thinking about this for far too long..."

"Please, I need you-" Your thighs trembled as he sped up. "Don't have words for the things I want to do with you-" you babbled, incapable of finishing your thoughts. You were close and you couldn't focus on speech and the feel of his mouth and hands on your body.

Gabriel laughed and his tongue pressing firmly against you as tremors ran through your core. You were so close. Two rhythms dominated your attention: the bass of your heartbeat pounding in your ears and the slick sounds of his fingers slipping in and out of you.

"That's it, baby," he crooned. "You don't have to wait for permission. Come for me now. I won't stop, I'm nowhere near done. I'm going to fuck this sweet pussy till you're too exhausted to move-"

He made more filthy promises but you were already coming on his face, keening as he licked you, his fingers still twisting inside you while you arched off the desk. He waited for you to fall flat, then he withdrew his fingers, licking them clean, before he wiped his mouth off on the back of his hand.

He pulled off his hoodie and shirt, dropping them on the floor as he unfastened his pants. You lay against the desk, mind hazy as you watched him stroke himself.

"You OK?" He leaned over you, teeth bared, smile faint.

"Thank you," you said and he chuckled.

"I'm not done yet," he said, rubbing the head of his cock against your slick hole. "You sure you're up for this?"

You nodded vigorously, lips parted. "Please, papi. Please fuck me on your desk. I need you. Been laying in my bunk, touching myself, thinking about you, but it's not enough-"

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. "You gotta behave baby. My delicate constitution can only take so much. You get me too worked up and I'll have you here all night."

You gave a soft cry as he eased the head inside, teeth gritted, brow furrowed in concentration.

"You feel so good, hermosa. You're taking me so well." He gave a sharp push and you threw your head back, whining as he stretched you out, his cock sliding in to the hilt. "You going
"Gabriel, oh fuck-"

"You're overdressed." He frowned, and pulled your shirt off, one hand unhooking your bra and tossing it onto the growing pile of clothes on the floor. "There we go." His hands cupped your breasts, squeezing gently as you bit your lip. "This is better than I imagined," he purred, leaning over to kiss you. "You know why?"

"Why?" You moaned as he sucked on your neck.

"Thought you'd be more of a smartass. But it looks like if I fuck you hard enough, you turn sweet pretty fast. That's going to be useful when you try to sass me again." He lifted one of your legs over his shoulder, sweat already dripping down his forehead.

"Gabriel, you're a jerk," you managed to get out.

"What was that? You want it harder?" Laughing he drew back and snapped his hips forward. You cried out as he went deeper, the angle sharper than before. "All right baby, I was going to take it easy on you, but if that's what you want..." His grin was savage and he began to thrust harder, each stroke of his thick cock stretching you wide while you arched off the desk, fingers digging into his forearms.

"Fuck!" You bucked your hips as he pounded you with bruising force. "Goddamnit! Pendejo!"

"Language, baby. Where did you learn these words?" He nuzzled your throat.

"You're a bad influence," you panted through gritted teeth.

"Slander," he said, kissing your forehead.

"You're so cruel-"

"You're the one who made me wait so long," he said in your ear. "I could edge you for hours, give you a taste of the agony you put me through-"

"Not fair. How was I supposed to know-?" You whimpered, breathing ragged from more than just exertion. "You never made anything clear-"

He kissed you gently, knuckles rubbing your cheek. "It's OK, hermosa. I've got you now. And I'm not going anywhere. That's what matters."

You gripped his hand as he peppered your face with open-mouthed kisses. Naked on his desk, one leg over his shoulder, you could only accept each deep thrust, his crown hitting your g-spot, his thumb back over your clit. Gabriel bent over you, his body burning hot against yours.

"Just you wait, baby. Jack will be back soon and then you'll really be in for it," he chuckled, mouth moving down your neck to your nipples. "He wants you just as badly, and since we're both willing to share-"

It didn't matter that Jack probably wouldn't be joining you, but just the thought of him had you clenching tighter around Gabriel.

"You like that, do you?" Gabriel chuckled. "I should warn you. He's probably going to be
aggravated that we started without him, and even if he doesn't look it, he's a kinky bastard. I suspect you're going to have a sore ass tomorrow."

You cried out as Gabriel began to drive harder. The desk beneath you shook, and you clutched his free hand tighter, fingers interlaced, as he increased the pressure on your clit.

"Gabriel," you mewed. "So close-"

"Love how you say my name," he groaned, mouth sliding down the side of your neck. "You feel so good around my cock, so tight and wet. And you're taking of all of me, baby. Going to come inside you, baby. You ready for it?"

"Please-" Your voice cracked.

"You're so good to me, corazon."

Each hard stroke pushed you closer to the edge, and you writhed beneath him, left hand clawing at the air. Gabriel squeezed your right hand, holding it flat against the desk while you came there, sprawled out under him. His hips jerked and you whined as you felt him filling you up, his cum pouring inside you while you twitched helplessly beneath him.

You lay there trying to catch your breath, while he placed lingering kisses on your throat.

"You like holding hands? That's cute, I do too." He raised your fingers to his lips.

"Gabriel-" You instinctively tried to pull them back, but he held on, kissing your right hand, then your left.

"Got caught up in the moment, did you?" He said in your ear, thumbs stroking your knuckles. Me too. Want to go again, like this, baby?"

You stared at him open-mouthed, brain blank.

"I thought you didn't do this kind of thing on your desk, Gabe. I thought your office was for "working." Same goes for you, Lucky."

If Gabriel had not been holding you, you would have fallen off the desk in surprise. Instead, you tilted your head to the side. Jack leaned against the door, arms crossed, eyes bright. You had been so caught up with Gabriel, you hadn't even heard him come in. His smile was tense and his eyes were hard. Your pulse sped up. You knew that look. Jack was in a mood.

"Mmm, welcome back, Jack." Gabriel nuzzled your throat.

"Thought you were going to wait for me, Gabe." Jack shed his coat on a chair, circling the desk. "Thought we were going to share."

Your eyes widened. Jack was roleplaying too? Had they been discussing this as well? You shivered and Gabriel gave you a smug grin.

"Night's not over yet," he said, and Jack gave you both a hard look. "Finally, got her to relax, Jack. You know how squirrelly she is. Trying to scare her off?"

Jack flashed you a cocky grin. "You don't look like you're going to be running off right now. Not with Gabe's cock nailing you to his desk." He leaned over, fingers tracing your lips. "Going to let me play too, sweetheart?"
You shivered as Gabriel released your fingers and pulled out, his cum leaking down your thighs onto his desk. He sat beside you, warm hands petting your sides.

"You're kind of intense right now," you said.

"Scared?" He asked, mildly. You weren't fooled. There was ice in his eyes and a harsh undertone in his voice.

"Wondering if it's a good idea," you said.

"You like bad ideas," he said, rubbing your cheek with the rough pad of his thumb. "I'm a little pissed at Gabe for starting without me, but you're in the clear. Just don't start pushing me, and you'll be fine." He gave you a lazy smile. "Don't you want to see how he looks on his knees?"

Your breath hitched. The two of you had talked about Jack topping Gabriel, but you hadn't expected to see it tonight. He'd given you plenty of warnings, too. You were going to have to tread carefully, unless you wanted him to turn that ferocity on you. That thought did not bother you as much as it should have.

Gabriel raised a brow, like he hadn't quite been expecting that twist.

You nodded, and Jack's answering laugh came out as a low rumble in his chest.

"You heard her, Reyes. Go sit on the couch. I'll deal with you in a minute."

Gabriel pressed a kiss to your hand. "You're going to want to behave, baby. Jack's not playing nice tonight."

"Your fault, Reyes. Now get over there. Don't make me repeat myself," Jack said, voice sharp.

Smile far too satisfied, Gabriel sauntered over to the couch and dropped to his knees, back straight, shoulders squared. He didn't bow his head or look away. He just watched the two of you, cock already standing at attention.

Jack towered over you, his eyes following your every move.

You pulled yourself up, wincing at the mess on Gabriel's desk. You would be bruised tomorrow, and that was without whatever Jack had in mind. Earlier the room felt like a sauna, but now you shivered, rubbing your arms for extra warmth.

"What's your status, agent?" Jack asked.

"Green," you murmured. "I'm a little sore, but-"

"I know you're new to this, agent," Jack said, a hard edge in his voice. "But if you want me to play nice with you, a little respect for the rank goes a long way."

"Sorry, sir," you said, heart beating faster.

His smile widened, more predatory than pleased. "Did Reyes fuck the sass out of you, agent? I've got to admit, I'm a little disappointed. Thought you'd put up more of a fight."

You clenched your teeth, a smart remark already on the tip of your tongue.

Jack bared his teeth, excitement palpable.
Oh hell, Jack was goading you now and it took every ounce of self control you had not to take the bait. You wanted to push back, to see that feral pleasure ignite till something gave, usually your body. You would play next time, when you weren't quite so sore and didn't have to work the next day.

"Sorry, sir. He took me off-guard." You dangled your legs over the edge of the desk, fatigue causing your shoulders to droop. Jack ran his fingers along your spine, the heat of his touch causing your nerves to prickle.

"Poor thing," Jack said, his breath hot on your ear. "You looked so cute, wiggling on his desk while he fucked you. Going to let me have a turn?"

"Need a moment, sir," you sighed as Jack's hands began to squeeze your shoulders, his lips pressed against the side of your neck.

"Looks like he marked you all up." Jack nipped the back of your neck and you jolted forward. He laughed. "Don't worry. I'll give you plenty too. Have to make sure everyone knows you're off limits now." He wrapped an arm around your midsection, his mouth on your neck.

He was warm and you leaned against him, eyes shut.

"Too much, sweetheart?"

You shook your head. "I just need to catch my breath, sir." You glanced back over your shoulder. Jack was watching you, his smile taut. Those blue eyes met yours and his grip tightened. He was searching for something, and you had no idea what. The intensity in his gaze surprised you and you looked away.

"Feeling shy?"

"Maybe," you said.

He chuckled. "You want me to play with Gabe first or would you rather come sit on my lap and let me warm you up? I can be nice, if you behave yourself."

"I want you, sir." You exhaled slowly.

He grabbed his coat and sat down in Gabriel's chair. "Come here."

You slid off the desk, into Jack's lap, kissing his jaw as you straddled his thighs. He slid his coat over your shoulders and cupped your face, holding you still so he could kiss you. He smelled like coffee and leather, and you sighed wrapping your arms around his neck. His cock pressed against your belly through the fabric of his pants, and there was no mistaking his arousal.

"Got something for you," he said, reaching into the pocket of his jacket. He withdrew a black leather choker with a buckle and a D-ring. "You can try it on later if you prefer. There's a matching leash."

The possessiveness surprised you, just a little. But then, it shouldn't. Jack was a kinky bastard. Of course, he'd like this kind of thing. "Thank you, sir," you murmured. "Can you help me put it on, please?"

"Oh, you are being good," Jack laughed softly. 'Is it because you want to see me topping Gabe?"
"It's definitely incentive, sir." You shivered as he brushed your hair to the side. You tilted your head to make it easier for him. He fastened the collar firmly around your throat and you stiffened.

"Too tight?"

"A little," you said.

He loosened it a notch, slipping two fingers between the leather and your skin. "Better?"

"Thank you," you said.

"Sir," he reminded you.

"Thank you, sir," you said, trying not to roll your eyes.

He raised a brow, reached into the overcoat, pulled out the leash. Hooking it to the D-ring, he let it dangle, admiring the sight of you perched in his lap, wearing his coat and a leather collar.

"Are you too sore to play right now?" He asked, rubbing your back.

"No, sir."

"Get over here, Reyes. Bend over the desk." Jack lifted you off his lap, setting you on the sticky desk as well. You turned to see Gabriel leaning over, weight on his elbows, a faint smile on his face. He kissed your shoulder, his beard tickling your skin.

Jack opened a drawer and pulled out a small container of lube. He reached into another overcoat pocket and withdrew a red plug. It was bigger than the ones you took, and you wondered if Jack normally carried things like that around. The jacket was heavy, and the armor plates maintained the line of the coat. He could have all kinds of interesting surprises stored in it. Like an extra perverted Batman.

Jack rose, fingers tangling in Gabriel's hair as he leaned forward to kiss him. The skintight black t-shirt left little to the imagination and you just enjoyed watching him move.

"Open up," he ordered, pressing the plug to Gabriel's lips. Gabriel smirked as he swirled his tongue along the silicone, his dark eyes never leaving Jack's face. Jack clenched his jaw, one hand gripping Gabriel's chin. "Got greedy, didn't you? Starting without me."

"Don't act like you didn't enjoy watching me raw her, Jack."

Jack shook his head slowly. "I'm going to enjoy pounding your disrespectful ass more." He set down the plug, released Gabriel and walked around the desk. He grabbed Gabriel from behind, one hand splayed over his throat, the other pressing into Gabriel's mouth, fingers thrusting roughly past his lips.

Gabriel stiffened, groaning as Jack ground against him, his face shuttered in concentration.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. He likes it rough too. Don't you, Reyes?"

Though Gabriel was sucking on Jack's fingers, he gave you a quick nod, amusement in his eyes. You didn't think you looked worried, but you were sitting mostly naked on your boss's desk wearing his boss's coat and a leash. You weren't entirely sure how you looked right now.

Jack withdrew his fingers, and a few seconds later, Gabriel grunted. You reached over,
stroking his face while he gritted his teeth.

"Been awhile, sir. Might need some more lube, please," he murmured, voice surprisingly soft. He was looking past you know, eyes half-shut, expression euphoric.

Jack nuzzled the back of his neck. "I told you. The attitude disappears once I bend him over and start stretching out that juicy ass." Jack bit down on Gabriel's shoulder hard and Gabriel gave a low groan. He took the bottle of lube and drizzled it on his fingers. You cocked your head, watching as Jack began to loosen him up.

"Come here, sweetheart. I have a job for you. Bring the plug."

You got off the desk, carefully laying the coat on the chair, because it was too long to drag around. You weren't quite as cold now. The plug was heavier than you expected, and wider than you were used to, but this wasn't for you.

"I've got him ready. Why don't you do the honors?" Jack's voice was low and rough in your ear. He pulled back, giving you room to work.

"Can you spread yourself out?" You picked up the lube, and watched as Gabriel grinned at you over his shoulder, hands squeezing his cheeks as he opened himself up for you. You coated the toy liberally and then poured some inside him. Gabriel shivered, muscles tensing.

You eased the plug in, watching it slip in halfway, before stopping. You began to wiggle it, Gabriel's breathing growing louder and raspier, his thighs and ass flexing.

"Relax," you said, rubbing his low back.

"You can be rougher, sweetheart. Neither of us are quite as delicate as you," Jack laughed, getting out a bottle of sanitizer and cleaning his hands. You didn't miss that he wiped them on Gabriel's pants. "Just give it a good hard smack."

Gabriel shuddered, but didn't protest. You just added more lube, pushing slowly till it went in with a soft pop. Grinning, you bit the wonderfully round left cheek, and Gabriel swore, hands dropping to his side.

"I'll remember that, hermosa," he growled.

You kissed the spot, nibbling on the back of his thighs and he jerked to the side, like he was ticklish.

There was a tug on your collar and you turned your head. Jack held your leash, eyes bright and smile just a little too eager for comfort.

"Get on the couch, on your hand and knees, unless you'd rather I took you on the floor."

You backed up, not quite liking how he coiled the leash around his hand. He wasn't choking you, and the leather rested comfortably at the base of your neck, but it still made you antsy. And judging by the shit-eating grin on Jack's face, he knew it.

You climbed onto the couch,

Jack knelt in front of you, unbuckling his belt. He was almost giddy, his long pretty cock bobbing in your face. He rubbed the head against your lips, pearly fluid already leaking from the tip. "Get it wet."
You gave it a few long licks before he tugged on the leash and you got the hint. Opening wide you swallowed him to the base, and he chuckled, fingers stroking your hair.

"Look how eager you are, agent. Do you need me that badly?" He rocked his hips and you bobbed your head, trying to keep the rhythm. "You're so cute with your mouth full. It's a good way to keep you out of trouble. Don't worry, I've ordered a smaller gag just for you. Still not sure if we're going to need it, guess that depends on how much screaming you're doing."

You nearly choked, now very concerned about what he had planned.

"It's OK, we'll take a few days off for _that_. I know you won't be walking after I'm done with you. That's about all I'll tell you right now. Just know that this is payback for all the things you think you got away with, like teasing. I haven't forgotten, sweetheart. I'm just biding my time." He pulled out, cock now slick with your saliva.

You glanced over at Gabriel, who knelt on the floor, a look of harsh concentration on his face. But when he met your gaze, he just gave you a small smile, which could have been reassuring, until you remembered that whatever Jack had planned, Gabriel was probably in on it.

There was an insistent pull on your collar and you looked up to see Jack sitting down on the couch, his thighs spread wide.

"Come sit down," he said, patting his thighs. "Face Gabe."

"Do you want me on your lap or your cock, sir?" You asked, as he hadn't tucked himself away.

"My cock, agent. That will make this more interesting."

Positioning yourself was a little tricky, but Jack held your hips, and slowly lowered you onto his shaft. You bit your lip, breathing heavier as you slid down, your legs spread over his thighs.

Jack groaned, forehead pressed to the back of your head, one arm hugging you around the waist, the other gripping the leash. His cock twitched inside you and you clenched around him. He cursed, teeth sinking into your shoulder and you flinched.

"Don't tease, sweetheart. Not unless you're prepared for the consequences," he warned, hands squeezing your breasts, thumbs scratching lightly across your nipples.

"Sorry, sir," you whimpered.

"These are so sensitive. You'd look good with piercings. I'm partial to rings," he said, pinching your nipples. "Maybe with little bells on them, so you jingle while I'm pounding you. That'd be pretty cute."

"Damnit, Jack," you shook as he began sucking marks onto the side of your neck.

"Come here, Reyes. We're going to play a game."

Gabriel's motions were deliberate. He approached, hips swaying. You couldn't walk that smoothly with a plug in you, but Gabriel barely showed any discomfort. He just knelt between your thighs, hands resting on your knees.

"It feels good, doesn't it? Having Jack stuff that sweet pussy with his pretty cock?" Gabriel
kissed the inside of your thighs and you dropped your head against Jack's shoulder.

"He's so deep." You took slow breaths, hands balled into fists.

Jack chuckled. "Here are the rules. Reyes, you're going to try to make her come in a few minutes, using just your mouth. Lucky, you're not allowed to come till I give you permission. There are prizes and there are consequences."

"Wait, how am I supposed to hold out with your cock inside me? That's really unfair—"

"Do you think I care about your excuses, sweetheart?" Jack asked, voice cool. "You have your orders." He squeezed your breasts and your breath hitched.

Gabriel's tongue flicked against your clit and you squirmed, Jack's dick rubbing against your sensitive inner walls.

"S-so mean," you panted as Gabriel began to suck, his tongue still pressing hard against you.

"I haven't begun to get mean." Jack rolled his hips and you shrieked. "It feels good when you wiggle like that," he said in your ear, hands still teasing your breasts. "Keep complaining, I'll just bend you over and pound that tight little pussy. Oh, you're enjoying this. I can feel you squeezing tight around me. You're dripping down my cock, sweetheart. Keep it up, Gabe. She's halfway there already."

You gritted your teeth, trying to think about mundane things, like when was the last time you'd restocked your grenades? Were you low on cumin? How were you going to get Jack back for this?

Jack kept casually telling you filthy things while he fondled your tits. He would occasionally rock his hips, just to make you tense up. And Gabriel tongued your clit, his hands kneading your thighs, holding them apart.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Jack said in your ear. "Been thinking about it much, sweetheart? Because I have. Every time I get you on the mat. Every time you give me that cocky little troublemaking grin. Even sometimes when you're sitting at your desk, hyper-focused and hard at work. I want to distract you. You can't tell me that you've been oblivious to us the whole time."

You swore as Gabriel's teeth grazed your clit, the friction making you arch.

"D-didn't know till someone pointed it out," you said. "Wanted you both, but—" You trembled as Jack's fingers dug into your hips. "Thought you were off-limits. Honest. Thought you guys just liked teasing me."

Jack chuckled in your ear. "We do. Preferably with our dicks. The point is, I have a lot of pent-up frustration baby, and you are the direct cause." His hands cupped your breasts and he began to thrust harder, Gabriel's tongue lapping against your clit while Jack bounced you on his cock. "Come on Gabe, you're running out of time. And sweetheart, if you come without permission, I'm going to enjoy punishing you."

You tried to squeeze your thighs shut, but Gabriel held them apart as you jerked between the two of them. Panting, you gripped Gabriel's hair, trying to push him away. Jack laughed at your attempts and his arms around you, trapping your hands at your sides.

"Behave," he growled in your ear.
"Can't- I can't hold back much longer, sir." You shook as Gabriel's fingers pressed against your clit. He inclined his head back, grinning smugly as Jack sped up, his thighs slapping against your ass. Arching, you clenched your teeth till your jaw ached, trying to hold out. "Jack!"

"Are you asking for permission?" Jack asked, a little breathless. He canted his hips and you choked back a sob. He was so deep, and Gabriel wasn't letting up either. The tension spiked and you teetered on the edge, trying to not to fall.

"Please, sir, I can't-"

"That's it," Jack purred. "Love how needy you sound. You're taking it so well."

"Jack, please oh please, sir-" Desperation choked the words in your throat.

He laughed, slowing his thrusts, giving you just enough of a reprieve so that you could hold out a few seconds more. "What was that?"

"May I please come, sir?" You begged, voice cracking.

"Such a polite girl." Jack chuckled in your ear. "All right, agent. Come all over Reyes' face."

Back bowing, you wailed as the orgasm pulsed through your core. Bucking your hips, you rode it out, swearing as the sensations twisted through you, your inner muscles clamping down almost painfully around Jack's cock.

Gabriel didn't stop playing with you, his eyes shining while he continued rubbing your clit. You struggled to break contact, the overstimulation wreaking havoc on your sensitive nerves.

"Reyes, I thought I was clear," Jack said, gruffly. "You were only supposed to use your mouth."

"Sorry, sir," Gabriel said, fingers still stroking you. "I got carried away."

"Damnit Gabriel! Let up!" You snapped. Jack still held your arms pinned to your sides.

Gabriel swiped his tongue over your clit, giving your pussy a hungry kiss. He deliberately slid his fingers into his mouth, licking your juices off them.

"Well, sweetheart, it looks like you win by default. Have to admit, you're extra cute when you're thrashing around like that. Think I'll have to tie you up again. We'll go till you're a pleading, cum-soaked mess." Jack rolled his hips and you gave a strangled moan. "And Reyes, you can stay where you are. Hands off that thick cock. I'll deal with your insubordinate ass in a minute."

Jack swiveled to the side and pushed you forward onto the couch. Before you had a chance to react, he was inside you again, hips flush with your ass. He pulled on the leash and you raised your head.

"I was going to have you suck him off while I fucked you again, but he's forfeited that reward. Are you warmed up, sweetheart? Because I'm not going to hold back this time."

He snapped his hips forward and you dropped, face buried in the couch cushions. "Jack-"

"Love how you say my name," he growled. "Been thinking about fucking you into this couch for a long time. You look so cute curled up on it. Reyes has sent me a picture or two of you
asleep here. Personally, I thought you'd be more comfortable in my bed, but we'll try that out later."

He wasn't teasing any more, his cock driving into you hard, and you scratched at the upholstery. Jack's cock split you wide and while it wasn't as torturous as the constant pressure on your clit, you were still sensitive from your last orgasm.

"Loved feeling you cream all over my dick. And hearing you beg, sweetheart, I almost lost control right there." Jack held you steady, continuing to sheathe himself inside your heat. He angled himself to hit your sweet spot, and you whimpered in response. "Been waiting a long time to do this." He rested a hand on your back. "Too long. But I got you now." He gave the leash a little pull, and you raised your head, glancing back over your shoulder to meet Jack's eyes. His smile was surprisingly gentle and he leaned forward, kissing you.

"Jack-"

"Shh, if you keep forgetting my title and there are going to be consequences."

"Sorry, sir," you whimpered. "I'll try harder, sir."

"Fuck that's hot. All right, baby." He drew back, hands gripping your hips. "See if you can keep up then." Jack slammed into you, his cock stretching you out then leaving you empty and needy. He fucked you into the couch, ass in the air, cheek flat against the cushions, eyes meeting Gabriel's. He smiled at you, strangely relaxed, his heavy cock bobbing between his thighs.

"Go on, hermosa. Want to see Jack blow his load inside you. You know how long we've both wanted this? Do you know how many nights he's fucked me into the mattress, the two of us fantasizing about having you in between us?"

The image of Jack holding Gabriel down and using him like he was using you now, was too much. Hands curling into fists, you came then, Jack fucking you straight through your orgasm. Jack growled something obscene and redoubled his pace, his cock pushing deeper inside you. You shook as he yanked back on the leash, his teeth sinking into the base of your neck. He bit down hard and you squealed, his cock twitching inside you. You lay there, milking him while he held you tightly, aftershocks leaving you weak and limp.

Jack's tongue laved at the bite and he sighed. "Sorry, baby. Looks like that might bruise. Didn't mean to go so hard on you. Spread your legs. We'll get you cleaned up."

You sighed as he pulled out of you. Rolling onto your side, you winced as you opened your thighs.

"Come here, Reyes. Use that talented tongue of yours."

Your eyes widened as Gabriel began to lick your slit, Jack's semen trickling out of your puffy lower lips. He didn't tease you, he just slurped away at your sloppy pussy.

"Such a pretty sight," Jack petted Gabriel's hair. "Love seeing your mouth smeared with my cum."

"Think you like coming inside me more, sir," Gabriel chuckled.

You rested your head on the pillow, watching as Gabriel hungrily swallowed Jack down. Jack had both hands in Gabriel's curls, and he pushed himself in to the base, holding Gabriel's head in place. Gabriel just reached up, cupping Jack's ass. Jack was a lot rougher with Gabriel than with you.

Gabriel winked at you, even as he drooled all over Jack's shaft. You squeezed your thighs together, unable to look away. He didn't have the same breathless enthusiasm that Jack applied to everything. Instead he was slow and thorough, adding a teasing sensuality to every motion. Jack gritted his teeth, pulling out, his cock slapping against Gabriel's cheek. Jack snarled, reaching down to kiss Gabriel, his hands still tangled in the other man's curls.

"You look good on your knees, Reyes," Jack said, hoarsely.

"I look good from every angle," he said, teeth grazing Jack's lips.

You laughed at Jack's disgruntled expression.

"You're so damn cocky." Jack shoved him onto his back. Gabriel rested on his elbows, grinning smugly at Jack. "Going to enjoy making you my bitch."

"Always the sweet talker," Gabriel gripped Jack's t-shirt, pulling him closer. "It's a good thing I got to Lucky first. You would've scared her off."

You didn't see Jack move. One moment, Gabriel was teasing Jack, the next, he was flat on his back, Jack's knees on his shoulders. "You really want to push me, Reyes," Jack rasped. "Lucky, get my coat."

You weren't limping, but you padded gingerly across the floor, feeling both pairs of eyes on you. You brought Jack his coat and he reached into the pockets, pulling out a thick pair of cuffs. Leather-lined, the connecting chain was shorter than the ones he used on you - three inches at most.

"Thank you, sweetheart," he said, not looking at you. "If you're cold, you can put my jacket on. Sorry, I'm going to have to take a moment to deal with Reyes."

You draped the coat over your shoulders and sat on desk, watching as Jack secured Gabriel's hands. Gabriel looked anything but repentant, his smirk not diminishing at all.

"Are you going to fuck me like you mean it, sir?" Gabriel purred. "Because it's no fun when you hold back."

"You won't be sitting right tomorrow, Reyes." Jack stood up and pulled off his shirt. You sighed, watching his arms flex and his pectorals ripple. Both men were beautiful and watching Jack strip was a pleasure in and of itself. "Sweetheart, I want to watch you play with his cock. But you can't let him come. He has to earn that."

You slid off the desk, leaving behind Jack's coat. He turned to face you, blue eyes wild. One hand wrapped around the back of your neck and he leaned over, mouth claiming yours. He reached into another coat pocket and pulled out a remote. A slow smile spread across your face.

"Go on then," he said.

You crawled between Gabriel's legs, your hands kneading his thick thighs. He shuddered as you squeezed his shaft, running your tongue along the underside. He smelled musky and his skin was salty with sweat. He gave a low groan as you swallowed him down, winding your tongue
around him in slow strokes.

"You shouldn't tease me, corazon," Gabriel croaked. "Jack's not always going to be the one holding the leash."

You released him with a loud pop. "Should I stop, papi? Would you rather I sat back and just watched while the commander edges you? I guess I could sit on your desk, and play with myself-"

Gabriel snarled and Jack laughed, tugging on your leash.

"Behave, sweetheart. Reyes, she's following my orders, something you seem to have trouble with." He knelt behind you, a hand resting on your ass. "Here's something to take your mind off Lucky." He clicked a button on the remote and Gabriel stiffened beneath you. Then the humming grew louder.

"Goddamnit, Jack!" He shut his eyes, teeth bared.

"Don't you like it?" You asked, fingers gliding over his shaft. "I remember you getting me one-"

Gabriel arched off the ground, panting as the vibrations grew stronger. "Baby, you are both going to pay for this-"

"You know, she likes it when you threaten her. She's dripping wet right now." Jack rubbed your slit, his thick fingers dipping inside you and you mewled softly as he curled them. You took Gabriel in your mouth then, muffling your noises.

Swearing, Gabriel writhed underneath you, his heels digging into the floor while the anal plug pulsed inside him. He raised his hips, trying to get you to take him deeper.

Jack tugged on the leash and you drew back.

"He's close. But I'm not going to let him come. Not till he asks nicely." Jack set you in his lap, his fingers still sliding in and out of you.

"Do I get to come, sir?" You moaned as he pinched your nipples, his fingers speeding up.

"You did win the game," Jack chuckled. "You want to come all over my hand while Reyes watches? So shameless."

"Please, sir." You smiled at Gabriel. His expression was savage and you wondered just how far things would go tonight.

Jack's fingers scissored inside you and his other hand began to stroke your clit. "Such a greedy agent," he ran his tongue along the shell of your ear. "How many times have you gotten off tonight?"

It took you a moment to count. And then you felt just a little self-conscious saying it out loud. "Four times, sir."

"And you still want more?" Jack's voice dropped an octave, his fingers moving faster.

"You do this to me, sir. Both of you." You turned around to kiss Jack's cheek.

Gabriel said something in obscene in Spanish, sweat beading on his forehead. His hips
bucked, thighs shaking as he lifted himself off the ground.

"You'll get more, sweetheart, but I want you to pace yourself. I want this to last." He withdrew his fingers, running them across your lips and you licked them clean while Gabriel groaned, his abs clenching as he squirmed on the ground. "I think Reyes wants some attention."

You crawled out of Jack's lap and sat on Gabriel's legs.

He stared up at you with half-lidded eyes, his breathing labored. "Hermosa," he croaked. "I need to feel your pretty lips around me-"

"Are you going to ask nicely?" You cooed, one palm resting on his stomach, the other hand, reaching down to stroke his cock.

Gabriel groaned, and you could practically see the sarcastic retort on the tip of his tongue. Still smiling, you ran your thumb along his balls, watching his eyes flutter shut. You kissed a line along his clavicle before sliding down to nibble on his thighs. He twitched, from side to side, hands clenched into fists.

"Hermosa." He licked his lips. "Corazon." His eyes opened and you could read the desperate need etched on his face. "Baby, please. I'm asking so very nicely." Except, there was a not very nice undercurrent to his voice, and you shivered.

It wasn't begging, nowhere near humble enough, but it was the closest he'd ever come for you. Your smile wicked, you ran your tongue along the tip and he groaned.

"You can do better than that," you said. "Say it like you mean it."

Gabriel tossed his head back. "You're vicious," he said, inhaling sharply, and you knew he wanted to add to that, but he had better self control than you. He gritted his teeth, tensing beneath you. You watched his abdominals tighten and he took another shuddering breath, sweat beading on his forehead, hair already damp. "Please, baby," he rasped, voice throaty and raw. "I need you to touch me, with those clever fingers, with that wicked mouth, that sweet pussy. It doesn't matter. Please, I just need you."

That still wasn't begging, but you weren't complaining. You looked up at Jack, his blue eyes shining in the low light.

"I think he deserves a reward," he said with a boyish smile, stroking himself with one hand.

You angled your head, one hand massaging his thighs while you used the other to hold his thick cock in place. Sucking him down, you kept your gaze on his face. His eyes rolled back as he dipped his head backward, muttering a string of rough and guttural Spanish.

His skin burned against yours and he swore under his breath, your name featuring prominently in his rant. He filled your throat, and you couldn't look away from him, the taut severity of his expression, the fierceness in his eyes. He didn't need to voice his threats; you knew he would get you back for this. But that didn't matter right now. In this moment, he burned for you. More sweat dripped down his chest, and he arched, nearly choking you. But you held him by the base of his cock, and didn't let him interrupt your rhythm. He snarled, but you stayed in control, and watching all that hard muscle twitch and shake under your touch was intoxicating. You had to resist the urge to stroke yourself. Instead, you focused all your efforts on making him fall apart. Tongue, fingers, and lips working in tandem, you kept up the pressure, pushing him closer and closer to the edge.
"Should I tell her to stop, Gabe?" Jack's voice was breathless with excitement. "It would serve you right."

"Damnit, Jack! No, don't stop," he snapped, words running together, thighs tensing underneath you. "Please don't fucking stop baby-"

You had no intention of stopping. You were too far gone, too addicted to seeing Gabriel in this frenzied state, at your mercy. Blood pounding in your ears, you could feel the vibrations from the plug pick up and Gabriel gave a hoarse yell, and hips jerking. You braced yourself, swallowing the thick flood of cum. When you raised your head, Jack was right there, inches from your face and he cupped the back of your head, kissing you hard.

"He didn't have permission to come." Jack pressed his forehead to yours.

"You didn't tell me to stop, sir," you said, batting your lashes. "I can't help that Commander Reyes needs more discipline."

Gabriel gave a harsh laugh and lifted his head off the floor. "I need discipline? Just you wait-"

"You may have a point," Jack said, nuzzling your neck. "But you have room to criticize. In fact, I'm looking forward to seeing him teach you all about discipline."

"If he has the energy for that after this, we haven't done our jobs properly, sir."

"I suppose you're right, agent." Mischief sparked in his eyes. "On your stomach, babe. I think we've waited long enough."

Gabriel took a shaky breath and rolled over. He lay on his chest, bound hands on the ground in front of him, hips raised.

You retrieved the lube from the desk, watching as Jack worked the plug out of Gabriel's ass. Jack applied a generous amount of lube, and you leaned against Gabriel's desk. With one hand on the back of Gabriel's neck, Jack rested on his knees and slowly pushed in. Jack's face was a mask of concentration, sweat trickling down his brow. Gabriel's mouth curved into a circle, his eyes closed.

"Love being inside you," Jack growled. "Love watching you take my cock. That gorgeous ass just sucks me in. Look at you, Reyes. I should fuck you into the carpet more frequently." His fingers tightened on Gabriel's throat, and you bit your lip, watching Gabriel relax against Jack's body. You had to remind yourself that he was obviously having fun.

Jack made eye contact and he studied your face, his grip on Gabriel's neck loosening. "Too much?"

You shook your head. "He's fine, I'm fine."

Jack nodded and continued to thrust, long deep strokes that had Gabriel resting his head against his forearms. "He can still breathe, sweetheart. I promise."

You nodded. "I know. I'm good. Just enjoying seeing you both like this."

Jack snapped his hips forward, picking up the pace. One hand sliding around to pump Gabriel's cock. Gabriel groaned, obviously still sensitive from his recent orgasm. His hips seemed to move of their own accord, matching Jack's rhythm. "You're so beautiful. Love how you look
underneath me. Love pounding this tight ass. Love feeling you all hot and slick in my hands. Even though you just came, you're practically begging for more."

"Jack-" Gabriel's face was strained. "Mi cielito-"

"Commander Reyes, you sound so damn filthy," Jack growled. "Letting me fuck you on the floor of your office. How absolutely shameless."

Gabriel groaned, too far gone to comment on the irony of that statement. And to be honest, you were now smart enough to keep your mouth shut. You didn't want to ruin the mood.

Jack moved faster, his fist tightening around Gabriel's shaft. The sound of wet flesh on flesh echoed in the office as Jack pistoned in and out of Gabriel's well-stretched hole. Gabriel panted, eyes unfocused as Jack pushed him harder.

"Is this what you had in mind when you disobeyed my orders, Reyes?" Jack laughed sharply. "If you had behaved, we could have put Lucky in between us and fucked her till she was a boneless, mewling wreck." Jack grinned up at you, and you knew from the look in his eyes, that he hadn't been joking about that plan. "Instead, I'm going to have to remind you who's in charge around here. But I know you like that. Almost as much as you like having an audience. What do you think of letting her see you like this? Strict and severe Commander Reyes, getting his ass reamed by the Strike Commander, and loving every minute of it-"

Gabriel gave a ragged moan and dropped his head, hips moving at Jack's rhythm.

"Come on, Reyes. Don't hide your face. Let Lucky see you come for me. She's never seen you like this, and I know she'll enjoy it."

Gabriel stared up at you, dark eyes hazy, lips chapped. "Mi corazon," he murmured. "Need you both-" And he trembled, shoulders shaking as he thrust faster into Jack's hand. Recognizing the signs, Jack slowed his pace, watching Gabriel tremble underneath him. You watched in rapt fascination as Gabriel spilled a smaller load on Jack's fingers, his eyes never leaving your face. Jack hugged the older man with his free arm, kissing the back of his neck a content smile on his face.

"Goddamnit, Jack," Gabriel sighed, when he could speak again.

"You mean, "thank you, sir?"

"Thank you, sir," Gabriel said turning his head so he could accept another kiss from Jack.

"You're welcome. This is just the warm-up, Gabe. I'm going to ravage you tonight."

"Love you too, Morrison," Gabriel groaned. "Even if you're a sadistic cocktease."

"Even if you're a sadistic cocktease, sir."

Gabriel chuckled. "Yes indeed, sir."

It didn't surprise you that Gabriel submitted to Jack. When they moved, they had a distinct grace, a synchronization born from a long history of intimacy. Even if Gabriel preferred to be in charge, he trusted Jack to take care of him, and the thought made your chest tighten. It wasn't quite jealousy. Seeing them like this, open and unguarded, was a privilege, one you didn't take for granted. But it also reminded you that you weren't on the same level. It wasn't that Jack and Gabriel excluded you, but that you didn't know how to progress. This relationship had not come
with an instruction manual.

Gabriel cleared his throat. "Going to join us, baby?"

You swallowed, wondering if your doubts had been on your face. "Sure." You knelt in front of Gabriel, one hand brushing his damp curls off his forehead.

Gabriel pressed his lips to your knuckles, metal and flesh, his eyes on your face. "I want you too, corazon."

"So greedy," Jack murmured. He hauled Gabriel to his knees, arms wrapped around his waist. You weren't sure about the angle, but you wrapped your arms around his neck and lowered yourself onto his lap, using one hand to guide him inside.

"You're so good to me, mi cielito, mi corazon." Gabriel buried his face in your neck.

You whimpered as Jack slammed into him the force reverberating through your own body.

"Can you feel me through him, sweetheart? I bet you can feel him twitching every time I fill him up."

"I thought we were going to focus on Gabriel, sir," you said, voice strained.

Jack flashed a smirk. "Focus" is too gentle of a word, Lucky. We're going to break him.

Jack eventually had to take the cuffs of Gabriel. You ended up on your back, Gabriel between your thighs, while Jack continued to work him over. You kept him locked him place with your legs around his waist. He could have easily broken it, but he rested his head against your shoulder, gladly taking all you and Jack had to offer.

The three of you were drenched in sweat and other fluids. Gabriel rested his on his knees and forearms, careful not to put too much weight on you. Jack maintained a punishing rhythm, face and chest flushed.

"Think I'm going to need to stop soon," you groaned. "Getting sore." You exhaled slowly as Gabriel nuzzled your throat.

"I don't know, I've got a couple more in me-" Jack rolled his hips and Gabriel gave a low moan.

"Going to have to vote with Lucky, Jack. I'm starting to chafe too, on both ends."

Jack reached for the lube, and applied some before handing you the mostly-empty tube. You used the rest, Gabriel sliding smoothly inside you. "One last time," he said. "Want me to go faster?"

"Please-" Gabriel shook and you kissed his face, whining softly as he thrust deeper inside you.

Jack stroked Gabriel's hair, "Relax and let us take care of you," Jack said, his lips gentle as he began to kiss Gabriel's broad back.
A little sore, and definitely wrung out, you held Gabriel, your shoulders bruised from the number of times he'd bitten down, muting his own cries. But you began to move, trying to match Jack's tempo.

Gabriel came first, a strangled moan breaking free of his throat as he shattered, collapsing against you. You stroked his hair, not minding that he was heavy. You weren't going to sleep this way, and you liked knowing that you were partially responsible for his state.

Jack didn't last much longer, wrapping his arms around Gabriel's chest. He dropped onto Gabriel and you swore, trapped under their combined weight.

"What's that?" Jack murmured.

"Get off!"

"I certainly did," Jack and Gabriel both laughed, neither moving to get up.

"Fuck you! Can't breathe..." You rasped, wondering if this was how you went out.

Fortunately, you were not crushed to death by super soldiers during post-coital bliss. After sneaking back to Gabriel's room for a shower, the three of you lay in bed, Gabriel in the middle.

"So were you messaging Jack before or after you pitched me on office roleplay sex?" You asked Gabriel. The emitter was on your side of the bed, which was good because your neck and shoulders were already bruised.

"After, of course," Gabriel said. "I wasn't entirely sure you'd want to play."

"I told him to wait for me," Jack muttered. "He didn't tell you I was on my way?"

"And ruin the surprise? Of course not." Gabriel laughed.

You ran fingers along Gabriel's neck. The hickeys on his skin were healing fast, whereas you would be wearing a high collar or a scarf tomorrow. "Was I really that obvious back then?"

"...Not to us, not that the time," Gabriel said with a sigh. "In retrospect, yes, we were all terribly obvious and undignified. At the time I thought you might be interested, but you were always so apprehensive. I watched Jack throw a full-on, panty-melting, charm blitz at you numerous times. You just looked uncomfortable and excused yourself as soon as possible."

"My feelings were hurt," Jack said with a straight face. "I knew you liked Gabe, but he wasn't so sure."

"I suspected you liked Jack; you got more flustered around him than me. But I wasn't sure if you felt anything more than friendship toward me."

"I thought you were both just acted out around me, because we were friends and you expected me to know that you were just joking." You sighed. "And because you're dicks who think it's funny to tease me. Genji recently told me that we were all painfully obvious and it was awkward as fuck for him and Jesse."
Gabriel snorted. "As if he has room to talk. We've all seen him hanging around the infirmary when he has other things he should be doing."

So you weren't the only one who'd noticed that. Granted, Genji was still probably a hell of a lot subtler than the three of you had been.

"But it's probably better that things worked out the way they did," Gabriel said, nuzzling your cheek. A lot of the tension had melted away and he hugged both you and Jack, a sleepy smile on his face.

"Not complaining," you yawned.

"Why do you say that?" Jack asked, rubbing Gabriel's chest. He reached over to ruffle your hair. You snapped your teeth at him.

"If we'd cornered her in the office, I doubt it would have actually gone that smoothly. She probably would have laughed, made up some lame excuse about leaving the stove on, and hightailed it out of there," Gabriel said. "We'd have had to hunt her down with a tranq gun, just to get her to talk."

"...Maybe." You closed your eyes. "If you came on like that, I definitely would have. You both can be pretty intense."

"And a penthouse suite is a better seduction location. We could take our time, get her comfortable, not have to sneak around for a shower," Gabriel continued, ignoring your comments.

"Agreed," you said, tucking your head against his chest.

"When you put it like that..." Jack yawned.

"Still appreciate you indulging me," Gabriel said, kissing your forehead. "Even if you were a goddamn brat about it."

"Blame Jack," you murmured.

Gabriel was saying something else, but you were already drifting.

Chapter End Notes

This was not what I intended to write. And to be honest, I thought it would be kinkier, but I fought this chapter for almost a week and this is what I got. I'm annoyed because it isn't what I wanted it to be, but I don't have an actual problem with the quality. And I have at least four more smut scenes in my head, so whatever. We'll get there.

Leaving Friday, will be back late Monday/Tuesday. Don't know if this will affect the update schedule yet. Being banging out an arc I've wanted to write for over two months now.

I need to stop cooking too much food. I bought these beef round roasts on sale, and I made a 3 pound roast beef with a giant pot of mashed potatoes and a mixing bowl of kale salad Sunday. I've given a bunch away and eaten the leftover at least 2x a day and we still have some. On the bright side, it was tasty.
Playing politics is more danger than you signed up for.

Kwento had arrived, ostensibly to inspect Overwatch and possibly have sharp words with the Strike Commander over how things were being handled.

You waited with Lacroix and Gabriel in the Blackwatch conference room. Jack and Captain Amari were giving her the tour.

Gabriel was rereading the Eyes Only dossiers that summarized Shit Spiders. They hadn't named the Kwento outreach as a formal mission, even if you viewed it as such. Lacroix was seated beside Gabriel, studying his immaculate cuticles.

You sat beside him, wondering if he and Amélie gave each other manicures or if they had them done professionally.

"And we'll do our presentation on R&D in the tertiary conference room," Jack said, opening the door. A light energy coasted over your fingers and you stiffened, lips curling in a snarl before you forced your expression into one of neutral boredom.

Kwento entered, looking brilliant in a blue suit, patterned with bright yellow rectangles, her gele that same shade of canary. She gave you a nod, and you returned the gesture, pointedly ignoring the one behind her. He floated in, almost passively, but you could feel him in your fingers. Didn't he know that was rude as fuck? Of course, he did. He was pushing you.

You lightly nudged Lacroix under the table. You'd already informed him of Zenyatta's probing. He flashed you a sardonic smile and you understood the message loud and clear. You'd just have to deal with it, till he found a strategic time to broach the subject.

Jack and Captain Amari filed in, Jack sitting at the head, Captain Amari to his right. Kwento sat beside Captain Amari, and across from Lacroix, Zenyatta faced you.

"Agent Strike, I had not expected to see you here. What a delight," Zenyatta said, sounding oddly enthusiastic.

"Thought you'd like a familiar face," you said, dryly, and Lacroix kicked you under the table. You winced.

"I am delighted to see one of your kind here. I was worried an omnic would be unwelcome."

You blinked. "My...kind?"

"You have...enhancements, do you not? I assumed that was common knowledge among
the leadership."

You flexed your fingers. "I have fairly advanced prostheses, but no other alterations," you said, a tad defensive. "I am not a true cyborg."

"Ah, my mistake," he said, sounding terribly serene. "You have my apologies. I did not mean to cause you discomfort."

"Then you-"

Lacroix put a hand on your shoulder, giving it a warning squeeze. "Then perhaps you should not be trying to be attempting to initiate a handshake protocol on Agent Strike without verbal permission."

Kwento raised a brow. "Zenyatta?"

"I did not realize she could feel it," he said. "Most cyborgs require extensive neural augments to detect my energy work. My apologies. I was simply curious about the interfacing. I did not intend to be rude, nor to cause you discomfort."

You hadn't really compared your augments to what was on the market. You had never needed to, but Angela did groundbreaking work. It shouldn't come as a surprise that yours had extra features, not including the custom attachments. You took a deep breath, not missing how Kwento watched your reactions. You didn't quite understand why they kept focusing on you.

"Apology accepted," you said, feigning disinterest.

"Well, now that that's out of the way, I must extend my sincerest greetings. Amélie was completely charmed by your acquaintance," Lacroix said, rising to shake Kwento's hand.

"You have a very enchanting wife," Kwento smiled. "These are interesting times, Mr. Lacroix. Your team presented me with quite a bounty of data, most of which I have independently verified. And while I am very impressed, it occurs to me that you do not do this simply out of the goodness of your heart. So what is it you are looking to accomplish?" She sat back down, eyeing your side of the table coolly.

"Take a look around. You have several Overwatch founders here. Reinhardt would have attended, but his presence was required for a rescue mission," Lacroix said. "We have our differences, but on this matter we are in agreement. There is something rotten in Geneva."

Kwento looked at you. "Are you sure we should be doing this with a...rank and file agent present?"

"Agent Strike is briefed on all the missions were have discussed and we have full confidence in her. But if her presence makes you uncomfortable..." Jack trailed off, his expression stony.

"No, I suppose I am just surprised that all of you want to meet with me." She smiled thinly at Gabriel. "It must be quite important if you can come to an agreement."

"Rumors of our internal discord have been greatly exaggerated," Gabriel said sharply.

"Danielle warned me about you Commander Reyes."

"I'm sure her critiques were all fair and completely reasonable too," Gabriel said, tone flat.
Apparently, he and Undersecretary Adawe did not see eye to eye.

"She holds very strong opinions," Kwento said with a small smile. "She is not always as patient as she should be."

Gabriel snorted, but said nothing.

"It's interesting that so much of your...research leads back to Ambassador Nguyen and Director Petras. I had been told Talon was a loosely connected alliance of terrorist cells, nothing to really worry about. Your reports say otherwise." She rested her hands on the table. "My own research backs that up. We have had...issues with them back home."

"You are a very thorough operator, Ms. Kwento," Lacroix said. "I am happy to provide evidence for my claims, but I suppose you wish me to be blunt?"

"Please," she said, smiling wide.

"There has been a lot of trouble, and while I hesitate to use the word "conspiracy," if the shoe fits... Overwatch has been infiltrated more than once by Talon and multiple political agent provocateurs. And you are aware that there are several factions within the UN pushing a variety of agendas at us. We are trying not to get into politics, but when they've killed several of our agents and keep trying to get us involved in political assassinations-"

Kwento narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"Director Petras has made me many under the table offers: promotions, increased funding, prostitutes-" Gabriel laughed darkly. "In exchange for my compliance. I've put him off this long, but he going after the Strike Commander and some of my other agents." Gabriel did not look at you. "We can't share all our evidence at this moment, but I would hope that seeing all of us at this table is a sign of how severe the situation is."

" Doesn't your AI record these conversations?" Zenyatta asked mildly.

This omnic was giving you such a headache. You gritted your teeth as Kwento gave Jack a hard look.

"Overwatch is not cleared to have true AI security systems operating on premises, not with Omnic Crisis still fresh. That's going to be a PR nightmare."

Zenyatta turned to you. "I would not expect you to tolerate it."

"Athena is great and knows not to go around touching other people's circuits," you said sharply.

Zenyatta studied you. "You approve of this?"

"Not my call," you said. "But yeah, Athena's an invaluable teammate. She's a lot more reliable than most people."

"Is that so? Can she hear us now?" Kwento asked.

"No. We have some areas cordoned off as invite-only. Most of Blackwatch is outside her purview," Captain Amari said.

"Interesting. She must be a handy security addition. Has she been able to aid in exposing
traitors?"

"Yes," Captain Amari said.

Kwento looked at you again.

And it hit you like a headbutt to the nose. You realized then that they knew you were the "mole" reporting to Petras. Fuck. You couldn't afford to confirm or deny yet, not till Kwento was cleared. But then, she might not want to form an alliance, not if she believed the situation to be dire, which it would be if you were an infiltrator.

You kicked Lacroix under the table.

He ignored you.

"I think we have much to discuss," Kwento said.

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Kwento would be meeting with Gabriel and Lacroix again this evening. Without you. Lacroix didn't look too bothered by the fact Kwento assumed you were a mole. That was fine; it meant your cover was convincing. Petras would probably get wind of your meeting with Kwento in Lyon; you and Lacroix were putting the finishing touches on your "report" to Petras. That Blackwatch wanted to meet with Kwento wasn't a shocker. She had been tapped as Adawe's replacement as the future UN Undersecretary General. If she agreed to an alliance, she would feign support for Jack and hostility for Blackwatch.

Gabriel and Jack would be busy for the rest of the night. You needed to check your grenade stock. I Need Coffee was the last formal combat mission you'd been on, and your gear had taken a beating. Hitting the operation locker rooms, you opened up your equipment locker, reloading magazines, checking grenades, and discretely sniffing your armor, because someone's gear had some lingering body odor, and you wanted to make sure it wasn't yours.

Nope, you were good. It was probably Jesse's undershirts. Sometimes he forgot to wash them after a run, and they got foul. You discretely spritzed some antibacterial spray through the vents of his locker.

Your climbing harness lay at the bottom of the locker and you wrinkled your brow. What was that doing out? You rarely used it. Had it been there last time? You didn't think so, but you couldn't be sure. Picking it up, you turned it over in your hand. It looked fine, but you ran your thumb along the belay loop. The webbing was still connected, but your thumb caught on something. There was a sizeable slit on the underside, out of sight. And as the belay loop was the load-bearing part of the harness, that could have ended very badly for you.

Whoever did this had probably been interrupted, otherwise they would have folded the harness back up, returned it to its spot, and you have been none the wiser.

You set the harness down. Athena didn't have cameras in the locker rooms and while you used a plain old lock on your locker, it was less a security measure, and more to keep other agents from accidentally opening your locker when they were in a rush. Jesse had a bad habit of throwing his stuff into the wrong locker when he was heading out. You took a picture of the damage to your harness on your phone and set it back in your locker. You'd have to talk to Lacroix
about this.

The likeliest perpetrator was someone in Petras' pay. But you remembered the people who
didn't like you when you first arrived. Maybe this was personal, though that seemed less likely.
You didn't really deal with anyone outside of Blackwatch, and even if you didn't like some people,
you kept relations professional. Hell, you would hope a Blackwatch agent wasn't this clumsy of a
saboteur. You briefly wondered if any of your former students could be responsible. Unlikely,
though still a possibility.

You hadn't used the harness since...before Lucerne. You didn't recall the last time you
checked it either. Rubbing your forehead, you put the harness back on the bottom of your locker.
No sense tipping them off that you knew someone was out to get you.

Lacroix only raised a single brow when you barged into his office. It was just him, but you
briefly wondered if you'd interrupted his sexting. Then you stopped wondering, because you didn't
want to know and you didn't actually care.

"We need to talk." You plunked down in a chair across from him.

"Yes, we do. You need to stop letting Zenyatta bait you." The fact you weren't entirely
comfortable with omnics remained unspoken.

"Kwento knows I'm the one writing "reports" for Petras."

"I picked up on that too. No matter. We'll just keep you out of the proceedings. It will be
interesting to see what she proposes to do about it."

You showed him the picture. "I put it back in my locker where I found it."

Lacroix's frown deepened, brows knitting together. "Did you check the rest of your
equipment?"

"Of course," you said. "I haven't used it for a long time. I don't think it was out of place the
last time I got in my locker, but I don't actually remember."

"It is most likely then that Petras is aware of your meeting with Kwento in Lyon. We knew
this would happen eventually. I'll polish the story in the report, make it clear the move was under
Jack's orders. We can see if he responds to that."

"I'm not sure if this was supposed to be a warning message or if the perpetrator was
interrupted."

"Petras is not that...subtle," Lacroix said. "If he wanted to send you a warning, it would
have been unmistakable. Chanceux, you are now officially disposable." He clapped politely.

"I've always been the expendable one," you said. "But good to know that it's official policy
now."

Lacroix frowned at you. "That is not the appropriate attitude to take on an op."

You shrugged. "I was joking."
"Of course, you were," he said with a thin smile. "But jokes are meant to be funny, Chanceux." There was an edge in his voice and you rolled your eyes. "Now listen up: I am very serious. I would not waste my time training disposable personnel."

You blinked. "Lacroix-"

"And I expect my students to respect my time and the effort I put into teaching them. Do you understand me, Chanceux? It reflects poorly on me if you cannot appreciate my work or think it acceptable to throw away my efforts. I do not train sacrificial lambs. If you are going to be casual about the worth of my time and your life, you don't belong in special operations." His tone was sharp and you sat rigidly in the chair, almost expecting to be slapped with a glove.

"Uh...sorry?" You blinked a few times, unsure of what else to say.

Lacroix's cool expression did not waver. "Do you understand me, Chanceux?"

You would never understand this man. "I get what you're saying, I think," you said. "I'll be...more circumspect, sir." That was a "please stop being mad at me, I don't understand what you want, Captain Amari" answer. And while you butted heads with Lacroix countless times, this was the first time, since that initial entry interrogation, that his anger made you uncomfortable.

Lacroix's shoulders relaxed. "Yes, well, I won't get my hopes up. I will finish the report tonight and you can send it off to Petras. We'll see if anything changes. If not, consider yourself burned, and we will act accordingly."

You sat there for a minute, wondering what exactly Lacroix was so worked up about. Maybe Kwento wasn't going to play along. Maybe Zenyatta was being annoying. Maybe Gabriel had worn the cufflinks and you hadn't even noticed.

"Now, about Zenyatta, what exactly is the problem?"

You shrugged. "He likes fucking with me is all. The finger thing irritates me, but I can't tell him off since we're in the middle of diplomatic negotiations. That frustrates me more."

"That kind of...reaching out is a common omnic greeting," Lacroix said. "I understand that it violates human notions of privacy and even body autonomy, but it's not rude to them. It is ruder not to acknowledge."

"He admitted that-"

"Yes, but I'm giving you context." Lacroix shook his head. "There was less offense intended than you think."

"OK," you said.

Lacroix folded his hands, resting his elbows on the desk. "You are to be professional, Chanceux."

"I have been!"

"Barely," he sniffed. "Don't let your issues with omnics bleed into your work. I expect better from you. Now I'm going to requisition you another harness and I expect you to discretely arrange for a more secure equipment storage. Leave some things in the locker, but move your primary gear to your quarters. I also recommend telling Gabriel and Jack about this. They will react badly if I have to be the one to give them the news." And from the way he said it, you knew that
keeping them in the dark was not an option.

Relationships weren't all cuddles and great sex. Some days you just wanted to be alone. Gabriel could be difficult and snippy. Jack could be distracted or inconsiderate. You were just as capable of being snappish and bitchy. Sometimes you didn't feel like engaging them or anyone. Already in a bad mood, you stalked to Gabriel's office, not looking forward to this talk.

"-Are you flirting with me, Ambassador?" Gabriel laughed, his voice low and pleasant. "What would Adawe say?"

"I am not my mentor, Gabriel. Please, call me Adaeze."

You blinked as you stepped into the office, Kwento sitting across from Gabriel, the both of them looking extremely comfortable. Kwento smiled brightly at you. "Agent Strike, I was wondering if I'd get to see you again before I left. I wanted to apologize for Zenyatta's behavior."

You stood in the doorway, jaw suddenly stiff. "Oh, it's fine," you said flatly. "Agent Lacroix gave me context. I get now that it was one of those cultural misunderstandings I was worried about."

Kwento raised a brow, not quite buying your performance.

You did not look at Gabriel. You just took a deep breath and forced yourself to relax. "When I'm in the field, getting hacked is a legitimate danger. It's a sore point for me and the intrusion put me on edge, but I'm sure he didn't know that. It made me grumpy, but no harm was done and I'll be fine."

Kwento nodded, apparently satisfied by your confession. "That is completely understandable, Agent Strike. Thank you for your candid explanation." She flashed you one of those megawatt diplomatic smiles and you had to fight the urge to snarl at her.

"Of course, ma'am." You nodded, and went to your desk, picking up your tablet and fiddling with some papers. You did not need to stick around and watch Gabriel charm Kwento. You knew it was just work. But it still felt like you'd gotten a fishbone stuck in your throat.

Giving them both a polite nod, you walked back out, closing the door gently behind you. Because otherwise, you might have been tempted to slam it.

Hanzo was in the Blackwatch gym in gi pants and tank top, and to your surprise, he was showing Vo a wristlock. She wasn't very enthusiastic, and he wore that familiar pinched expression that he normally got around you. He mimed twisting his arm and she crossed hers, glaring up at him.

"J'ai terminé," she said when she saw you.
Hanzo frowned.

"Oh, I think Tataryn was looking for you, Vo," you said, not very convincingly.

Hanzo rolled his eyes upward, like he was seeking some kind of divine aid. Vo just nodded her thanks and scurried away.

"I don't know why you did that. She needs the practice. Her hand to hand is terrible."

"We will never knowingly send Vo into a close combat situation," you said.

Hanzo crossed his arms. "Things happen."

You sighed, remembering the damn day spa and Marta. "Yeah. They do," you said glumly. "That's the first time I've seen her in the gym in a months. She hates exercise almost as much as healthy eating. So that is a pretty impressive feat."

Hanzo nodded like he was entitled to the compliment and the recognition. "I'm beginning to see that." He paused. "She doesn't have anyone outside of Blackwatch, does she?"

"Not that I know of," you said.

Hanzo watched her retreat, his expression thoughtful.

You set your tablet down, pulled off your hoodie, and kicked off your boots. "Do you want to spar?"

Hanzo frowned at you. "Didn't you have some important-"

"I showed up for the politicking. Now I'm ready to hit something," you said.

"I think you might be disappointed then," Hanzo said. "I have no intention of letting you hit me."

"So "no" to sparring," you said and picked your boots up. "You haven't seen Genji then, have you?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't spar with you," Hanzo said with a little smirk. "I said I wasn't going to let you hit me. We can spar, you are just too slow."

You dropped your boots back on the floor. Smiling at him, you began to stretch. He just gave you a casual nod tinged with disdain. You didn't care that Hanzo outmatched you. You were going to hit him.

---

You hit Hanzo. Only a few times, and nowhere near as hard as he deserved, but you did that much. Despite ending up flattened on the mat many times, you felt a little better. Eventually, you just laid back on the mat and shot dirty looks instead of roundhouse kicks at him. They were about as effective. Hanzo just shook his head at you.

"You were sloppier than usual," he said. "Angry?"
"I was," you agreed raising your head off the mat. "But not at you. I think I feel a little better now. Thanks."

"Would any of that anger happen to be directed at Commander Reyes?" He asked, studying his fingernails.

You would have never described Hanzo as "emotionally astute." It took you a moment to connect the dots. "He's watching us, isn't he?"

Hanzo nodded. "He doesn't look particularly murderous, if you were concerned."

"I'm not," you said. You got up, dusting yourself off. "It's nothing serious. I'll see you later. Thanks for the workout."

"Of course. Maybe one day you'll be able to return the favor." He tossed his head, ponytail whipping over his shoulder and sauntered out. Yeah, you could really see how being a smug shit ran in the family.

Hanzo greeted Gabriel as he passed, but Gabriel was watching you, his face neutral. You pulled on your hoodie and put on your boots. Grabbing your tablet, you took a deep breath. You walked up to him.

"Do we have a problem?" He asked you, his expression guarded.

You shrugged. "Don't think so."

He frowned at you. "Something's bothering you."

"I'm having a bad day," you said. "I just...need some space. We can talk later."

Gabriel nodded. "All right. But we are going to talk about it."

You bristled at the statement. He could issue you orders about the job, but in the relationship? He wasn't your boss there. Your outrage must have shown on your face, because Gabriel gave a heavy sigh.

"I would like to talk about it later," he said, voice lower. "Please." The words were clipped and tight, but he didn't look angry, just tense.

You gave a curt nod. "OK." And you were off, back to your quarters for a shower and a drink.

---

Bayan had finally sent you a note, just a short message telling you that he was doing fine, thanking you for your intervention, and apologizing for missing the slumber party. Maeda Vargas and Lowell had more questions about combat ops. Jeong sent her own inquiries about the nuances of handling classified supply chain management and logistics. Tataryn wanted something. You weren't sure what, but he invited you for coffee, and addressed the letter to "my good friend," and that made your teeth itch. Amélie wanted to know when you were going out on a double date.

There was a knock at your door and you took a deep breath, hoping it was not Gabriel. "Who is it?"
"Your favorite sandwich-maker, now open the damn door," Ziv snapped.

"I only open the door for cake. Unless I like you." You sat there a moment, then got up and opened the door.

Scowling, Ziv shoved his way in, carrying two large packages wrapped in wax paper. He dropped them on your desk, glaring at you. It didn't bother you at all; you were used to Ziv's hostile facial expressions. You just got out the strawberry Fanta you'd bought for him.

Ziv's frown softened. "Thanks."

"What'd you bring?"

"Roast broccoli sandwiches with Sriracha mayo, parmesan, pine nuts, and Korean pickles. Don't ask me what kind, I got them out of a jar, and it's all in Korean."

"Huh," you said.

"They're really good. One of the girls at camp got me hooked. Said they were a New York thing. I don't care where they're from, they're tasty." He handed you a large submarine sandwich, before carefully pulling out your chair and sitting in it. It wobbled, and he grimaced. "You haven't gotten this replaced yet?"

"I don't use it. Thanks for the food," you said, not actually hungry. But you politely took a bite. The broccoli was tender and almost nutty, the cheese and spicy mayo adding smooth layers of flavor. The pine nuts gave it a satisfying crunch, but it was the sweet and sour tang of the pickles that really brought the flavors together. "That's...surprisingly good." You eyed Ziv and sat down on your bed. "What have you done?"

"God, you're paranoid. I just brought you a sandwich, because I'm sorry I'm a bad friend," he muttered, not looking up from his own sandwich. That didn't actually refute your point, but you decided not to argue.

You took another bite, waiting.

"And the boss told me about your gear." He glared at the floor. "Any ideas who?"

"Not a clue," you said.

"I briefed Athena. We can take several tech precautions without tipping off the saboteur. Torby thinks he can booby trap your locker, if you like."

You nearly choked on a broccoli floret. "Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

Ziv took a savage bite off his sandwich. Chewing angrily he stared at the floor. "I checked in on your boy."

"I keep telling people, he's not mine."

"He's fast and clever," Ziv said, reluctantly. "He'll be better than me in combat and maybe some of the sneakier shit. But his tech scores aren't so hot, so you're not getting rid of me that easily."

"...There went my brilliant plan," you said dryly.

Ziv flashed you a triumphant smile. "Well, as long as he's competent. He isn't quite as good
looking or as mature as me-"

You rubbed your forehead.

"But I guess he won't bring down the team."

"You're talking like this is a done deal: we're not recruiting them straight out of training. They're going to Overwatch first, and we'll see how they do. Unless Lacroix has yet another clever plan he hasn't briefed me on."

Ziv shrugged. "No. It's just obvious that Maeda Vargas is Blackwatch material. And his friends Lowell and Jeong seem determined to join up too. Heard they were part of your fan club."

You took another bite of sandwich, if only to avoid saying something caustic.

"How'd Reyes take it?"

"Haven't said anything yet," you said when you were done chewing. "He was busy...finessing Kvento." You scowled.

Ziv frowned, like he couldn't imagine Gabriel being diplomatic. "I don't know what that means."

"She was flirting with him and he was being friendly back."

"...She was hitting on him? He wasn't flirting back, was he?" Ziv stared at your face. "He was! That pig! You're not going to let him have a harem!"

"Relax, Ziv." You rolled your eyes. "I know it doesn't mean anything-"

"That bastard has the Strike Commander and you! He doesn't get to keep acquiring lovers while I'm celibate!"

"...Those are two completely separate topics," you put your sandwich down. "This is work. I'm just annoyed at her omnic friend Zenyatta. He's fucking with me and I'm not entirely sure why. And Lacroix took me to task for not being more professional about the whole thing." You left out the part where he overreacted to your throwaway comment about being disposable. You still weren't sure how you felt about that.

"He's ruthless when you mess up on an op." Ziv winced.

"Is he still giving you shit over Spinshot?"

Ziv shook his head. "No. We settled that. As long as I don't fuck up again, I think we'll be fine." He focused on his hands. "Amélie invited me over for dinner in their quarters tomorrow night."

You nodded.

"I don't know if it means anything," he said.

"I've told you what Amélie has said to me."

"We...get along pretty well," he said. "Cologne was eye-opening, and not just because I fucked up big time." He sighed. "Amélie likes me just fine and made it clear that my feelings don't bother her. But I don't know about the boss. Sometimes we flirt outrageously, but he's the kind of
guy that...well, he flirts outrageously. It doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"Lacroix and I never flirt," you said.

"You have an entirely different relationship with him," Ziv said.

"Thankfully," you said. "Ziv, I want you to happy, provided it doesn't involve lots of evil and inconvenience to my life. If you and Amélie are happy, that's what matters. As for Lacroix, I don't trust him any further than I can throw him, but if you and Amélie can keep him in line, more power to you."

"You know the boss isn't that bad."

"...I understand him better than before," you said after a moment. "That's all I'll say about that."

"Jack's quarters?" was all the message from Gabriel said. You agreed and put on a comm unit. You did not need to be ambushed by Zenyatta.

"Athena, where is Zenyatta?"

"He is with Ambassador Kwento in Commander Wilhelm's office. They are having a late snack and discussing policy."

You nodded, even though Athena couldn't see you. "I'm headed for Jack's quarters. I'd like to avoid him as much as possible."

"...He has asked me several questions about you," Athena said.

You frowned. "Just me?"

"No. He has many questions. He made several personal inquiries about my purpose and satisfaction. It is...nice to speak to such a well-traveled inorganic life form." She sounded almost wistful and you felt a pang of guilt. Athena didn't get to socialize with many high-functioning omnics, not with her role and sentience heavily classified. That Zenyatta had been able to figure her out so quickly worried you.

"Anything I should know about?"

"He asked me if you were ever rude or cruel to omnics and other inorganic collectives. I was offended."

"...I don't interact with them much," you admitted. "But until recently, I didn't have many friends outside of Shit Spiders, so, I think that's more about my lack of socialization than anything else."

"I said something similar," she said. "But worded it better."

"Anyway, he keeps trying to push me. I don't know why." You shrugged.

"He is very curious about you. I am not entirely certain what the reason is. You should be
"...Thanks for the heads up," you said, with a sigh. You appreciated the concern and the initiative. But it would have been extra embarrassing if you hadn't known it was there. Ziv could pick locks just fine and you wondered if he was going to leave you any gross surprises.

"They won't install any of Agent Lindholm's devices without your permission."

You laughed nervously. "Yeah, I appreciate that."

"Don't worry, Lucky," Athena said. "We have your back."

You slunk into Jack's quarters, not looking forward to this discussion. Sparring with Hanzo and eating Ziv's sandwich had perked you up. Gabriel's boots were next to the door. Jack was on the couch, in sweatpants and a t-shirt, eating chips. He flashed you a tired smile.

"You OK?" He asked, as you flopped onto the couch, fluffing a throw pillow under your head. You could hear the shower running.

"It's been a stupid day," you said, staring at the ceiling.

"Gabe and I talked about Zenyatta. If he's going to be a problem-"

You waved your hand. "Getting on Kwento's good side is the most important thing right now. But Lacroix and I are pretty sure that they're aware of the fact I'm sending "reports" to Petras. I'm guessing that's why they keep focusing on me."

Jack nodded and offered you the bag of chips. They were just plain salted potato chips and you sighed. "No thanks."

"Have you eaten?"

"Ziv made me a broccoli sandwich. It was surprisingly good."

Jack's expression was incredulous.

"It was more elaborate than that. There was cheese, spicy mayo, pine nuts, pickles..." You trailed off, realizing that it would be better just to recreate the sandwich than try to explain it.

Jack nodded, more in acknowledgement than understanding. "Gabe should be out of the shower soon. He seemed tense. Everything OK?"

You wondered how much Jack knew and decided it didn't matter. He wasn't scolding you or being a dick.

"Today was just kind of stupid," you said, curling up on the other side of the couch. "I don't like playing politics. I managed to walk in on Kwento flirting with Gabriel and while he wasn't doing anything wrong, it still made me grumpy. I probably should have stayed in my room. I'm not...good company right now."
Jack laughed, patting your knees. "I would've been annoyed too." He scooted over, so he was now in the middle of the couch, hip brushing against your legs. "Feeling jealous isn't bad, as long as you don't act out because of it, sweetheart."

"There's something else, but I figured I'd wait till Gabriel got out of the shower."

Jack nodded. "You want to hear something hilarious?"

"Sure," you said, because you could do with some hilarity.

"They want to build a statue of me. Adawe tipped me off awhile ago, but Kwento brought a copy of the blueprints. She thought it was funny."

"Like a giant Jack Morrison overlooking Overwatch?"

"Don't you mean-"

"No, Jack. No, I don't." You cut him off with a scowl. "Are the rest of the founders getting statues? Is this a group thing?"

"I only saw the one of me," he admitted. "I doubt they'll really do it, sweetheart."

"...You better not let them," you said. "Like you need to actively oppose it."

Jack raised a brow. "Oh?"

"Only two kinds of people have statues of themselves: narcissists and dead people, usually martyrs. You don't get to be in any of those categories."

Jack laughed. "That's fair. I know Petras was really encouraging me to do more "branding," back before things soured. This is probably one of his residual ideas that someone ran with. Don't worry. I'm sure nothing will come of it. And I will block any attempts to make replicas of me. The world can only handle one Jack Morrison." He winked at you with a shit-eating grin.

"You're such an asshole," you laughed and he leaned over to kiss you.

"I made you smile, I can't be all bad," he said, nuzzling your cheek.

"Yeah, Jack Morrison, you're OK," you said. "If you get a statue made, I'll spray paint a porn-stache on it."

"...No statue, I promise." He chuckled, setting the chips on the coffee table. "Shower's off. You want to ogle Gabe as he comes in? I bet you twenty credits he'll only be wearing the towel."

"He won't even be dry, and the towel will be slung dangerously low," you nodded. "I don't know how he does that. Magic hips?"


You sat up, leaning against Jack as the two of you watched the bathroom door open and sure enough, Gabriel emerged with a towel around his neck, and a larger one dipped below his waist, showcasing his sharply cut v-lines.

Jack grabbed the potato chips and shoved a handful into his mouth openly staring. You maintained a solemn expression as Gabriel cocked a brow, his lips starting to quirk upward. You reached into the bag and took a few chips, your gaze never leaving him while you ate.
"You two are ridiculous," Gabriel said, shaking his head.

"You're doing this on purpose," you said. "We're trying to be appreciative."

"We know you need lots of attention," Jack said. "We're being supportive."

"You're being assholes is what you're doing," Gabriel rolled his eyes and walked into the bedroom, wiggling his ass just to tease. Because that towel still stayed up. Magic hips indeed.

He emerged a few minutes later, toweling off his hair, just wearing a pair of sweatpants. Instead of sitting next to Jack, he leaned on the armrest of the couch beside you.

"You want to tell me what was eating you?"

You took a deep breath. "Zenyatta being pushy, someone getting into my stuff, and Kwento flirting with you," you mumbled. "Not mad at you, just...was grumpy."

"But I cheered her up," Jack said sincerely. "She is not a fan of the statue though."

"Narcissists and martyrs," you repeated.

Gabriel rubbed your cheek. "Kwento was just trying to butter me up for information, chica. I'm sure she appreciates my...assets, but in this case, she wanted more access to Blackwatch files. That's not something I'll just give her, not without an NDA, and some serious information trading. She's charming, sure, but my plate is full." He leaned over to kiss you, his lips soft from the shower.

"I know," you said. "It just put me out of sorts."

"You can always invite me to spar," he purred in your ear and your breath caught in your throat.

"Wasn't going to be good company. That's why I found Hanzo: birds of a feather," you said and Gabriel snorted. "He was trying to teach Vo to fight like a ninja. She wasn't having it. He thinks we're remiss in not making her attend your combat classes."

"He's never had to subdue her," Gabriel scowled. "She's quick, stronger than she looks, and she bites hard." He grinned down at you. "Actually, that description fits you too. But you make it cute."

You rolled your eyes.

"So who got into your stuff? Did Vo eat all your snack food again?" Jack asked and you sighed.

Gabriel nudged you sideways, and Jack scooted over, so suddenly you were in the middle of the couch.

Reluctantly, you got out your phone and brought up the picture of your partially-cut harness. You handed it to Jack and he stared at it for ten seconds before handing it to Gabriel. The look on his face went from open and amused to what you internally called "the Strike Commander is not having any of your nonsense," and then grew uncomfortably cold. He leaned forward, fists pressed tight against his sides.

"It was out of place, otherwise I never would have noticed," you said. "I'd like to think that
no Blackwatch agent is going to be that obvious about it, but-

Gabriel swore and set your phone down on the coffee table.

The air prickled, and you wished you weren't in the middle of them.

"When?" Gabriel asked.

"I don't know when it happened. I think it must have been recent, because I don't remember it being on the floor of my locker before, but I can't swear to it." Both men sat stiffly beside you and you stared at the bag of chips.

"Did you check the rest of your gear?" Jack asked sharply.

"Yeah. Might cycle out the grenades, but-

"I'll do it tomorrow morning," Gabriel said, words low and clipped.

"I can-"

"Let him," Jack said coolly. "I'm sure you did everything right. But it would give us both peace of mind if one of us, or both of us, did a second or third inspection."

You swallowed your protests. That wasn't entirely unreasonable.

"Thanks," you said. "I appreciate it."

Jack reached over and rubbed your back a little too hard, like he was calming himself. "I'm sure you've already taken defensive measures. Tell us."

"I showed Lacroix already. Ziv and Athena have set up a camera in my equipment locker. Apparently, Torby offered to booby trap my locker, but I think I'll pass on that for the moment. I'm going to start keeping my primary gear in my quarters." You shrugged. "He thinks it's retaliation for helping you scout Kwento. The timeline fits, but I can't be sure. He finished crafting the report and I sent it off already. We're playing it like we don't know anything is wrong."

Jack nodded and reached over to Gabriel. "Babe?"

"Want to go to New York this weekend?" Gabriel asked gruffly.

"Hmm, I have a training exercise, but I can make time." Jack said, with sharp cheerfulness.

"We don't know for sure it was him," you said.

"Don't care any more," Gabriel said, one arm wrapping around your waist. "I'm out of patience."

"I'm OK. I'm careful and borderline paranoid."

"This is our base, we are responsible for what goes on here," Jack said, almost too casually. "Neither of us is "OK" with someone trying to get you killed. You should expect more than that."

You flinched. "I didn't mean-"

"It's not just that they tried to hurt you, corazon, though that's bad enough," Gabriel said, kissing the nape of your neck. "It's that they tried right under our noses, in place where you should
be safe."

"Just...don't overreact?" You groped for words as Gabriel's grip tightened.

"Mmm, I remember some idiot charging off alone, against orders to hunt down a sniper in Belfast. I also recall that same idiot ignoring all kinds of "stupid" orders from her concussed commanding officer," Gabriel rumbled. "Was she overreacting?"

You shrugged. "None of it was premeditated."

"This isn't the courtroom, sweetheart," Jack said with a laugh.

"...You're not pulling me from fieldwork," you said.

"No one brought that up at all," Jack said. He patted your head. "Have some faith in us, OK?"

"Just...making sure," you muttered sheepishly, tucking your chin against your chest.

"Do you still want Tataryn on guard duty?" Gabriel asked. "I'll rotate Diallo and the Shimadas-"

"I don't want my friends as my bodyguards."

"They're acting as second pair of eyes. They aren't sampling your food or required to get between you and bullets. They're just watching your back," Gabriel said. "Because you have a giant target sign on it."

You sighed. "I don't want to think about it right now."

"I'll put Tataryn on standby later."

"I can go around with Athena in a drone too," you said.

"All right," Gabriel said. "But I'm still putting Tataryn on standby."

You gave a groan of frustration. "Gabriel-"

He stood and scooped you off the couch. "We're both too tired to discuss this now. Let's go to bed. I have to get up early for an equipment inspection." He began to walk toward the bedroom. "Give me a counterproposal tomorrow."

It was hard to sulk when Gabriel carried you around in his arms. "...OK."

"You're so cute when you're reluctantly reasonable," he said, tweaking your nose.

Chuckling softly, Jack followed you both into the bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Vacation was nice. I'm trying to stay in contact with my college friends, partially because I like them, partially because it's good to get different perspectives. Most of them are in some way feeling the millennial disillusionment. Even if they're making
lots of money, there's a sense of "...we're so fucked."

But enough of my endless optimism!
Chapter Summary

Two words: American cheese

Chapter Notes

Dafne made art based on the last chapter! I always get so excited when I see art.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Will you?" Tataryn hovered over your shoulder while you cleaned your carbine in the rec room. Gabriel had checked your gear, replaced your grenades, and found everything else to be in order. Except he made an off-hand comment about how your equipment could use some maintenance, and then gave you a rather pointed look. Your stuff wasn't boot camp shiny, but it was well-kept. Still, you went through and gave your combat tools a good cleaning, somewhat annoyed by his meddling.

"Tataryn, that's an awful idea," you said, not looking up. "You know that's a terrible idea. I have no clue why you thought asking this would be a good idea."

"...You are not so bad. And while you weren't my first choice, Ana has a prior obligation."

You looked up from your gun. "Really?"

"Truly. I would not ask this of you, except that I am desperate." He nodded sagely and you shook your head. You put your gun aside and picked up your belt, noting it felt heavier than usual. You opened up the sealed pouch and a small wrapped box fell out.

"Ooooh, what's that?" Tataryn asked, his grin widening.

You rolled your eyes and checked the label, written neatly in Gabriel's handwriting. "Corazon." You weighed it in your hand. It wasn't leaking, ticking, or rattling.

"Tataryn, I've met your daughter once. Once. I doubt she wants me to attend her family visitation day at school." Tataryn had been slated to help another new class of Overwatch agents run some kind of combat exercise in Oslo that week. Apparently, he'd tried to weasel out of the shift, but had so far been unsuccessful.

"She likes you," he said. "She likes Ana and the commander too, so don't get too full of yourself. But-"

You had to stop yourself from asking where Kseniya's mother was, mostly because you suspected it wasn't a happy story. "I'll think about it," you said, if only to shut him up.

"You are a lifesaver, woman. I would kiss you, but then the boss would murder me and it would be very sad, possibly messy. So, are you going to open that box?"
"Eventually," you said, palms itching to do just that. But you didn't want to do it in front of Tataryn.

"Come on, I'm dying to see what's inside," he said, plopping down on the seat beside you. He stretched his long legs, feet resting on the coffee table. "Don't keep me in suspense!"

You gave him a hard side eye.

Tataryn just folded his hands expectantly, that shit-eating grin never leaving his face. He wasn't going to move. And if you did, he would just follow you.

You rolled your eyes and tore off the wrapping paper. It was a jewelry box and Tataryn's amused grin widened. You opened it carefully to find a silver chain with a matching filigreed locket on it. It was a little larger than you liked, the size of a pocket watch, but you opened it up, half expecting to see an amusing picture of Jack. It was a compass, the arrows slender and elegant, the rose done in red and black lines. It was sturdier than you expected and there was a manufacturer's statement under the velvet. Despite its pretty appearance, the locket housing shielded the compass from demagnetization and there was lifetime warranty with free calibrations.

"Pretty and functional. The boss is smooth," Tataryn said with approval.

You realized then that there had been nothing wrong with your gear. Gabriel was just making you work for your gift. Aggravating as that was, it still made you smile.

"Thank you," you told him, when you got back to the office. "You jerk."

Gabriel just gave you a smug look as you leaned over his desk to kiss his cheek. "I know it's a little big for jewelry, but it is durable. You can take it on ops. I thought it could be useful: a compass, so you never stray too far off course."

"I think it's going to take a lot more than navigational tools to keep me on the straight and narrow," you said.

"And so that you can always find your way back to me."

Your heart stuttered. "You've been around Jack too long, spouting all that American cheese."

"I thought it was rather suave." He just kissed your glove. "Makes up for all the times I'm a jerk, right?"

"...Maybe," you said, your cheeks hot.

"You up for a quick run to London? There are some scientists that want out of their rather restrictive contracts. Said contracts belong to corporations that reportedly have ties to Nguyen."

"We're just...waltzing in there, no prep?" You crossed your arms.

"It's not supposed to be a dangerous run. But it's loosely categorized under Shit Spiders."

You raised a brow. "If we're picking up civvies, you have to behave."
"I know," he said, not the least bit perturbed. "I just want out of the office for a few hours. Thought you might like to ride along."

"Yeah, OK," you said. "Let me go get changed."

You stuck the compass into one of the padded pouches on your belt and swapped out your prostheses. Gabriel helped you adjust your chestplate and the two of you headed for the docking bay.

Jack waited by the entrance to the bay, holding two insulated lunch bags. There were all kinds of support personnel milling about, so there would be no pre-mission kisses from him.

"Are you coming too?" You asked.

"I wish," Jack shook his head. "No, I have to field an irate call from Petras, demanding to know why he wasn't informed that Ambassador Kwento was making a stop here." He shook his head. "Some days this job isn't worth the headache..."

Gabriel clapped him on the back. "You're taking one for the team, Jackie."

"And the team better appreciate it," Jack scowled and handed Gabriel the bags. "I packed you lunch. I know it's not fancy, not like you two make, but...I wanted to do something. I tried to make something like those sandwiches you like," he said to you.

Gabriel's grin widened. "I could kiss you."

"Don't tease," Jack griped. "I'll see you two tonight."

"Thanks dad, I mean sir," you said, saluting with a wink.

Jack narrowed his eyes at you. "Really, agent?" His voice was low and gruff and the way he said "agent" made you clench.

"Later Jack," Gabriel laughed, pushing you toward the bay doors. "There are too many witnesses for the two of you to start that up right now."

You boarded the Orca, and Gabriel passed you the bag tagged "Lucky." You sat down and strapped yourself in, before opening up the bag. There were two sandwiches, an apple, a bag of chips, and a drink pouch. You wondered if this was what Jack ate in elementary school.

Gabriel sat down beside you. "I brought the files up, if you need to read the mission parameters. I might take a nap."

Nodding, you flicked on your tablet and then grabbed a sandwich. Out of curiosity, you inspected the sandwich.

"...Gabriel," you said, hesitantly.

"Yes?" He asked, eyes shut.

"Are we poor?"
He snorted. "I don't know about you, *chica*, but I've been responsible with my money. So has Jack. Now if you need a sugar daddy..." His eyes opened, a slow, downright wicked smile spread across his face. "You only have to ask, baby girl."

You just looked back down at your sandwich. It was white bread with a smear of mayonnaise, and a slice of American cheese. There was one pickle chip in the center and that was it. The second sandwich was identical.

After staring for several seconds, Gabriel started to laugh.

"We're poor, aren't we?"

Gabriel just laughed harder. "*Dios mio*, Jack. Now I have to check mine." He opened his bag and he had three lettuce and mayo sandwiches, a banana, and another juice pouch.

"...Is he saying we need to lose weight?"

Gabriel just shook his head. "...Don't think so hard about it. He probably just couldn't find the peanut butter for PB&Js. That damn ape eats it all."

"...Gabriel, this isn't OK. This is what you pack for a six year old that you don't like very much."

Gabriel gave you a look, like he wanted to say more, but thought better of it. "At least you got cheese, *corazon*."

"...I'll trade you a pickle and some cheese for your lettuce," you said. "Because I love you and don't want you to starve to death before we get to London."

Gabriel just stuck a straw in his juice pouch, sighing heavily. He still took the cheese.

You waited outside bookstore, watching the coffee shop. You wore a long coat over your armor, your carbine clipped to your back. You pretended to check your phone, watching Gabriel order lattes, while he waited for your defectors to show.

"Did you get me anything? I know they have sweets," You said into the mic of your comm unit.

"No pastries while we're working," he told you. "I'm still not over how it went down last time."

You smiled grimly. "But I'm hungry-"

"I swear, you sound like McCree-"

You watched a dark-skinned woman weave through the crowd, a briefcase clutched tightly in her hands. Her long black hair was loose and she kept looking over her shoulder. Squinting, you recognized Dr. Mai Singh, but where were the other two? Dr. Rudiani and Dr. Kinnunen?

"One incoming, and fast," you scanned the area, remembering your last trip to London. Neither MI-5 nor MI-6 had gotten a good description of you, so you forced yourself to relax, acting
engrossed in your phone.

"I'll be out in a moment." Gabriel had a bag and a cupholder with four drinks. You hoped one of those was for you.

You spotted three men walking too fast. They were several yards behind her, and you moved to intercept, phone held in front of your face. "We have pursuers."

Gabriel was out of the coffee shop and he nodded. "I see them."

He casually strolled toward Singh, the bag tucked under his arm. His grin widened as she bumped into him.

"The mouth is not satisfied by speaking and the ears are not satisfied by hearing," Gabriel uttered the pass phrase. "Where are the others?"

"Kinnunen is dead. Rudiani was supposed to take a separate route, but I've been followed-"

"Head over to the bookstore. Woman in the tan jacket will get you to safety. I'll take care of these guys."

That wasn't part of the plan. You scowled as she crossed the street. One of the security guys would pass you in half a minute. You primed your pressure injector, knowing you would have to be fast.

He walked by you, and you kept your hand low, finger pressing against his wrist. He looked up, startled by the pinch and the contact, and then he dropped while you turned to catch up with Singh.

"Watch this," Gabriel laughed, and you looked over your shoulder, eyes widening as Gabriel dumped the entire drink tray on one of the suits. He screamed and Gabriel reached out to "steady" him and "help him dry off" before they both disappeared into an alleyway. You caught up to Singh.

"The hunger of the hungry is not appeased; by mere words, hunger is not relieved," you said in her ear. "Now turn right up here."

Singh, to her credit, did not look back, she just kept walking, following your instructions.

The two of you took the fire escape up.

"Status?" You heard static over the comm.

"Busy!" Gabriel shouted.

You tensed as Singh reached the roof, her eyes falling on the illegally-parked shuttle. It had cloaking-tech, much like your stealth suit, so it was hard for security sensors to pick up, but it wasn't invisible. It opened to your touch and you let her into the back seat.

"I'm going back to see what the hold up is. If we're not back in ten minutes, the autopilot will take you back to the ship."

She nodded once, lips pressed in a thin line. "Thank you."

You made your way to the edge of the roof. Gabriel had an older man leaning against him, three more suits following behind. You positioned yourself above the mouth of the alley, and drew
"Get up here," you said. "I've got you covered."

"Try to keep it nonlethal," Gabriel said sharply. Because killing civilians was strongly frowned upon, even if they were corporate security goons.

Gabriel lifted Rudiani in a fireman's carry and took the steps three at a time. You saw one of the suits reach into his jacket and took aim, finger hovering over the trigger.

He withdrew a cell phone and you exhaled slowly. The other two men rushed into the alley, but Gabriel was on the roof and the three of you climbed into the shuttle, already heading back to the Orca.

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Rudiani had been hit with a motorbike while trying to make his escape. He was concussed and you were pretty sure his left ankle was broken, but he was alive. You stabilized it, and gave him a painkiller. He wasn't entirely cognizant, and you didn't like the way his pupils didn't match. Gabriel set up the emitter while Singh looked on, fretting.

Once you'd taken care of Rudiani, you sat back in your seat and Gabriel handed you the remaining bag from the coffee shop.

"Save me one," he said, before sitting down with Singh to debrief her. Inside were a cinnamon bun and a croissant. You took a small bite off the cinnamon bun, just because it smelled good and then ate the croissant. Yes, the cinnamon bun was better, but it was higher calorie and Gabriel probably needed it more. The croissant sufficed. You didn't even mind that there wasn't any coffee to go with it.

Both Singh and Rudiani worked in genetic engineering: Singh being a cutting edge researcher in the dubiously ethical field of human genome enhancement; Rudiani specializing in custom-designing treatments for a variety of inherited disorders. Kinnunen had patented some kind of trait blocking chemical. So while you weren't actually sure what exactly their work entailed, you had a sneaking suspicion that Gabriel's medical issues weren't getting any better.

"Your counterproposal?" Gabriel asked when he sat down beside you, having finished up with Singh.

"I'll start taking an Athena drone with me. Yeah, you can have Tataryn watch my back, but as necessary. Not full surveillance."

"A combat-equipped drone," he said.

"OK," you agreed.

"We're keeping your name off the mission rosters for now. You can go out, but there won't be any forewarning for anyone outside of Shit Spiders."

"OK," you said, content that he wasn't trying to smother you into safety. You handed him the bag with the cinnamon roll, and he gave you an acerbic smile when he saw the bite taken out of it.
"Really?"

"I was making sure it tasted as good as it looked," you said.

He snorted. "Verdict?"

"Well, it's still there..."

He gave you a look.

"...But I could take another taste, just to make sure."

Gabriel devoured the pastry in two quick bites, his eyes never leaving your face. "It was delicious," he said, crumpling up the bag.

You sighed, looking wistfully at the bag.

Gabriel just rolled his eyes at you.

You crossed your arms. "You're kidding me."

"You always say that, and you are always wrong," Lacroix said, lounging in his chair. "One would expect you to learn from your mistakes, Chanceux."

You slouched in your seat, staring up at the ceiling and muttering under your breath. "After all that..."

"She didn't say "no." This may not even be a stalling tactic. Agreeing to a formal alliance takes time. This is merely an extension of negotiations. Stop being so impatient. You know better."

"But does she have to leave Zenyatta as an observer? For fuck's sake, he's been asking Athena all kinds of questions about me."

"Though it would make your life infinitesimally easier, it's still too early in the process to show our hand, Chanceux," Lacroix said, disapproval clear in his tone. "Petras will probably get back to you tomorrow, if he thinks he's going to retain your services. Ziv has informed me of the camera in your locker. We will see if anyone attempts to fix their mistake."

Lacroix's amended report included a situational analysis, claiming that Reinhardt and Jack were trying to form an alliance with Ambassador Kwento, without Gabriel's knowledge. And that Kwento, like her mentor, didn't care much for him. As Gabriel's meetings with Kwento had been private, none of Petras' spies could contradict you.

"Does she think he's going to uncover more classified information or-?"

"He is a character witness, Chanceux. Kwento is a busy woman. And while she's intrigued by our pitch, she wants to see what she's getting into. She trusts Zenyatta's judgment. So keep that in mind whenever you interact with him. Obviously, he has ulterior motives, but information-gathering is a two-way street. You are not a complete fool. You understand that you can learn as much about him as he wishes to learn about you, if you work the situation correctly."
You winced. "You're the worst."

"I am merely pushing you to do better, Chanceux. You cannot avoid social engineering tasks simply because they make you marginally uncomfortable. Some may have that luxury, but we do not. You are capable. There is no excuse for shirking. I wouldn't have tasked you with this if I thought it beyond you."

It occurred to you then that Ziv wasn't a part of these proceedings, maybe because he'd returned halfway through, or most likely because he sorely lacked a diplomatic face. Hell, he was a right bastard to you, and he *liked* you.

"I'm not going to be his tour guide."

"No, that would be too obvious. But he will seek you out. And he will question those who know you. Work with that accordingly. You have a reputation for being candid in your interpersonal interactions. It would not be out of character for you to confront him eventually, however, you must be smart about it. None of your outrage or kneejerk defensiveness. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," you said sullenly.

"I want regular reports on your interactions with him. If only to track your progress."

You wondered then if you could take a rotation in Antarctica for a month. No one would ever look for you there.

"...Well this is awkward."

Gabriel had not locked the door and now he regretted it. There were guards on duty outside the room. And visiting hours were in effect. Not to mention he had it on good authority that you would be occupied for the next hour or so.

"Come in, Mihret, and shut the door behind you."

Mihret slunk in, sullen and twitchy, like a feral cat. It still surprised Gabriel that the antisocial hacker had latched onto you. He seemed like the type to live in a tech cave all day, only to emerge for convenience food. But then, Mihret, you, and himself were all bound by shared trauma. And Lao? Yes, that tie applied to her too.

Lao sat behind the table, her arms crossed.

Mihret looked at Gabriel, his eyes narrowed. "You're not threatening her, are you?"

Gabriel raised a brow. "And if I am?"

"Then you're a dick," Mihret said, yanking out a chair and sitting down beside him.

Lao's eyebrows rose higher.

Apparently, Chang's program hadn't worked. Not that he expected an attitude adjustment, not without some serious head injuries. Mihret had filled out a little, but he seemed even surlier
than before, like some kind of demonic hellspawn that didn't die, but returned nastier than ever.

"Then you're a dick, sir," Gabriel said sharply.

He saw Mihret start to come back with something smart ass, but then the boy gritted his teeth and stared at the floor. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Have you been formally introduced?" Gabriel said, letting the attitude go for now.

"No, sir."

"Agent Lao, this is Agent Ziv Mihret, our Blackwatch systems engineer and a constant thorn in my side," Gabriel said. "It's his secondary title."

"Is that a promotion? I'll get a plaque made for my office," Mihret said. "...Sir."

"You're Rivka's grandson," Lao said in a quiet voice. "Lucky told me. I...I'm sorry. For all the times I attacked you."

Ziv waved his hand, not making eye contact. "You failed, so it doesn't matter."

Lao blinked, obviously taken aback by his brusqueness. "I'm sorry about your grandmother. I-"

"I saw the video," he said sharply. "You didn't kill her."

Gabriel sighed. Mihret was the emotional equivalent of a rabid hedgehog dipped in hot sauce smacking a person across the face. "I am obligated to inform you that this is how he usually behaves," he said. "I think Lacroix and Lucky are the only ones who can reign him in, short of using extreme measures." Ana could do it too. Gabriel considered transferring him right then. He cast a sideways look at Mihret, who actually had the grace to squirm.

"So what did I interrupt?" Mihret asked.

Gabriel inclined his head back and Lao met his eyes silently asking permission to share. He nodded.

"Dr. Ziegler is willing to craft me a new arm and do more invasive procedures to alter my spinal cybernetics. We've been talking about the risks and what I want to do afterward."

Gabriel would treasure the look of shock on Mihret's face for the rest of the night. The younger man's jaw dropped, and then he looked between Lao and Gabriel like they were fucking with him.

"You're being nice to her? You? After-"

"That information is classified, Mihret," he reminded him sternly.

Lao cocked her head to the side. "I was just as surprised that he didn't take me out back with a shovel."

"Lucky wouldn't let him," Mihret scowled. "And speaking of which does she know-?"

"No," Lao said firmly. "It's not her business. You don't need to get her hopes up."

"What do you care? You won't even let her visit!" Mihret practically shouted.
Lao flinched. "Why are you here? To yell at me in her stead?"

Gabriel wondered if he was going to have to kick Mihret out.

"No," Mihret muttered. "I thought you might like a visitor who hasn't contributed to your baggage. But I'm not good at diplomacy."

Gabriel laughed sharply, but diplomatically did not add to that.

Lao stared at the table. "...I don't know how to fix any of this: my knowledge of Talon and Hanoi is of limited use. And I don't know where to start. I don't know what to say. I don't know if any of this can be fixed."

"Oh," Mihret said, after a moment. "I uh...I hear apologies are a good place to start, but I'm no good at them, so you might want to ask the Commander. I hear he has a lot of experience giving them."

"I see," Lao said, her face very blank as she looked between Gabriel and Mihret. Then she covered her mouth and it took Gabriel a moment to realize she was laughing.

She sounded painfully young and Gabriel swallowed his annoyance. "Yeah, I know how to apologize. That's why I have friends and you hang out with a monkey in the lab all day."

Mihret glared at him, and Gabriel wondered if you'd be opposed to sending him back to California for a few weeks. Just to get some peace. But Lao was smiling, and he had not seen that before, not in person. Of course, that was the Mihret effect in a nutshell, surprisingly helpful, but simultaneously a goddamn pain in the ass.

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Every one of your trainees had passed. You couldn't take credit for all of that, but you were pleased that Maeda Vargas, Lowell, and Jeong had all done well. You'd made an appearance at the celebration, buying them a round and donating a bottle of Máotái to your fellow instructors. Shoal was placated, but Jesse chewed on his cigar, swallowing bitter words, if his sour expression was any indication. You realized you were going to have to talk to him about things soon.

Everything was slowly coming together. Lacroix and Lao were having intel-sharing sessions, and despite her aversion to you, she was handling Lacroix all right, and he seemed pleased over the quality of information she provided.

The Overwatch leadership was working hard behind the scenes to maintain unity, while carefully playing their "politicized" roles for the enemy. The rank and file consensus was that Jack and Gabriel had a personal falling out, but they were too professional to let that get in the way of work. If anything, Jack and Gabriel seemed to enjoy snapping at each other in front of other people in a sort of goading foreplay. Gabriel would sneer "sir" on the end of his snarky remarks, and Jack would take a deep breath, shooting Gabriel a hard look that translated into "we're going to have rough sex later," but that other people thought meant "I hope you get hit by a bus."

Petras had not yet given you anything incriminating, nor had he cut ties. He just thanked you politely for your report. No one had come to remove the harness, so you were working under the assumption that he wasn't trusting any of your information and that he would eventually try again. But the combination of data retrieved from the Vialli mansion and the decrypted Talon
SIGINT from the Ninth Circle had enough to warrant a formal investigation. There were so many unethical research projects and corporate ties, you suspected the only multinational you could trust was Feng's White Rabbit Enterprises, and considering it was a Triad front, the irony was not lost on you. Genji was following the money and unearthing quite a tangle - there were several corrupt members of the Petras family and Gabriel had cleared Hanzo to help him.

Athena had numerous search filters and was trawling a variety of intelligence databases for leads. She had put together some very interesting reports, and it was unnerving to see how many intel agencies underreported on Talon. The PRC's MSS had the best compilation overall, though that report had not been widely circulated. There were Talon plants in the Ministry of State Security, but not as many as you expected and you credited On Sing with that.

Lacroix had Ziv pursuing other angles, from the cyborg soldier they'd captured in Zurich, to threads of data from Vialli and the Ninth Circle. Some roads led to Oasis. Too many led back to Geneva.

And that's where Kwento came in. You needed an advocate in the UN, someone powerful, someone with friends, someone who could work the system. As much as you hated politics, you would be an idiot to underestimate their importance. Aside from Lacroix, there was no one else you could see navigating the viper pit of the UN and not burning out. Maybe Amélie, but you suspected she enjoyed violent ops a lot more than she let on. But Lacroix was needed here, in Overwatch. He was too clever to sacrifice on the altar of politics.

You wanted to do the Hanoi op a long time ago, if only to stop the flow of cybernetic soldiers for Talon attacks. But Lacroix had some kind of grand scheme in place and said the timing wasn't right. Nguyen knew you were coming. But so far, she'd just bunkered down, fortifying her base of operations instead of moving, according to your spies anyway. You wondered what the cost of waiting would be, but at this point, you trusted Lacroix's ability to get the job done. There would be casualties, no doubt. And the thought made your stomach drop.

Feng forwarded numerous Talon, Shimada, and Nguyen-related reports to Lacroix. You weren't sure how big a team she had dedicated to intel-gathering on those topics, but she provided lots of invaluable data that would make Hanoi easier. However, you could not rely solely on her. Vishkar was starting to push back against White Rabbit, already suing over one of their hard light patents and the current Shimada leadership wasn't so happy with Feng, not after the East Asian gossip rags published grainy photos of Hanzo and Feng having dinner in Shanghai. Some of the PR departments from Nguyen's companies were openly criticizing Feng for being an ADHD dilettante, rather than a "real scientist." It looked like Feng would have her hands full for awhile.

This was further than you'd been a year ago. And to be honest, this was more than you had dreamed of accomplishing. Sure, it wasn't all your work; you couldn't have done this much on your own, but you were much closer to avenging your squad and taking out the corrupt politicians responsible, and that's what mattered.

After Shit Spiders, your biggest concern was Gabriel's health. He swore up and down that he was fine, but now he was more selective of the runs he took, climate playing an important role. He didn't say anything, but you noticed. And when you asked, Jack, Jack told you things were under control, though he didn't look any happier than you did.

And Jack was being awfully secretive about something. He seemed happy, but you'd walked in on him a few times acting suspicious. Little things, like shutting down his viewscreen and stuffing his tablet behind his back. You weren't worried per se, you trusted Jack. But it was odd and when you mentioned something to Gabriel, he told you not to worry about it. Like that
ever worked.

Lao still wasn't taking your visits. But you still sent her things. Books, food, music that you thought she liked, but honestly, you weren't sure.

Tataryn was starting to get annoyed at Zenyatta on your behalf, but you made polite conversation with the omnic.

In short, things were far from perfect, but they were moving in the right direction. You just had survive the robot interrogation.

You took a quick mission in Copenhagen. Get in, kill a Talon plant in the Folketing sent to assassinate a friendly ambassador, take her stuff, and get out. Simple shit. You were on autopilot by the time you'd strolled out of the hotel and toward your extraction point. Athena's modified fish torpedo hovered above you.

Everything went off without a hitch. Except when you set foot in the docking bay, Zenyatta was waiting for you.

"Agent Strike," he said. "You were not listed as on a mission. Is that normal for black ops?"

You shrugged. "Maybe you weren't cleared for it?" Ignoring the fact your mission confirmations were now done in person, though Athena logged some under the Shit Spiders files.

"That must be it," Zenyatta said with a nod. "Is this a bad time?"

You sighed. "Are you ever going to pick a good one?"

"It seems that it's never a good time for you," he said sounding oddly regretful. "I would take it personally, but I know that you are a busy person."

You now understood that he knew you were avoiding him and it was time to handle the situation. "We can walk and talk. What did you need?"

"May I speak candidly?"

"Could I stop you?" You wondered aloud, slinging your bag over your shoulder.

"We had a rocky start, and it was my fault. I was in the wrong. I should not have...intruded at the restaurant nor when I first arrived here. I am very sorry," he said. "I realize now that this is a very sore point for you and would like to make amends."

"Is that why you've been following me around? Because you wanted to apologize?" You asked, unable to keep the skepticism out of your voice.

"Well, you are a very interesting person. Like Genji."

"...I hope you're not bothering Genji," you said tightly.

"On the contrary, he sought me out to discuss Shambhali philosophy. I was most intrigued
by his questions. He is on a difficult journey."

You sighed. Genji had told you he was interested in the Shambhali, briefly. Maybe he was still curious. "Sorry, when Athena went live, she did something similar to both of us. She...upset him."

"I was more diplomatic with him," Zenyatta admitted, sounding almost sheepish.

"I bet." You blew out a breath.

"You are uncomfortable with me."

You shrugged. "Yeah."

"You are uncomfortable with omnis."

Well, they were fully capable of squishing you into a little crunchy meatballs. "Sometimes. Small ones, not so much. Big ones, yeah." He was taller than you, so he qualified as a big one, simple as that.

"You lost someone during the Omnic Crisis."

"You could say that." You didn't look at him.

"You lost a lot of people during the Omnic Crisis," he amended. "You are not very old. You were young when it happened. I am sorry to hear that. It must have been difficult."

You shrugged. "I survived."

"I expect that you have gone into combat against many omnis. Does that color your view of us?"

"Am I bigot, do you mean?" You laughed softly. "I've had to fight a lot more humans than omnis. And humans make me just as nervous, if not more so. Hostile omnis? I know what to expect. Hostile humans? They hide it better."

"That's a very broad analysis. But I wasn't asking about humans. Interesting that you them up as contrast. Rather off topic."

You blinked, your face very warm.

"I won't be offended. I am curious how you feel about omnis."

There was no point in lying, not if you wanted to get anywhere. So you took a deep breath. "Sometimes they make me uncomfortable, sure, usually when they're trying to kill me. But omnis are obviously people in their own right. As long as they're not trying to slag me, they deserve equal rights, recognition as people, all that stuff they're doing in Numbani." You paused, realizing how lame that sounded. It wasn't a lie, but it was only lip service. Omnic rights and their struggle had never been something you personally researched or supported. You had not fought against them, true, and maybe you bore them no animosity, but you were not an ally, not really. The realization was uncomfortable, but then seeing your own shortcomings always was.

Zen regarded you placidly. You suddenly worried that he was going to ask you what kind of social justice movements they were embracing in Numbani. Because you didn't know the details. Your specialization had been Talon and their operations. And while there was nothing
wrong with that, in the face of scrutiny, you realized your own ignorance.

"You think in terms of combat," Zenyatta said, sounding a little disappointed. "Would you be comfortable with them allowing omnic agents within Overwatch?"

"You looking for a job?" You laughed nervously.

"I might be."

"I have no problem with it," you said, as long as they didn't pair him with you. "We need more skilled and trustworthy hackers."

"What about as combatants?"

"Sure," you said. "Haven't really thought about it. I don't normally do straight up combat runs. But I'm sure an omnic partner in black ops would be great. Athena runs them with me from time to time. She'll be ready for frontline duty soon," you realized, with a frown.

"That bothers you."

"She got torn up on our first mission together. I'd rather keep her out of harm's way. But...that's her choice."

You couldn't read Zenyatta's face, hell you couldn't read most omnic expressions and that was partially what worried you about them. Humans had tells. Omnics weren't quite that open. But still, you got the impression, somehow, that you had surprised him.

"You have an interesting way of looking at things. Rather limited, but-"

"I'm not a scholar," you scowled. "Meditating on the deeper meaning of things isn't a luxury I've had."

"I meant no offense-"

"You can't say things like that, then add "no offense," and then expect someone not to be offended, like you weren't criticizing," you said.

Zenyatta laughed. "True. My apologies. I guess I was expecting you to have a broad viewpoint on the omnic struggle. Perhaps that isn't fair, considering your attention is tied up in other things."

You shrugged, unsure if that was an insult or a genuine apology. Maybe both? "I don't make policy. I solve a very specific set of problems. The only time omnics have fallen under that umbrella is when I'm in combat with them. My interaction with them has mostly been limited to "are they on my side?" And too often, the answer has been "no."

"Then perhaps I could give you a more in-depth experience," Zenyatta said.

"Are you volunteering to be an ambassador for your people?" You asked dryly.

"It is one of my secondary roles," Zenyatta said, possibly missing your sarcasm. "I would be honored if you would spare some of your precious time so I could give you a more balanced viewpoint of omnic culture." Nope, he got it, loud and clear.

"Is this "education" going to be filled with more sarcastic asides, under the guise of bestowing wisdom on my ignorant ass?"
"I have only told you that everyone begins in ignorance. Whether they stay there is their own choice."

You didn't have time for these word games, but Lacroix's admonishments remained fresh in your mind. He had ordered you to interact with Zenyatta. Here was your opening, and it was your mission.

"Yeah, sure," you said, after a moment. "There aren't going to be tests, are there? Because I hate tests."

"I'm sure we can keep this informal," Zenyatta said, sounding vaguely amused.

Chapter End Notes

Today was...weird. Not bad, just weird. I had this 25-35 year old white man (this plays into it, bear with me) ask me for book recommendations. He likes James Patterson and thrillers. OK, so I give some recommendations. Then he specifies he wants "darker things." O-K. So I go with spy/assassin thrillers. Then he specifies that he wants to see the "killer's perspective." Several times. By the second time I'm like. "...well this is some Dexter-esque shit." Yeah, he kept asking and then thanking me for my recommendations. He was completely polite and behaved appropriately, but I'm sure you see where I'm going with this. Here is the textbook wannabe serial killer profile. "...OMFG do I have to kill him to protect society? Because this is an uncomfortable obsession. Also, please forget I exist, because I do not want to play serial killer games. I am too old for that shit."

I got a guy who commiserated with me about how they don't teach enough history in public schools, and how those who don't know their history are doomed to repeat it. Cool, agreed. Then he went on to lament about how they're taking down Confederate flags and statues and how there were plenty of black slaveowners too. Yeah... I was like, "You know, the next town over has a statue of Robert E. Lee, in it. Like, why?" He was slightly taken aback and professed ignorance of it. Because we are in a northern state that did not secede and that makes no fucking sense from a historical perspective (but that town had a very active Klan presence in the 90s, so...you can read between the lines.) But he changed the subject to Kentucky and I mentioned "they didn't actually secede either..." and left it at that, because yeah. We were both polite, but I normally don't comment on things like that at work with people whom I know I'll disagree with.

Ranger (Doggo #1) is scheduled for surgery in two weeks. I found a second lump which they'll look at beforehand. I'm a little freaked out, but hoping for the best. Dogs apparently have lots of benign but unpleasant growths.
"Hey, you busy?" You poked your head into Jesse room since the door was open. He was geared up, and you realized then that this was a bad time. "I can come back."

"I was just coming to look for you," he said, adjusting his hat. "Boss had a run for us."

"Huh," you said, because Gabriel hadn't mentioned anything to you. "Didn't know."

"Just came down the pipeline," he said. "Major Rodriguez is taking a squad out. Some of our trainees are going. Commander thought we might want to tag along and observe."

"Sure, let me get my gear." You weren't sure if you could talk to Jesse about stuff with all those witnesses, but you could always get drinks afterward, and it had been a long time since you'd gone on an op with him.

You got your gear on, and Jesse waited by the door. Armored up, you swapped out prostheses, grabbed your gun, and followed him to Gabriel's office.

To your surprise, Jack was there, sitting on Gabriel's desk laughing. There was a third man, tan, SEP-broad, and in his mid-thirties, with expressive brows, a sharp nose, and slicked back brown hair. He had a wicked scar that cut through his lower lip down his chin. But he was handsome and, even with the scar, he looked like the kind of man who smiled a lot.

"Jesse you've met Rodriguez," Gabriel said with a wry grin. "Lucky, this is Mateo Rodriguez. He's SEP too, and you can't believe a goddamn word he says."

Rodriguez smiled up at you and winked. "You're as pretty as they told me."

Gabriel sighed. "OK, you can believe that part. Pendejo."

"Nice to meet you," you said, reaching out to shake his hand. He stood, took your hand in his, and raised it to his lips.

"The pleasure is all mine. I've been hearing about you for months, but these bastards refused to introduce me." It clicked then that he'd been at Galanos' funeral. You'd left before you had a chance to talk to him.

"You can let go of her hand now," Gabriel scowled.

Laughing, Rodriguez released your hand. "So jealous, Reyes."

"I remember you hitting on Jack's sister, my sisters, and most of the women in SEP. It's for
your own protection. Lucky doesn't take shit," Gabriel said, with a warm smile.

"I've heard," he said. "You broke poor Morrison's nose, didn't you?"

"It was an accident," you said, rubbing your forehead.

"It's OK. That's how these idiots flirt," Rodriguez said, laughing. And to your surprise, neither Jack nor Gabriel looked offended. "You should've seen them back at chem camp. They'd be sparring and dropping innuendo the whole time. People either fled or found an excuse to hang around the gym and watch."

"Whatever. You like your women crazy, too," Gabriel said sitting back in his chair.

"Hey now, he'll tell Ray you said that," Jack laughed.

You raised a brow. "You and Chang?"

"...I wish," Rodriguez said, his smile fading a little. "She's great. I'd marry her in a heartbeat. Never look at another woman again. Well, maybe just look," he said with a sheepish shrug. "But, you've met Ray. She uh...isn't about that life."

Chang had told you herself that she didn't like to be touched. Gabriel said she had no interest in sex. And judging by Rodriguez's flirtatious demeanor, that wasn't quite the relationship he wanted.

"Some day though." His grin widened. "If I can't win her over with my charm, I can keep sparring with her. She likes that. And the harder I flirt, the more she hits me. It's adorable."

"...Yeah," Gabriel said, dryly. "She likes it so much, she broke your arm last time."

Rodriguez shrugged. "I got cocky and clumsy. I also proposed in front of her squad."

"...You didn't," Gabriel shook his head. "Of course, you did."

"I knew she'd say "no." But I had to ask again. Just in case she changed her mind this year."

Jack sighed. "I know this sounds like harassment, Lucky. But Ray actually jokes back with Rodriguez. She isn't happy about the proposals, but she'll tolerate one per year. Had me mediate a formalized agreement and everything. They have a strange relationship."

"Shouldn't have done it in front of her squad," Rodriguez said, shaking his head. "That was a mistake. They've been with her for a long time, so I know I didn't undermine her command, but I definitely embarrassed her."

"And that's hard to do," Jack said.

"Yes, there was that time Chang walked in on us in the showers-"

"Which time?" Rodriguez smirked.

Gabriel just rolled her eyes. "This was before the joint chiefs incident." You made a mental note to ask about that. "I swear anyone else would have begged to join in. She just rolled her eyes and told us to let her know when we were done. Came out fifteen minutes later to find her still in a towel and reading a fucking tank manual."

Rodriguez sighed. "Bet she looked cute."
"She looked annoyed," Jack said.

"She always looks annoyed," Rodriguez said. "It's cute."

"...I thought you said he was one of the "normal ones," you said to Jack.

Rodriguez laughed. "I am! Honest! I've just been in love with Rayner Chang since I first laid eyes on her."

"You just want the one you can't have," Gabriel said. "Doesn't stop you from flirting your way through the base."

Rodriguez shrugged. "I'm hoping one day Ray will get jealous. But until then, I have plenty of love to go around." He winked at you.

You snorted.

Jack rolled his eyes. "Ignore him, baby. He's just trying to get Gabe worked up."

"I'm not worried," Gabriel said, smiling at you. "Rodriguez can't cook for shit."

Rodriguez sighed, drooping in the chair. "That is true. And I can't sing like he does either."

You raised a brow. You'd heard Gabriel humming from time to time, but you'd never heard him singing.

Gabriel shot Rodriguez a dirty look.

"Wait a minute, Jack can't cook either-" Rodriguez said, perking up.

"Yeah, but you're not as cute as Jack," you said. "Though he did make us sandwiches the other day-"

"I have to go now," Jack said, standing up. "I uh...forgot about an appointment-"

"Uh huh, sure. Sit your ass down." Gabriel tugged on Jack's coat and Jack sat back down on the desk, sighing. "Go on Lucky, tell him all about Jack's sandwiches."

"I made the mistake of telling him one of my friends made me a roast broccoli sandwich with cheese, spicy mayo, pine nuts, and Korean pickles-"

"You just said pickles!" Jack said. "How was I supposed to know? And wait, pine nuts? Well, I guess it's for the best that I couldn't find the peanuts..."

Rodriguez started laughing, head thrown back.

"So Gabriel and I go out on a mission with these handmade lunches, bestowed upon us by the Strike Commander himself-"

Jack buried his face in his gloves.

"And what to do I get? I have white bread, with a little smidgen of mayo, a slice of American cheese, and a single pickle chip in the middle. He made me two like that."

"I didn't know how many pickles you wanted!"
Rodriguez doubled over, laughing so hard his shoulder shook.

"Fortunately, he packed me an apple and a juice pouch. So it wasn't a total wash. I think I deserved a cookie too, but I don't make the rules."

"I didn't have broccoli on hand and...well, I thought it was weird, but she's got a better palate than me and I tried to recreate what she was talking about." Jack's cheeks were pink and you leaned over the desk to kiss him.

"It's OK. The meal was questionable, but I will take great joy from retelling this story to all our friends," you said.

Jack just stared at the ceiling, resigned to the ungodly amount of ribbing you and Gabriel were going to put him through.

"Anyway, that isn't an excuse. He packed me three lettuce and mayo sandwiches. I didn't even get cheese," Gabriel said, affecting a mock pout.

"They weren't supposed to be just lettuce and mayo! I forgot to add the bologna!"

"...That's probably for the best," Gabriel sniffed.

"Oh. I forgot you don't like cold bologna..." Jack trailed off. He shook his head. "I got you juice pouches."

"You did," Gabriel said, leaning over to kiss Jack's other cheek.

"That's so Morrison," Rodriguez laughed, wiping his eyes. "Next time order out and pack it in your own tupperware, idiot. They won't question it too closely, they'll just be happy they have good food."

Jack sighed, shaking his head. "You guys are all jerks."

You looked up to see Jesse eyeing the three of you with a pained smile. Like this was a side of the commanders that he never wanted to see.

"...So I hear there's a mission?" You said, deciding that he had suffered enough.

The five of you sat around Gabriel's desk, Jesse looking a little more comfortable now that business was back on the table. You were to go to Ankara to retrieve an omnic terrorist the local authorities had taken into custody. Some of your students, Forrester, Chey, and Maeda Vargas, were joining Rodriguez's newly-formed squad. There were three other agents being transferred in from other locations. No one you knew very well, but on paper they didn't appear problematic.

"Damnit Jack, if this mission were any cushier, I'd be pillow-fighting your sister!" Rodriguez's brows drew together in irritation.

"You don't know what you're talking about, my sisters are mean. Jane would put a brick in the pillowcase," Jack said, folding his hands in his lap. "You have a new squad. I'm not sending you into the thick of things till you've developed some unit cohesion."
"That's when they learn fastest!" Rodriguez laughed.

Gabriel leaned back in his chair. "Quit showing off for my woman, Rodriguez."

Rodriguez just winked at him. "Maybe I'm showing of for you, jefe. You've got dreamboat Morrison and this bloody-towel-fighting femme fatale in your bed. How can I resist your charms?"

Gabriel rested his head in his hand. "Goddamnit, Rodriguez. I forgot how annoying you are."

"Making up for lost time, Reyes. It's been how long since we got the gang together? And what's this I hear about Ray being in Zurich for Family Day?"

"It coincides with her leave. I don't know if she'll stay in Zurich," Jack said, shaking his head.

"I'll be here!" Rodriguez slapped his palm against his chest. "She'll stay! If only because I'll buy her the best bottle of whiskey I can find and we will challenge you to a drinking contest. Ray and me versus you and Reyes. It will be epic!"

You nudged Jesse with your elbow. He was falling asleep in his chair. If the two of you timed it right, you could take all kinds of bets...

"Rodriguez, go meet your new squad. Try not to scare them with your enthusiasm," Gabriel said, rolling his eyes.

"And Lucky and Agent McCree are coming with me?" Rodriguez smirked at Gabriel.

"Yes, Mateo," Jack sighed. He looked at you, shaking his head, like he already regretted introducing you. "It's just in case he runs into trouble. Better to have a few more experienced agents backing them up, and you know the rookies pretty well."

"Understood," you said.

"I've heard the stories," Rodriguez said, tone a little more subdued. "At least two of them are strong candidates for Blackwatch. Should I expect trouble?"

Jesse laughed. "Yup."

"Maeda Vargas is smart, eager to prove himself, and views rules as mere suggestions. If you impress him right off the bat, he'll fall over himself to please you. But he's a "jump first, look later" kind of guy," you said.

"I like him already," Rodriguez laughed.

"Chey isn't the most personable agent, but he gets the job done. Butts heads with a lot of people though," Jesse said.

"Pfft, he just needs more hugs," Rodriguez said, waving his hand.

"Don't let Rodriguez's ridiculous attitude fool you. In the field, he's a hardass. Not as severe as Aishani or Chang, but not someone you take lightly," Gabriel said.

"That is the sweetest thing you've ever said about me," Rodriguez said. "Lucky, you are a good influence on him. I approve."
"...I think that's Jack," you said.

"Mmm, maybe." Rodriguez looked at Jack. "Sunshine always did have a way of finessing Reyes."

"Sunshine?" You repeated in rising tones.

"...Rodriguez, get out," Jack scowled.

"Was that his nickname?"

"Aw, this is great. Lucky, how much have they told you much about chem camp? Because I have so many stories, and I bet you haven't heard about the time-"

"Just go," Gabriel scowled. "If you're going to natter on about the past, at least have the courtesy to do it out of earshot."

"It's like the Algeria all over again-" Rodriguez shook his head. He got up. "It was good to catch up with you two. It's OK, I'll look after your agents," he said. "Come on, Agent Sexy Towel and Agent Spaghetti Western. Let's roll!"

Rodriguez sauntered out of the office whistling badly as he went.

You blinked. "Wait, what?"

"Jack's full nickname was "Sweet Summery Sunshiny Soldier-Boy," courtesy of Rodriguez," Gabriel said with a faint smile. "Sunshine" for short. Though he'd sing the full title to him when drunk. He was always off-key."

"Shut up, Gabe," Jack muttered.

"Well, it's time to go," Jesse said, grabbing his hat, apparently so relieved that this meeting was over, he wasn't even going to complain about the nickname.

"You know how Ray is. She did remark on your sneakiness and said you were "better than she expected." Honestly, that's high praise from Ray. She's a bit...challenged in the compliments department." Rodriguez chatted happily as the three of you walked through the halls. He had a slight limp and towered over both you and Jesse. "Have you met Sergeant Chang, Agent McCree?"

"Nope," Jesse said.

"Then I must be boring you to tears." Rodriguez laughed. "So let me get this straight: Lucky's a stealth operator with stabbing tendencies, and you're a sharpshooter. Reyes says you're good, scary good."

Jesse stared straight ahead, his cheeks a faint shade of pink. "Now you're just blowing smoke up my ass."

"Kinky, but not my style." Rodriguez shook his head. "Just wondering how much more damage you could do with an automatic."
"Revolver gives you better control," Jesse said. "Plus it doesn't jam when it gets hot. I can use anything in a pinch, but I prefer revolvers."

"You're a qualified sniper; I'm not questioning your judgment. Was just curious." Rodriguez adjusted his sleeves. "It takes a steady hand and good reflexes to use a revolver against omnis."

"It's just what I'm used to." Jesse shrugged, but he didn't look quite as displeased as he had earlier.

Rodriguez stopped outside the briefing room, straightened his collar, and turned to face you. "How do I look?"

"...Tall?"

He slapped his hand over his chest. "I don't have anything on my face, do I? Uniform look right? Nothing in my teeth?" He opened his mouth, wiggling his jaw so you could see his teeth from a variety of angles.

"You look fine," you said.

"Very professional," Jesse said dryly.

"If I meet my new squad with bean skins in my teeth, I am holding you both responsible," he said, pointing between the two of you. "I had corn in my teeth last time and Reyes never let me live it down."

"You're clear," you said, solemnly.

"Thank you," he said, cracking his neck. "All right. Let's go." He opened the door, shoulders square, mouth flat, and gaze a lot sharper than it had been in the office.

You followed him in, noting that Chey and Maeda Vargas sat beside each other, engaged in a heated, but whispered battle. Forrester looked on in distress, her hair recently cut short. You had seen Krizman around; he was a solid combat medic. You didn't know much about Rangi, other than that he had power armor. And Serik was an accomplished scout and sniper, though her temper was well-known. Chey would man the defensive barriers, his background in mechanics coming in handy. Maeda Vargas would probably train under Serik. And you expected Rodriguez would be mentoring Forrester, since she had leadership qualities.

Maeda Vargas and Forrester sat up straight when they saw you. Chey gave you a nod, his brows raised. It was a friendlier greeting than you expected.

"I am Major Mateo Rodriguez, former US Special Forces." He took a moment, making eye contact with every agent under his command. "We are one of the newer units tasked with bringing order to the Mediterranean region. This area has the worst military fatality rate since the end of the Omnic Crisis. So basically the local secret omnium base is operating under the assumption that the war isn't over," he said sharply, and you thought of Galanos and Sinaga. "I will demand the best from you, and you can expect the same from me. If you have a problem, you come to me. If you have a concern, you come to me. If you have questions, you come to me. And if you cause trouble, I will come to you, and that encounter will be nowhere near as pleasant." He placed his palms flat on the table and leaned forward. "Do we understand each other?"

"Yes sir!" Reverberated throughout the room, hands snapping up in salutes.
You caught the gleam in Maeda Vargas' dark eyes. He wasn't daunted by the challenge, no he was pumped. Yeah, Rodriguez would have him eating out his hand by the end of the day.

"All right then, now that our introductions are out of the way, let's talk about this first mission..."

"Agent Strike, ma'am," Forrester saluted as she passed.

"Ma'am!" Maeda Vargas plunked down beside you as Forrester shook her head at his presumption. "And Agent McCree, sir!" He grinned at you both, his hair longer than you remembered, growing out into little corkscrew curls. He practically vibrated with excitement. "This is exactly the kind of thing I wanted to do when I joined up! Major Rodriguez is SEP, isn't he?"

"Major Rodriguez was US special forces. Anything else about his history, is up to him to share," you said.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, not the least bit discouraged. "You like him?"

You raised a brow.

"...Not like that! Though he is...impressive," Maeda Vargas said quickly. "I mean, that's your own business, ma'am. I wouldn't pry." He glanced over at Rodriguez who was talking with Serik. "I'm sorry."

"I think Major Rodriguez has the right temperament to handle you and Chey," you said. "If that's what you're asking.

"...Chey isn't that bad," Maeda Vargas said, after a long pause. "Don't tell him I said that. He's insufferable enough."

You weren't expecting that change of heart, but it was a relief that they'd reached some kind of understanding. You adjusted your gloves. "How are Lowell and Jeong liking Oslo?"

"I think they're both relieved that they're not on the frontlines yet. Lowell's too anxious. They're perfectly capable; it's all in their head. And Jeong is fighter, but she's best at mission planning - she's a detail person." Maeda Vargas nodded to himself. "I hope we'll get to work together again. Chey too. He can be a pain, but at least he's reliable."

You smiled at that. It was good to see him finding his own way. And maybe you were a little pleased that he still wanted to join Blackwatch.

"You got a moment, Strike?" Rodriguez tapped your shoulder. "Gotta have a talk with you, me, and McCree...heh, I can say that literally."

You rubbed your forehead.

Rodriguez coughed, smothering his grin. "I mean, we have some logistical details to go over."

You rose, giving Maeda Vargas a nod.
Rodriguez fell into step beside you as you headed to the other side of the room, where Jesse polished his bowie knife.

"Kid's got a case of hero worship," Rodriguez said, not looking back. "I'm glad you're along for the ride. You're making this transition much smoother. And I have to admit, Chey isn't as grouchy as I expected."

"They do good work," you said.

"I mean, I remember Reyes on morning patrols. You haven't seen grouchy till you've seen Reyes at 4 AM with no coffee. It's amazing that I survived..." He laughed softly.

"Now Rodriguez, you're teasing me with all these stories, when you claim we have logistical details to go over."

"I lied," he said, sitting down. "I just wanted to shoot shit about the SEP days, and tell embarrassing stories about my friends."

"I have no complaints," you said.

"See, I knew I liked you better than Maya. She was hot. Oh, she had these smoldering eyes and-" He drew an hourglass with his fingers in the air. "But she was a bitch and a half. Thought she was the last coke in the desert. Ray was going to-" He paused. "You do know about her, right?"

"Yup," you said. Though Gabriel had not told you her real name. Well, it was good to know that "Tara" was really "Maya." You didn't share that part. "I think Chang gave me her tacit approval back at Christmas; it was hard to tell."

"Oh good," Rodriguez said, his expression shrewd. "If Ray didn't like you, we couldn't be friends."

"That's bullshit. You're friends with Gabriel and Chang doesn't like him-"

"And for good reason. He loves winding her up. I mean, I do too, but I usually know when to stop. Reyes just goes till she snaps."

You nodded. "That sounds about right."

"Anyway, Reyes' carne asada is the best, and that gets him a lot of slack. But if you tell my mama I said that-"

You laughed. "Gabriel is a good cook."

"And has he made you those little beef empanadas? Dios mio, I can eat my weight in those." Rodriguez rubbed his stomach. "Now I'm hungry. Quick, change the subject to something terribly serious!"

"Did you know Captain Patel very well?"

Rodriguez's smile faded. "Yeah. Aishani was a mother hen with iron teeth." He stared at the wall. "Kept us all out of trouble with the brass, then damn near killed us herself. You didn't fuck up for her more than once. She eventually pushed some bureaucrat too hard and they tried to put her out to pasture. Didn't take. Reyes knows a good thing when he sees it, and recruited her immediately. Her husband wasn't happy, but..."
"Captain Patel was married?" You tried to picture her as anything besides your badass CO. You had some difficulty seeing her living a civilian life. Grocery shopping, yard work, her wedding ceremony: she would have the same stony expression through it all. You realized then, that perhaps your viewpoint wasn't entirely accurate.

Rodriguez nodded. "She didn't talk about her personal life much, not as your CO. But after we graduated she stayed in touch. Aunt Battleaxe is what Frank called her." He stopped, gritting his teeth.

You remembered Jack telling you about Gabriel's squadmate Frank, also SEP, who died in Dili. "Anyone tell you how she recruited me?"

"Ray did," Rodriguez said with a soft laugh. "And I told Andre. And I'm sure Andre told Leah..."

"It's like SEP is the top secret gossip network."

Rodriguez nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes. We keep track of each other. Morrison and Reyes are easier to find than most. "A lot of people are unhappy about Aishani. I know Reyes isn't sitting around doing nothing, but aside from Ray and me, not a lot of people know the details." He shook his head. "It's a godforsaken mess."

You nodded, staring at your boots.

"But we knew that." Rodriguez sighed heavily. "Hey, have you heard about the time Morrison streaked across camp while the joint chiefs were visiting?" He asked, tone brighter.

You shook your head. "Tell me everything. I will owe you all the alcohol."

"I hear you can get things. And I like Pisco."

"Deal," you said.

"So Ray walked in on them in the showers, again. And she was so irritated that she had to wait to clean up, so she took their towels and clothes, and tossed them in the pond. After the inevitable confrontation, Reyes stole her towel and ran. But Morrison was too shocked to react and Ray, of course, went after Reyes swearing bloody vengeance. Eventually, Morrison realized no help was coming, and he was under a time crunch because he had to meet with some of the brass. So he decided to risk it. Turns out, Morrison is smarter than people give him credit for. He didn't cover his junk, just his face. Sure the joint chiefs were on site and everyone was scandalized, but it's not like they could go around demanding a dick inspection."

You ended up taking care of the paperwork for the pickup, because hating paperwork was an established SEP trait. And Jesse was needed to "supervise." Though you weren't sure if he was supervising the prisoner or if he was making sure Maeda Vargas didn't pickpocket the Turkish military police. It took longer than you liked, but you got it done.

Rangi and Forrester were taking first watch in the brig, not that you were too worried about the prisoner slipping his restraints. Still, Rodriguez was pairing up new agents with more experienced ones. Serik and Maeda Vargas would take watch together, and Chey and Krizman
would do the next shift, if necessary.

"And that's why Jack wouldn't eat raisins for years! Leah had him convinced that they were indistinguishable from Portuguese wine beetles. You have to understand, there's no such thing. But we all played along. Even Reyes. I think Ray was the one who finally spilled the beans after he gave her too much flak about eating raisin bran."

You chuckled, plenty amused by the stories Rodriguez kept spinning. You'd have to ask Gabriel how true they were, but as outrageous as they were, they weren't implausible.

"Major, there's a distress call coming over secure channels, from the Mani peninsula," the pilot said over the comms, her voice strained. "We're the closest unit."

"Where is it coming from?" Rodriguez said, mouth flat, eyes alert. He'd been at Galanos’ funeral too.

Jesse sat up straighter.

"Off Cape Matapan. Closest town is Kokkinogia. We currently have full operational freedom in Greece, sir," Daniels said.

Rodriguez shook his head. "Guess this routine mission is about to get real interesting. Radio the base. Let them know we are diverting to answer. Lucky, can you find out who's stationed there?"

"Lieutenant Commander Nejem is listed as on patrol in that region," you said, bringing up your view screen. ".But their status is "out on patrol" and no distress calls have been received, according to command. Athena, can you get in contact with Lieutenant Commander Nejem's unit?"

"...Negative, Lucky. They are not responding. It is possible they are out of range or being jammed."

You nodded. "Thanks, Athena."

Rodriguez nodded. "All right then. Gear up, folks! We could be going in hot."

You put your tablet aside and adjusted your armor. Jesse sidled up to you with a few EMP grenades. It could be pirates, a medical emergency, or even freak weather, but the two of you knew that it could very well be another omnic raid.

You had packed EMP rounds, just because you knew you were escorting an omnic criminal. You and Jesse took a turn guarding the prisoner while the rest of the squad tightened up their armor, checked their weapons, and prepped for contact.

"Radioed back," Daniels said. "But not getting any response from the unit. ETA twenty minutes."

"Not uncommon in emergencies. We'll do a flyover, see what the sensors pick up. Move fast and quiet. This could be an ambush." Rodriguez set his assault rifle on the seat beside him.

You strapped yourself in, and Jesse sat beside you, his shoulders tense.

"You always invite me to the nicest places," you said.

"We're going to the beach, Lucky. I thought you wanted a vacation," he laughed.
"Yeah, OK," you said, shaking your head. You took a deep breath and closed your eyes, concentrating on what actions you might need take. Medical care would be left to Krizman. Most likely you would have to reinforce Nejem's unit. And if there were omnics, it was EMP grenades all the way. If the situation was too hot, the pilot wouldn't land.

"We have begun descent," Daniels announced and you opened your eyes. "ETA is under ten minutes-"

Maeda Vargas tapped his feet, hands fiddling with his seatbelt. Forrester chewed on her bottom lip, sweat beading on her forehead. Rodriguez was very still. Chey ground his teeth. Jesse tapped a silent rhythm on his thigh.

"Anybody know any good jokes?" Maeda Vargas asked, his voice cracking.

You never heard the response. There was a roar as something hit the transport, and you jolted forward in your seat. The frame creaked and the lights shorted out, sparks raining down from the port side of the ship. The craft began to dive, and your stomach dropped, even as you heard someone, probably Forrester, scream.

The speakers crackled. "Mayday! Mayday! We have been hit and we have taken damage! Brace yourselves! We are going in hard!" The world spiraled and Rodriguez's gun slammed into the bulkhead.

There was a bang as something breached the hull. Cold currents tore through the cabin throwing tablets and gear in a whirl, ripping at your hair and limbs, and squeezing the air from your lungs. Rapid depressurization, you realized, as your thoughts zigzagged between incredulity and fear. There was a word for what would come next, but you couldn't remember. Hypnosis? Hypothermia? Hypoxia!

The oxygen masks dropped from their stations, but you couldn't reach yours. Not while the world spun in freefall.

You didn't have time to panic. The oxygen was gone, and with it went your consciousness.

"...I can't believe you thought it was a good idea to introduce those two," Jack moaned, and Gabriel just rolled his eyes. It had been Jack's idea, not that Gabriel minded. You would have met Rodriguez eventually. Best to get all the awkwardness out of the way. You would have all sorts of questions and hilarious stories when you got home tonight. It would be wisest to have cake on hand, if only to distract you for a little while. Gabriel had plenty of ideas about how to keep you distracted, and he smiled tolerantly as Jack continued to mutter under his breath.

"If Rodriguez didn't meet her, one of the others would, and at least Mateo knows some discretion," Gabriel said.

"Are we talking about the same guy?" Jack asked, a little incredulous. "The one who told Jane that he'd happily put a wig on me and think of her?!!"

Gabriel snorted. "He was fucking with you, amor. Imagine if Andre or Leah corners her. Andre's still making a lot of noise about Aishani, and the day he learns to keep his mouth shut is the day we bury him with a whole roll of duct tape around his head." Gabriel ran his fingers along
"Our friends are all assholes," Jack griped, reaching over to kiss the top of Gabriel's head.

"Newsflash Jack, so are we."

"Strike Commander-" Athena's voice piped into the office, almost nervous. Well, she should be. She wasn't supposed to be in here if Lucky wasn't. Gabriel glared at the speakers.

"Yes, Athena?" Jack frowned.

"Lieutenant Commander Nejem's squad on the Mani peninsula has gone silent. Lieutenant Daniels radioed base to say they'd received a localized distress call over secure channels, but there is no record of any such thing reaching us. Major Rodriguez is moving to respond-"

Jack paled. "None of Galanos nor Maina's distress calls made it through the jammers."

Gabriel swore. "Mateo wouldn't ignore a distress call-" Gabriel didn't need to finish that sentence. Rodriguez would answer the call, taking his new squad, Jesse, and you straight into the thick of it. "Bring up satellite imaging." He ordered, not caring that Athena was not supposed to be in his office.

"Yes, sir!" His screen blinked and with each click, the image zoomed in, from the Mani peninsula to a montage of detailed images of grass, beaches, and billowing black smoke. Athena was faster at this than any of the techs Gabriel had seen, her programs filtering through the junk data at inhuman speeds. Click. A burning overturned armored vehicle on the beach, Overwatch markings and military plates. Click. Fires spreading across the sea of grass. Click. Human bodies in Overwatch uniforms littered the beach, some on fire, some in the water, none of them moving.

"Tell them to abort," Jack said, his voice distant. "They're too late."

"Message transmitted sir, but- they aren't responding either. Strike Commander, you should hear this: "Mayday! Mayday!" The voice was unfamiliar, but the panic was what Gabriel registered. "We have been hit and we have taken damage! Brace yourselves! We are going in hard!"

His blood ran cold, but Gabriel did not look away from the screen.

"Lieutenant Daniels managed to transmit her coordinates before she cut out," Athena said. "They were about twenty kilometers away from the attack site." Athena rapidly cycled through the satellite pictures, and Gabriel suspected she was adjusting the satellite's trajectory to get a better angle on the region. It was a terrible violation of protocol and there was no way she was cleared to do that, but in this moment, Gabriel couldn't bring himself to care.

The Orca lay on its belly in the sand, one nubby fin torn off, the metal blackened and cracked where something incendiary had hit the drop ship. It wasn't on fire, and while it would not be flying again, it was mostly intact. Click. Athena changed the picture and Gabriel almost shouted at her, but the words died in his throat. Because she'd cut to the ocean, the water roiling and steaming as a score omnis: OR-14s, bastions, and what looked like a half-sized Titan emerged from the sea.

Gabriel reached for Jack's hand.

"...What do we do, Strike Commander?" Athena asked, as they watched the omnis march
out of the water in real time. And Gabriel already knew the answer: there was nothing they could do.

Chapter End Notes

I have to open, and this scene is taking forever, and I'm trying to post a chapter but keep getting distracted. But it is late, and I am dumb. It is bedtime.
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

Life, death, and shadows in the dark.

Chapter Notes

We are now past 500k and 7 months. Yeesh.

Here there be monsters. And by monsters, I mean "feelings." Ugh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Lucky, chica, come on, wake up. If anything happens to you, Morrison and Reyes will never forgive me. And that means no empanadas."

The voice was unfamiliar, and you struggled to open your eyes. You were not restrained. The ground was soft and wet. And you could hear waves crashing on what had to be sand.

"How long was I-?"

"Just a few minutes. We were thrown clear of the wreck."

Your head hurt. Your whole body hurt and when you tried to move your left arm, the pain shot through your nerves like fire and you opened your eyes, biting down on your lip till you tasted blood. Instinctively, you reached for your tanto. It was there. So was your gun. You couldn't feel your prostheses respond, but you switched on your stealth generator. These were all tasks you could accomplish one-handed and a reflexive part of your combat prep.

Still dazed, you tried to focus on your rescuer.

Rodriguez hunched over you, his brown eyes worried as he cradled your head. "Can you move?"

You wiggled your legs and your right arm. They ached, but they responded. "Left arm's busted," you said. "How did we-?"

"Daniels brought us down as easy as she could. Come on, let's find everyone else. There are some caves over there." He stood. There was a "whumpf" as something heavy hit the sand behind him, a dark shadow falling over you both. Behind him was a van-sized omnic wielding an energy sword.

You blinked as a bright orange shard emerged from Rodriguez's chest. His eyes widened and he pressed a gloved hand to it, blood already beginning to dribble out of his mouth. You were only starting to make sense of it, when Rodriguez pitched forward on top of you, and the OR-14 retracted its blade.
Your breath hitched. "Rodr-"

"Shh, it's OK," he murmured. "It'll be OK." He exhaled softly, blood already hot and sticky against your skin. "Doesn't even hurt..." He sighed, drooping against you. "Never hurts when I'm with you, Ray."

You lay there in the blood and wet sand, pinned under Rodriguez's formidable weight, waiting for the next blow that would finish you off. But the omnic clanked, already moving forward.

You lifted Rodriguez's chin, your gloved fingers brushing his scar. His eyes were open and already empty. Teeth clenched, you shook him, trying to will the life back into his face. Telling yourself that maybe if you just looked harder, you'd find the spark you'd missed. That the man who had been laughing and making jokes with you all day wasn't dead on top of you.

Hyperventilating, you wiggled out from under him, your left arm flopping uselessly at your side. The world wobbled, and you stared at the wreckage of the Orca, about ten meters away. And at the two dozen or so omnics in the water, marching directly toward the craft.

There was another scream, and the world narrowed to three points. You were here on the beach. The rest of your squad was strewn around the wreckage of the Orca. The caves that Rodriguez mentioned were about a hundred meters out. If they were deep enough, you could take cover and regroup.

You patted your belt, EMP grenades still locked in. You took one in hand and staggered forward, your legs not wanting to support your weight.

There was gunfire ahead, and that gave you hope. Someone else had survived. Your legs steadied and muscle memory carried you forward as you threw yourself into a loping run. The majority of the omnic force was still in the water, but they would be here soon. Rodriguez's murderer was ahead and you would have to be careful about the grenades shorting out your stealth field.

"Step right up!" Jesse shouted and your heart sped up. He was alive and you were going to keep him that way.

"Fire in the hole!" You snarled and threw the EMP grenade.

The burst was almost soundless. You watched the OR-14 wobble as the pulse shorted out its legs. Jesse crowed. "Thank you kindly, Lucky!" He fired rapidly into the immobile omnic and you smiled savagely as it fell.

"Status?" You reached for a second grenade.

"Right as rain, huckleberry. You seen Rodriguez?"

"Dead," you said flatly. "That one got him."

Jesse winced. "Lost Krizman and Rangi in the crash. Prisoner got...compacted. Serik is helping Daniels get to cover. She's pretty ripped up."

"Those caves are our best bet. They're narrow enough we can hold them at a chokepoint."

"...We're trapped then, Lucky."
"We're dead in the open, Jesse."

Jesse shut his eyes for a tense second, then nodded grimly. He backed up, hat in his hand.

"Forget about salvaging anything. We need to go!" Jesse snapped and you saw your former students grabbing packs and picking up the pace.

"Strike!" Maeda Vargas' face lit up, his smile wobbly. "I knew you'd be-" He frowned. "Where the major?"

"Less talking, more running," you said, shaking your head.

Maeda Vargas' eyes widened. Forrester and Chey were at his side. All of them were a little scraped up, but they seemed functional.

"Quit lollygaggin' and move!" Jesse snarled and the five of you took off across the sand, Serik and Daniels still in view.

You glanced over your shoulder. A dozen OR-14s were moving fast. You threw your second EMP grenade and hoped that would delay them. With one hand, you unclipped your carbine.

Something whistled through the air as you hit the sandy scrublands off the beachhead. Clumps of vegetation dotted the hills and you kept your gaze on the caves.

The first explosion fell short. The sound spurred you forward, though your lungs burned and your vision swam. The bastions were using their cannons then.

The second explosion wasn't far behind the first and it sprayed you with dirt.

The third was immediately after and though you were on the periphery, it tumbled you a few yards into a bush. Thankfully, you knew how to fall: you'd had plenty of experience.

You pulled yourself to your feet. The OR-14s were catching up and the distance between you shrunk. You threw your final grenade, hoping to buy some more time.

Even as you made the throw, your eyes fell on the body on the ground, her black hair dusty and damp, her head twisted too far to the side, blood already pooling underneath her. You didn't need to check for a pulse. That last salvo killed Forrester. Such a goddamn waste. You clenched your jaw. She'd just been a stupid kid, not Blackwatch material, but still one of yours and seeing her sprawled out in the dirt, shredded something inside you. She'd been so full of hope and enthusiasm that sometimes it had hurt to look at her. And now that that light was gone, it hurt even more.

"Strike!" Chey shouted hoarsely through the dust, and you followed the sound. He crouched on the ground, his leg at a sharp unnatural angle, one hand pressed against his abdomen. Maeda Vargas lay on his side, eyes shut, unnaturally still. And for one terrible moment, you couldn't breathe. "He's still alive. Get the boy out of here."

"You're not a goddamn horse, I can help you both-"

"You can only help one of us, Strike and that's the boy," Chey snapped. "Give me your gun." He gritted his teeth, pain etching sharp lines on his face. "You save the stupid kid. If you can come back for me, great, if not, I'll buy you time."

He was lying. The moment Chey started shooting at the omnics they would triangulate his
location and return fire with a vengeance.

But you understood. You'd done this before. You handed him your carbine. "The EMP rounds are spaced out every third shot. You can slow them that way."

"I'll aim for the legs," Chey laughed dryly. "Now move."

You wobbled as you knelt and tried to yoke Maeda Vargas's arm over your shoulder. "Come on, agent. I need you on your feet! That's a goddamn order!"

Maeda Vargas moaned, but miraculously, he pushed himself forward and you half-guided, half-dragged him toward the caves. Gunfire echoed behind you, and you forced yourself to keep your eyes straight ahead on your destination.

Jesse was in front of you, Daniels over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. You caught sight of the mangled mess that had been Serik and swore. Everything hurt, your chest, your head, your arms. Breathing burned and you could smell death and fire on the wind.

Jesse disappeared, against the rock face. You practically rolled down the hill with Maeda Vargas. And then Jesse was there, helping you drag the boy through the rocks and the darkness. With your right hand, you opened your multitool finger and switched on the light. An impressive backdrop of stalagmites and stalactites striped the cavern. The entryway was almost two yards high and a yard across, giving you plenty of clearance. At its highest point, the ceiling at least ten feet tall. The cavern narrowed, about two yards in, and you could not see how far back it went.

Daniels lay propped against a large stalagmite, her head bandaged and bloody.

"Jesse, Chey is still-"

He nodded swiftly and bounded past you while you lowered Maeda Vargas onto the ground and frowned at the placement. If an omnic made it down here, you'd be tripping over them. They needed to be somewhere more secure. You dragged Maeda Vargas and Daniels back a few yards, so resting them against a wall. Then you returned to the entrance, already rushing back out to back up Jesse.

"It's too late! Move it!" Jesse shouted, as he hurtled back into the cave, something small bundled against his chest.

There was a terrible shaking even as Jesse tumbled into the mouth of the cave and rocks began to fall. The bastions were still firing their cannons.

Jesse swore as he hit the ground, landing on his side. The thing in his arms yelped. Rolling onto his back, his hat fell off and Jesse tried to yank his right leg free while cursing. He set the creature aside and you blinked, it was a black and white dog, lap-sized with a blunt snout and pointed ears. It whimpered, cowering under your gaze, and you shook your head, turning back to focus on Jesse.

You removed the augment, still attached to the utility prostheses, so it could give you some light to work by. Your little metal finger rested on a rock while you clumsily lifted the stones to free Jesse. He managed to wiggle free of his metal boot, and while he wasn't going to be using that leg tonight, the armoring saved it from being completely crushed.

"Don't know if anything's broken, but I really fucked up my knee," he admitted after a moment. "I went back but-" He shook his head. "I'm sorry."
"Yeah," you said, looking at the dog. It crawled over to Jesse.

"I got out there and...after I turned back, it practically jumped into my arms." Jesse sounded embarrassed. "I don't know where it came from, but I wasn't going to leave it-"

You shook your head. "It's not that. I'm just...processing."

"You're a good...boy, yes you are," Jesse, patted the dog as it licked his face. Gingerly, you helped Jesse up. He didn't put any weight on that leg. You let him lean on you, while he hobbled to the wall. It was just wide enough for the four of you to sit side by side.

Clanking and gunfire continued outside. You weren't sure what they were shooting at now, but it sounded like distant thunder and the earth shook around you. Heavy artillery, probably. You reached into your belt for the stealth field-extenders. As long as you kept everyone close together, you might be able to mask their heat signatures, for another few hours maybe.

Rodriguez was dead. Forrester was dead. Chey was dead. And you'd lost the rest of Rodriguez's veteran agents.

"How bad off is Daniels?" You asked. You didn't carry an emitter in the field, and neither did Jesse. Krizman had one, and there were plenty back on the ship, but that didn't help you here.

"Dunno," Jesse said. "Serik stopped the bleeding, but she probably has internal injuries. We're all concussed to hell, you're down an arm, and I can't run." He shook his head grimly. The dog was tucked against his hip and you reached over to pet it.

The temperature was cool, and the air smelled a little stale, but you sat between Jesse and Maeda Vargas, the boy's head resting against your shoulder. Your whole damn arm was numb now, a bad sign.

"Jesse, I need you to set this as best you can," you said.

He nodded, his hands poking and prodding. "I'd be happy to give you a hand."

You flinched, mostly from his examination, but a little from the joke.

"Think you snapped your funny bone, sugarpie."

"No, your jokes just suck," you said with a tense smile. "Think it's lower."

"Definitely broke your funny bone," he said, and pushed on your forearm. You gave a cry of pain. "We can put it in a sling."

"Shemagh on my belt," you said. And Jesse grabbed the scarf, and helped you tie a sling, stabilizing your elbow and wrist. "Thank you."

"Anytime, sweetpea," he said gruffly. "I'll see to Daniels. Can you-?"

"Yeah." You checked on Maeda Vargas. "Hey, agent-"

"Got a name, ma'am," he said, voice groggy. "Think you can call me "Távio." I'm a real agent now. It says so in my file."

"Can you stay awake, Távio?"

"I can try ma'am," he said, lips curving in soft smile. "That wasn't so hard, was it?" He
Durga save you from smartass rookie agents. You caught yourself smiling, in spite of yourself.

"Do you have any water, ma'am? I think I left my canteen on the ship-"

You were used to working one-handed, and you unclipped your canteen, moistening his lips. "You hungry too?"

"No, ma'am," he said. "Unless you've cooked up some of that legendary fried chicken I heard about. I'd like to try that some day."

"Get through this, and I'll make you some," you said tightly.

"Me too," Jesse laughed softly, the dog now nestled in his lap.

"Yeah," you said, looking up. "Of course."

Eventually the clanging, booming, and scratching noises stopped. Hopefully your stealth field had convinced them you were all dead. Daniels was still breathing, but you weren't sure if she would last the night. Távio drifted in and out of consciousness, often breaking down into long chains of Portuguese while he curled against your shoulder. Sometimes he called out for his mãe, and clung to your arm. You patted his head awkwardly.

The cave was damp and the air stale and cool, but it was only mildly uncomfortable. The close confines and the inky darkness should have bothered you more, but you were too physically exhausted and emotionally wrung out to panic at this point. This was nothing compared to the snow. For the moment, this felt almost safe.

"You know, I wanted to talk to you in private," you said to Jesse. "But this is not what I had in mind."

Jesse grunted, gently scratching the dog's head. You'd been sitting here for hours and your stealth generator was now dead. But the dog had stayed glued to Jesse's lap, not barking, not crying, just licking Jesse's fingers every few minutes. He looked like a Boston terrier or French bulldog, with stubby legs, and pointy ears too big for his head. He had a white blaze in the middle of his head and you rubbed his ears, while he panted happily. His short coat was glossy, if a little dusty, but he didn't look neglected. What was he doing out here?

"What are you going to name him?"

"Bandit," Jesse said without hesitation. And that was better than you expected, given Jesse's code naming practices. You were a little surprised he hadn't chosen Goodboy Waggybottom or Tiddlywinks Cowpoker. "Don't know if the boss'll let me keep him, but-"

"We'll figure something out," you said, wondering if maybe you guys should get an apartment off base and use it like a timeshare. If you got back to base. But you knew better than to voice that thought. You were both very aware of the danger you were in. There was no point in getting worked up over imminent death when you could be finding a solution.
"What'd you want to talk about?" Jesse asked, exhaustion coloring his voice.

You got out an energy bar and offered it to Jesse. He broke it in half and gave part back to you, crumbling some in his hand for Bandit.

You ate sparingly, wondering if you could get Távio or Daniels to take some food. You had a few more bars in your belt; you packed extra for Gabriel and Jack. There was a chocolate bar too, but Bandit couldn't eat that.

"I need to see if there's a water source or another way out," you said, looking at Jesse's leg. The knee was swollen and when he thought you weren't looking he would wince and rub it gingerly.

You carefully extracted yourself from Távio and he groaned softly as you propped him up against Jesse.

Using your light finger, you examined the location of the rock fall. The stones were set firmly and you were pretty sure it was night by now, though no external light had come through after the omnics had sealed you in.

You walked back another ten feet, weaving between stalagmites, some as high as your hip, and stalactites, some dangling low enough to cause serious head trauma. Water dripped from above, and you probably had a purification tablet in your belt. The ceiling was too high to try to tunnel through, and the cave ended in a wall of pitted limestone. Most of the rock was probably limestone; you recognized the shell fossils. It was a soft rock, you remembered. The news feeds often mentioned acid rain damaging limestone statues in the older cities.

But the cave did not connect to any network of tunnels. You might be able to break through the back wall, but there was no guarantee it would lead you anywhere, and you were concerned about releasing trapped pockets of sulfur, methane, or carbon dioxide.

You heard Jesse clear his throat. "Hey, Lucky, what'd you want to talk about?"

You'd heard him the first time, but you still weren't sure how to say it.

"This dead ends, but it's mostly limestone. We might be able to chip away at an exit route," you said, making your way back to the group. "There's a water drip. I've probably got purification tablets if you have an extra canteen."

"I do, but we can always use my other boot."

"...No," you said.

Jesse reached down and handed you his empty canteen. "I got Daniels to drink most of it. She's not staying conscious, but she's still breathing."

You nodded and took the canteen, setting it under a water drip. Thankfully, it wasn't salt water. It tasted heavy on the minerals, but you weren't going to complain. You'd rotate yours after you got Távio to drink more.

"Lucky...what'd you want to talk about?" Jesse asked a third time, and you had stalled long enough.

"Sorry. Just gathering my thoughts." You exhaled slowly, settling back down between Jesse and Távio. "One crisis at a time, you know. Going to turn off the light. Don't know how long
the charge will hold. I don't think it got damaged but...

You switched off the light, plunging the cavern into inky darkness. The drip of the water seemed louder, as was Távio's breathing.

"If you don't want to say-"

"...Things between us have been weird. Even Genji said something," you said quickly.

"...Yeah," Jesse said, voice raw. "I know."

"I thought if I just ignored it, it would go away," you admitted.

"Ouch."

"The situation, not you."

"That's not what it seemed like," he said.

"...I'm sorry." You took a deep breath. "...When Candle Arc went south," you began. "After Lao stabbed me. After Gabriel overreacted and issued the gag order, it really hurt me that you didn't try to tell me what happened to Lao. I know it isn't fair, but I thought you had my back, Jesse. Genji and I weren't as close. Ziv got himself banned. Lacroix was never really my friend, but you-"

"Sweetpea," Jesse gave a heavy sigh. "Who do you think got Mihret that Venus flytrap? It's a goddamn indigenous American plant. Not something Mihret is going to think of right away."

You blinked, chest tightening. "You mean-"

"I couldn't be obvious about it, sugarpie. Not without the boss skinning me alive. But I guess I was too convincing. You really thought I'd hung you out to dry, didn't you?" Jesse's voice came out strangled and you realized then how much your assumption had hurt him. This wasn't a new phenomenon. Your cool cynicism was a tried and true defense mechanism, but you were coming to understand that it could just as easily be turned against the people around you. And you'd never wanted to hurt Jesse.

You stared into the darkness, not even able to see your feet. "I did," you said quietly. "I'm sorry. Why didn't you say anything?"

"You didn't say nothing either. You just slowly kind of stopped doing things with me," Jesse said. "I figured you were busy with your issues and your lovers, that maybe you needed some time, maybe some space. Then suddenly you and Genji were buddies. Then you and Tataryn. And then you and the Zhai girl. I guess I realized that maybe you didn't have time for me no more and-" His voice was thin and dry. "I wasn't going to make a nuisance of myself, huckleberry. And with all the tension between Ana and me, maybe you were right to-"

"I'm sorry," you said, resting your head against the heat of his arm. "I was a bad friend. I was dumb and just stayed quiet when I should have said something. Or maybe I should have just trusted you more. You deserve better than that, Jesse McCree."

There was a long silence.

"If you're really sorry, when we get out of here," Jesse took a shaky breath. "You're gonna make me the biggest batch of that karaage, ever. I want to eat till my sides are bursting. And lots of
"OK," you said.

"And you're going to crack open that bottle of Johnny Walker Gold and we're going to drink that with it."

"Sure," you nodded.

"And then you're going to buy me some more goddamn tea, because I know damn well it's you who's been filching it all this time."

"Guilty," you said. "Though you've been in my snacks-"

"Not recently."

You blinked. "But if not you...?"

"Snitches get stitches, sweetpea," Jesse said with a laugh.

"I'm here, they're not. Now spill. Was it Tataryn?"

"Ain't caught him in the act; think he knows better."

"Vo?"

"She's been doing all right lately," Jesse said.

"Genji?"

"Wrong brother."

"...You're fucking kidding me. Hanzo?!" You sputtered.

"Seen him once or twice. I didn't say nothing, because I didn't realize you were blaming me. But I ain't taking the fall for that guy."

"Can't let you blame me for everything-"

"I'm sorry," you sighed.

"Ain't nothing left to apologize for, Lucky. Water under the bridge. We're good now, and that's what counts, right?"

"Yeah," you said. "It is."

Jesse patted your head. "OK, we've dealt with the personal crap. Now we need a plan of action."

You nodded, heart sinking just a little. You flicked the light back on, and winced as your eyes adjusted.

Jesse and you discussed the situation.

None of you were in good condition and you had limited supplies. You were trapped in a hole in the ground that could easily become your tomb. There might still be hostiles outside. Rodriguez, Chey, Forrester, and a lot of other people were dead.
You had no idea if rescue was coming any time soon. Athena knew your trajectory, but there was no guarantee she could track you after the crash. And lover or not, Jack and Gabriel could not just charge into an ambush for you. There were bigger things at stake. You had a little water and some food. The air supply didn't feel thin. As long as omnis didn't break through, and no one succumbed to their injuries, you could hold out for a day or two. Sitting tight and waiting for rescue wasn't the best plan, but you were too exhausted to try to dig yourselves out right now. And you hurt, all over.

"Hey, we're all beat. Why don't we catch some shut eye, and maybe things'll look different after some rest?" Jesse yawned. At the very least you could wait out your enemies, for a few hours. Convince them that you were all dead and they could go away.

"Yeah," you said. "That might help."

Your mind was not kind.

You lay on the beach again, the sand and grit sticking to your damp skin, the waves crashing on the shore. Pinned under Rodriguez, you couldn't breathe, and he convulsed against you, Chang's name on his lips while he died.

Sharp pain shot through your own stomach, and you could feel the energy blade cutting through your abdomen, burning straight through you. And you still couldn't get enough air to scream.

You were dying once more, bleeding out on the ground, and it was no longer Rodriguez on top of you, but Gabriel, his body too hot, his eyes vacant. Shouting, you jolted forward, eyes wide, heart racing, and head pounding.

The air felt wrong, and you reached over to check on Jesse, Távio, and Daniels. They were still breathing, but no one stirred. The light was on, and you looked up, cursing yourself for not being more vigilant about your power usage.

Your gaze fell on two figures, in the shadows, and your heart stopped, maybe for real this time. Wobbling to your feet, you rubbed your eyes, knees shaking. The taller one leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, his smile so gentle and familiar that you pressed your palm flat over your chest. The second figure sat on a small pile of displaced stones - debris from the cave-in - half her face still scarred, her expression severe.

"You...can't be. Am I...?"

"Not yet," the man said. You took another step forward.

"You're not really here. This isn't real." You shut your eyes, cheeks damp.

"We aren't really here," he agreed. "But that doesn't mean this isn't real."

"Dream logic," you laughed, voice verging on hysterical. "You'll be gone when I open my eyes." You wiped away the tears and stared ahead, expecting to see only a dark cave wall.

Captain Patel shook her head, like you were being especially thick.
"It's not quite a dream," Shin said. "Or do you still talk to dead people regularly?"

"There's gas," you realized. "We're breathing too much of it."

"Too much CO2, maybe some other elements," he agreed. "Subterranean ventilation is complicated." He stood there in uniform, body intact, eyes on your face like you were the only light he'd seen in years. "We'll get to that later. We don't have much time, but there should be just enough."

You took another step forward.

"You're not really here," you said, your voice weak.

"Does it matter? It's just good to see your face again. I miss you," he said.

"Yeah," you said. "I miss your face too." Your voice cracked.

Shin rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. Like you'd caught him eating the last cookie or slipping his laundry in with yours, again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to leave you behind. Honest."

You stopped only a few feet away from them, knowing that if you touched them, they would disappear. It was dream logic, probably, or just the unpredictable synaptic seizures of your dying mind. Maybe death wouldn't be so bad, if you got to see them again.

"Shin," you said his name, unable to think of the right words to say. You settled for the truth. "I miss you a lot."

"I know. But you're doing pretty well, baby. You're so tough. I'm proud of you." He gave you a crooked smile and you fought the urge to reach out and cup his face, to try and keep him here with you. "Always knew you were special. Wish I'd been around to grow alongside you." He shook his head. "My own fault, koibito." He paused. "And the asshole who killed me. But never yours."

"Shin-"

"There are lot of things we should have said when we had the chance." He looked you in the eye. "Always thought we'd have more time."

You bit your lip, right hand balled into a fist. "Me too."

"Do better this time around, for both of us."

You flinched, unsure if the sting came from being called out or the fact he knew about your current relationships.

"I-"

"It's OK. I'm glad you're not alone," he said, without reproach. "But is it what you want?" He didn't sound doubtful, just concerned.

"Still don't know what I'm doing. Don't know if things will work out. But yeah, I want this. I'm really trying."

"All right." His lips curved in an impish grin. "Have to say, it's quite the ego-boost. It took two men to replace me, and you didn't aim low: the Jack Morrison and Gabriel Reyes." He
laughed, the sound warming your blood.

"No one replaced you," you said, because there was a part of your heart that would always be held for him.

His expression grew solemn. "I know. I was joking. But I guess that isn't funny to you. Sorry." He shook his head. "You've done well, Lucky. You avenged me. You saved Lao. You're on the frontlines of the Talon counteroffensive. What are you going to do next? Solve global warming? Build a better Numbani? Create the ultimate cake?"

"I'm tired of this, Shin," you said, shaking your head. "So tired. It doesn't end. I kill one enemy, I find ten more. I'm terrified of losing anyone else and I don't know how much longer my luck will hold out. But I don't know how to stop either."

You didn't know where the honesty came from. You would never speak these words to the living. But here in the dark, on the cusp of oblivion, there was no point in lying to the dead. You were too tired for anything but the truth and they deserved nothing less.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to complain." You shook your head. "Sometimes I just feel like a bag of broken things, my shattered parts rubbing holes in my skin, like they're trying to break free. Sometimes it feels like the damage isn't ever going to get any better. Like everything is too fucked up, I've lost too much, and I will never be able to put the pieces back together. Sometimes I wonder what is actually left of me, underneath all the jokes and the scar tissue." You lapsed into silence, vision blurring.

"I know, koibito. If you wanted to lay back down and close your eyes, no one would blame you." He stared at you and for a moment you felt the cold of the void in your bones. "You've done enough, you deserve your rest." There was no judgment in his eyes.

You glanced back at Jesse and Távio, the two of them still breathing shallowly. Bandit shivered in Jesse's lap, his eyes shut.

"And the others?" Captain Patel said, voice deceptively mild.

Shin didn't look away from you. "I can speculate, if you like." He uncrossed his arms. "The dog will be the first to go." Shin's tone was flat and matter of fact. "But it will be quick and painless. Your pilot is holding on by a thread. Again, it won't hurt. The boy just won't wake up. And your friend? He might stir a few times, but he has his own demons to face." Shin looked you in the eye. "There will be no suffering, unlike trying to live. It's your choice."

You wiped your eyes. You don't know how long you stood there staring at the shade of the man you loved. You didn't know if he was trying to comfort you or galvanize you into action. You didn't even know if he was real. "That's no choice, Shin. Not for me."

"There's always a choice, Lucky. You move, or you die. And there are no guarantees." He smiled sadly at you. "I wish I could help."

"We're stuck here." You tapped your sling. "Maybe if we were all in peak form, we could dig our way out, but-

"Stop making excuses, soldier." Captain Patel snapped, and you stood up a little straighter. "There is no going backwards. You fight or you die. There is no other way."

"Ma'am." You saluted.
Her expression softened. "You did well with Agent Lao. And while I don't condone that piss-poor excuse for dodging, Durga had mercy on you."

"But Lao-"

"Will get over herself, just like you had to. You're resilient, even if you aren't very bright."

"Ouch," you laughed nervously, glancing at Shin. His smile was gentle, but he shook his head, unwilling to intervene. You couldn't blame him. Captain Patel could blister your ears without ever touching you.

"I don't have Lieutenant Sato's tolerance for existential crises. You have a squad here. You have a mission: you keep them alive." She echoed that last night at the Ninth Circle and your breath hitched. "We've lost enough already."

"I don't know-"

She pointed at the spot where she was sitting. "Look here, agent. Time's almost up. If you can't save yourself, then you can at least try to save the others. Mateo didn't die so you could dither around."

"Captain," Shin said, voicing gentle disapproval.

"No, she's right," you muttered. "I'm sorry. It's the air, and the day, and all the death. I'm not thinking clearly."

"Look here, I only ask that you do your best, Lucky. If you give it your all and still fail, there is no shame in that," she said.

"Yes, ma'am." But you stared helplessly at her, because you weren't sure what you could do next. "But I don't know what to do."

"You are so dense." There was a third voice, raspy and heavily accented. You didn't see her, but for a moment you smelled cigarette smoke. "Everything is above your pay grade. Look there," she said, though you could not see her white curls or glasses. And your eyes fell on the spot Captain Patel was pointing to. "You learn or you die, Lucky. But stop taking all these foolish chances. My worthless grandson will be lost without you."

Shin laughed. "Oh she is still bending the rules. I want to be her when I grow up."

You blinked, a flicker of hope illuminating your mind. "Wait, do you mean-"

"That's it." He shook his head. "We can't stay. I'm sorry."

"I love you. I loved you all," you blurted out. "But Shin, I should have said it sooner."

"I love you too," he said, smile widening. "I always knew."

"I was dumb; I only suspected." The words came out rapidly.

"I should have said it too. I was always waiting for the right moment." He shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"Me too." You looked away.

"There isn't time to be sorry, Lucky," Captain Patel said sharply.
"I'm-" Your head spun. "I mean, thank-"

"Don't waste your breath. Time's almost up," she said, standing. "You have your mission."

"Sit back down," Shin murmured. "You still have time. Not much, but enough."

You opened your eyes, breathing shaky, your face wet with tears. Your head was too light, your heart beat too fast, and the cave was dark. Reaching out, you checked your utility prosthesis. It flickered on, and you exhaled slowly, grateful for that small mercy.

They were gone. No Shin. No Captain Patel. No Rivka. They had never been here, you told yourself. The light had never been on. There was no way they could have been, no matter how real it felt. You drew a shuddering breath, you skin too tight, your heart freshly broken.

Your sanity had been in question before. But the dreams had never been quite that vivid. Sometimes they lingered throughout your day, the way all nightmares haunt the corners of the mind, because they had roots in reality. Maybe today had been too much. Maybe there was a limit on what your mind could bear, and now, surrounded by so much death, you were hallucinating in the opposite direction: resurrection to counter annihilation. You were personally stealing back life from the jaws of death.

You needed to move. You didn't have time to think about whether it was real or not. Shaking your head, you forced yourself to focus.

Jesse and Távio were still breathing. Bandit too. You hesitated over Daniels, fearing the worst. But her chest rose and fell. You didn't know a goddamn thing about her, but she'd gotten you through the landing alive, and she'd come this far with you. You could not help but like her for that reason alone.

"Daniels, you still have one job. Just keep breathing till we get rescued. It'd be terribly unfair if you died now," you said, voice raspy.

You shined the light on the spot where Captain Patel had been sitting. It was along the side border of the cave in, and you found a flat rock to set the light on. You began to poke around, feeling for loose stones. This was as good a place as any to start. Your gun was gone. Your left arm was out of commission. You drew the tanto.

You began to pry with the blade, loosening the rocks, and shifting them into piles on the side. It hurt your heart, more than you liked to admit, to abuse your weapon this way, but it was the only tool you had left. You dug one-handed, till your gloves were shredded. And still you kept digging, your fingernails were half torn off, the skin cracked and bleeding. Two inches. Six inches. A whole foot. Several times the hole collapsed on itself, but you kept moving with a fanatic's determination. There were large rocks you couldn't move, but you dug out the gravel, and wedged smaller rocks in the cracks to stabilize the vent. There was no time for skepticism. The light flickered, but you kept on moving, knowing that Bandit was your metaphorical canary, and the dog had gradually slowed down.

The first breath of fresh air, nearly brought tears to your eyes. It was cool and salty, and while you hadn't made it all the way through the rocks, it gave you hope. You sped up, the stones slippery with your blood. The vent took shape, growing almost six inches in width. Orange light
poured in and you redoubled your efforts. Snarling, you kept prying rocks loose till one snapped the blade of your tanto.

Your vision blurred, and you stared at the broken edge for half a second, before wedging the handle and guard in the vent, for stability. You picked up the blade and carefully put it back in the sheath. Because even broken, it was yours and Shin had given it to you.

And then you went right back to digging with your bare hand, because you did not have time to mourn.

When you had cleared as much rubble as you could, and reinforced the small tunnel, you stood. Right hand raw, you wobbled over to Jesse and picked up the dog. Bandit's tail thumped, twice and he licked your hand. You reached into your belt pouch and pulled out your compass on its neck chain. It took a few tries, but you shortened the chain, and fastened the necklace around Bandit's neck. If a rescue party found him, maybe they would know to look for you. Maybe. Maybe the dog would just look fabulous.

"OK, boy. I don't know how much English you understand, but don't panic. I'm going to try to get you out."

Very carefully, you pushed his paws through the opening, knowing there was a possibility that there were still hostile omnis around. But least he had a chance out there. You wiggled him through the narrow hole, worrying that maybe he'd get stuck or the rocks would collapse on him. But the channel held and you gave a push.

He squeaked as he fell out.

"You can go for help at any time," you said. "Or at least pick up a pizza? Maybe some gyros and dolmas?"

The dog looked back at you, his eyes big and buggy. He woofed softly, then climbed to his feet, shook himself, and wobbled off out of sight.

You inhaled the fresh air, knowing that even if you saved Bandit, you couldn't do much more digging. Instead, you began dragging your people to the entryway, where they could get some clean air. And after you did that, you collapsed against Jesse, wondering if you could have done more.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of feels. This chapter has been fomenting in my head for about three months. How real is it? Who knows?

My cousin has offered me a bounty of cake every time I kill off well-liked character. He's kind of a troll, but don't worry, I've had the rest of the storyline plotted for months. Tweaking some aspects of the ending, but that's plot-related. He isn't going to change my mind on who lives or dies. Probably.

In other news, teen!cousin is playing Alien: Isolation and has been stuck in the same locker for like 30 minutes. Every time he goes out to explore, he runs into the alien and has to flee and take cover. I keep hearing him screaming in the living room. At
this point, it would be a mercy for the alien to eat him. He's now playing Locker Simulator.
Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

You cannot dig any more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Time wasn't running correctly here. You knew you'd been trapped at least one night, maybe longer. And nobody had come. Or maybe they had and the omnis shot them down too. You couldn't think about that right now. You had to focus on getting your squad out of this alive.

You were on your own. It was a bleak realization. Worse still, you couldn't dig yourself out of here. Your right hand was too fucked up and your left arm was broken. Jesse and Távio seemed a little more active now, but they had not yet awakened. Summoning your strength, you got up to collect the second canteen. You swapped out the empty one, dropping a purification tablet in the full canteen. You took a sip, nearly spilling it on your face, because your right hand would not stop shaking. The water tasted like chalk and charcoal, but it would keep you alive.

Jack and Gabriel would send someone. They would be searching for you. You knew that. You just weren't sure you could bear to think about them right now: you didn't want to think about how much you just wanted to be back in bed between them, Gabriel's arms around your waist, Jack hogging your pillow while he rubbed your shoulders. You didn't want to think about that soft look Gabriel got when you were waking together, how sleepy and content, and happy he was to have you and Jack in bed with him. And you certainly didn't want to think about Jack, and how even your subconscious hallucinations called you out on your cowardly bullshit. How you should have told him exactly how you felt about him on the way back from Mongolia. How you shouldn't have waited this long, continually making excuses to yourself that "it wasn't a good time." How if you died here, he might spend the rest of his life wondering if you'd really cared about him or-

You flinched, and forced yourself to swallow more water. You could not afford to navel gaze now. Even if there was nothing else to occupy your time. You had a vital mission. One that took precedence over your personal neurosis.

Jesse called out for Ana, and you clumsily stroked his forehead. He was too warm, and you patted his cheeks.

"Jesse, you need to wake up."

"Jamie!" He groaned, and you flinched, remembering the woman you executed in New Mexico. Whatever he was seeing couldn't be good. So you splashed some water on his face and he sputtered, sitting up straight.

"Where-"

"Cave. I dug a hole in the rocks. There was something in the air."

"No, where's Bandit?" Jesse looked around frantically.
"I pushed him out the vent -"

"There are omnics out there!" Jesse shook and you held the canteen out to him, your tremors getting worse.

"Drink. The air was going bad. We were all dangerously lethargic. I wasn't sure if he was going to make it." You knew that in a few hours you wouldn't be able to use your right hand. You already hurt all over, from your beach landing and the subsequent firefight. "I haven't heard any shooting, and he hasn't come back. That was a pretty well-cared for dog, Jesse."

Jesse drooped against you. "I...you're right. No sense keeping him walled up here with us. He has a better chance out there. I just...got attached. Sorry."

You shook your head. You were going to buy Jesse a puppy if you got out of this. When, you reminded yourself. When you got out of this.

"My right hand is fucked up. Do you mind opening my left pouch for an energy bar. I'm going to try to wake Távio next. Daniels is still alive; maybe you can get them to take some water."

Jesse frowned, lifting your torn up right hand in the light. It hurt even more to look at the shredded skin and bloody nailbeds. "Goddamnit, sugarpie. What happened?"

You shrugged. "Had to get us clean air. I went a little a crazy." You stared at your sheath. "Broke my tanto. The hilt is one of the support beams for the vent."

Jesse blew out a breath. "I'm sorry, huckleberry. I know how much you loved that knife. I...yeah. I had the weirdest fever dreams." He shook his head. "I'll water them, don't you worry. You got any painkillers in there?"

"Don't think so." You had a few poisons and maybe an ampoule of sedative, but you didn't want to mess around with dosages, not in the dark, with your hands unreliable.

Jesse took the bar and broke it in three pieces. You ate your portion in two bites. It tasted like dirt, cardboard, and sugar, but you didn't care. Jesse ate his part sparingly.

"Maeda Vargas -"

"Távio, you need to wake up -"

He groaned, and muttered something rude in Portuguese. You rolled your eyes.

Jesse splashed water on his face.

Távio cursed, trying to burrow underneath you.

"That's an order, agent," you said sharply.

He groaned. "My head hurts, ma'am..."

"Eat some of this," Jesse said, pushing the remainder of the energy bar into Távio's hand.

The boy slowly sat up, rubbing his forehead. You watched him practically inhale the food. "Where? Oh...just dreams," he said, not looking at either of you.

"There was gas," you said, unwilling to think about that now. "I dug a vent. So we have some fresh air. We should probably sleep in shifts, just in case."
"You need to get some rest," Jesse said as he administered the water and bandaged your right hand. The ground was hard and uneven. "I'm going to put Daniels between us," Jesse said. "She's shaking, and I think she's too cold." Unspoken was the fact she had probably gone into shock and you had no equipment or drugs to treat her with.

You nodded. "OK."

You lay on your side, trying not to jostle the pilot. She was unresponsive, but between you and Jesse, she stopped shaking so much, her breathing leveling out.

"Maeda Vargas, help me stay awake," Jesse said. "Lucky, get some rest."

You nodded and closed your eyes.

"Lucky-" Jesse nudged you.

You groaned, and rolled over, your whole body aching. Your right hand felt like it'd been crushed and rolled in broken glass. When you tried to move it, your nerves pulsed, raw and screaming.

"Something's out there."

There was still light shining through the cracks, and you cocked your head to the side, making out the sound of gunfire. It grew louder. And then came the shouting, still too distant to understand the words. OR-14s didn't shout, they just killed things while making robot noises. You sat up, slightly alarmed to find both Távio and Daniels huddled against you.

"What's up with Távio?"

"He can't stay awake. Probably the concussion," Jesse said grimly. He sat by the vent in the rocks. "Can't tell what's going on. Is your stealth generator on?"

"It's dead," you said.

You wobbled to your feet, and staggered over to Jesse. Moving hurt. Your shoulders were too tight, your muscles ached, and your bones didn't seem like they could continue to support your weight, like they were splintering as you moved. You sank down on your knees beside Jesse.

"How's your pain?"

"...Painful," you muttered.

Jesse reached over and rubbed your shoulders while you both listened to the firefight in the distance.

"We need find a way to signal them," Jesse said.

"You're louder than me," you said. "Why don't you start shouting?"

"You're hilarious, sugarpie," Jesse grunted. "We can both shout."
"Well, I didn't want to cause another cave-in," you coughed, voice cracking. Jesse held a canteen to your lips and you drank slowly, water dribbling down your chin.

"Someone's out there. We have to get their attention."

"They probably won't be able to hear us, not from that distance and with all the gunfire."

So you and Jesse waited, listening as the gunfire slowed. You couldn't tell who was winning or what was out there. Just that there was fighting.

"Jesse, you're hogging the peephole," you said.

"Can't see shit anyway," and you could hear the scowl in his voice. "Just rocks and grass, and some sunlight. I miss sunlight, sweetpea."

"Yeah, me too. I'd like to see it, if only your head wasn't in the way."

"I think I've been stuck in here long enough with you."

"Agreed," you said. "Your feet stink."

Jesse snorted. "None of us smell like daisies."

You weren't sure how long you waited, but the gunfire had died off. And you couldn't tell if the omnis or the humans had won. There was no point in calling for the OR-14s and Bastions to come back and finish the job.

And then you heard the shouting start up again.

"What's going on?" You leaned forward.

"Shh," Jesse hissed. "I'm trying to hear-"

You fell silent, the voices were getting louder. Then:

"What the hell, Gabe? How could you throw the dog?!" Your heart froze right there. You had to take a few steadying breaths, to make sure you heard that right, because you recognized that voice.

"I didn't throw him, he jumped!" The other man sounded outraged and you felt yourself smiling, even as your heart pounded.

"Bandit?" Jesse's voice rose. "Hey! Hey! We're over here!"

There was a low-pitched howl that didn't come from a human throat.

"McCree? What the hell...?"

"Cave-in. We took cover and they caused a rockslide."

"Lucky?" Gabriel asked, his voice rough.

"I'm here," you said, squeezing your eyes shut. They'd come for you. You weren't sure why that surprised you. You weren't sure why your heart was in your throat. But you took short sharp breaths, right hand curled into a painful fist.
"Hold tight," Jack said. "We'll get you out. You might want to back up-"

"Give us a moment. Daniels is severely injured. Maeda Vargas has a bad concussion. Lucky and me are conscious, but we're all pretty beat up."

Távio was out again, and you tried to rouse him, but he just groaned. You and Jesse painstaking dragged them backward.

The earth rumbled and you heard a roar followed by a crash. Light started to stream into the cave. Gravel and small rocks rained down the incline and you shielded your face with your right arm. Piece by piece, the stones were plucked away, and you recognized Reinhardt's hearty laugh. From the sounds of heavy landings in the distance, you were pretty sure he was actually throwing boulders out of the way.

You leaned back against the cave wall, eyes gradually adjusting to the daylight.

Reinhardt waved at you through the gap in the rocks, Jack and Gabriel working in tandem to roll a large slab out of the way. Torby shouted instructions about "structural integrity" and "being smarter than the rocks" but you weren't sure anyone was listening to him.

Bandit was in first, he ran straight to Jesse, and leapt into his lap, licking his face. Laughing, Jesse squeezed the dog, his shoulders shaking.

"You're such a good boy," he said, voice strangled. "Who's my good boy?"

Gabriel was in next, wedging himself through the hole. He rushed to your side and you threw your good arm around him, burying your face against his chest. He was too warm and slick with sweat, and you stuck to him, trying to absorb some of his heat.

"Corazon," he breathed, kissing the top of your head. "You had me so worried."

"Thank you," you mumbled, already melting against him. "Thank you for coming."

He squeezed you to him, and you winced.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Sorry." He relaxed his grip on you, and you blinked. Captain Amari crouched in front of Jesse, her hands cupping his cheeks, her forehead pressed against his.

It surprised you to see both Angela and Torby armored up, but with Reinhardt's help, they loaded Daniels onto a stretcher and were already moving her out.

And then Jack was there, sweaty and eyes wild, his face red from exertion. He stared at you, like he wasn't entirely sure you weren't a mirage. He moved and suddenly he was on his knees in front of you, his hands on your face, because he had to touch you, just to be sure you were really there.

There was relief as he rubbed your cheeks with his gloved hands. Even covered in dust and worn down, the corners of his eyes crinkled and he smiled. What took you off guard was how ecstatic Jack looked. Like Christmas had come early or he'd "lost" all his paperwork in a tragic shredding mishap. Radiant and smiling, there was an openness to Jack that you and Gabriel could never replicate.

You were just dumbstruck by how happy he was to see you. That anyone could be those happy because of you. You realized then that maybe you undervalued yourself, but that Jack and Gabriel did not. It was one thing to believe the give and take of your relationships went both
ways. It was another to see them both here, when they shouldn't be, all that emotion - fear, sorrow, gratitude, and joy - plain on their faces. Something inside you began to crumble and you drew a sharp breath, your chest aching.

"I really thought I'd lost you," he whispered, hands shaking as he wrapped his arms around you. He held you too tightly, but you clung to him as best you could, inhaling the scent of his sweat and soap.

"Jack-" His name came out a choked half-sob.

"It's OK, sweetheart. I'm sorry we were late-"

"No! That's not...I'm sorry. I was waiting for the right time. I thought I could do better, and make up for what happened after Mongolia. I'm sorry. I should've said it earlier, but I love you and I'm sorry I made you wait to hear it and I was scared to say it, but-" You took a shaky breath, burrowed into his coat, your face in the crook his neck. You were making a mess of things, your reason dissolving in a flood of sunlight and endorphins. You couldn't muster any eloquence, not when they had found you here, your brain a jumble of regrets, relief, and sheer gratitude. "I love you, Jack."

His grip loosened and he stared down at you, mouth open, eyes wide. And then he beamed, all that unrestrained joy and affection aimed at you on full blast. That look stopped your heart, slew you, and you yielded, letting yourself relax in his arms.

"I love you too, sweetheart," he said, kissing your forehead, then your nose, and finally your mouth. "But we all knew that already, didn't we?"

You just nodded, your smile a little sheepish. Gabriel's hands rubbed your back as Jack embraced you.

"...No fucking way..." Távio muttered, voice slow and groggy. "There's no way she's with the Strike Commander. He's like steamed cornmeal on weak ass milk toast. I am obviously hallucinating..."

Gabriel was still shaking with laughter while Jack carried you down the hill. There were several smoldering mechanical ruins, omnis as well as Torby's turrets.

Reinhardt had one hand over his heart and kept wiping his eyes every time he looked over at you and Jack. Gabriel and Captain Amari helped Jesse hobble out of the cave. And then Rein scooped him up in a bridal carry, laughing as Jesse protested faintly.

Torby and Angela had returned for Távio with the stretcher, and you stared out over the charred and blasted earth.

"Did you...find everyone else?"

"...Yeah," Jack said, voice soft.

You pictured Rodriguez lying there in the sand and closed your eyes, grief and guilt weighing heavy in your stomach.
"I'm sorry about Rodriguez," you said.

Jack was silent as he carried you down the hill toward the beach. A few minutes passed before he spoke. "Wasn't your fault, sweetheart. No one's blaming you. For any of this." The words were sincere. But now that euphoria of finding each other was starting to fade, you could hear the pain in his voice.

"Chey and Forrester-"

"Were your students. Yes, they were your responsibility, to some extent. But this is not your fault," he said, stroking your hair. "There's still a difference."

"-I'm not that predictable," you said, resting your head against his shoulder.

"Apparently, you are. At least to Gabe," Jack nuzzled your cheek. "He can read us both way too well."

"I can walk, you know."

"Gabriel always gets to carry you around like a teddy bear. It's my turn. Not going to risk you running off, or stepping on a poisonous snake, or falling down a well-"

"Screw you," you muttered.

"Later, sweetheart. And I prefer to call it "sweet, sweet lovemaking." You know, because I'm a gentleman." Jack was already going up the ramp into the dropship.

You shook your head, glancing over at Gabriel. There was a softness in his brown eyes that made you want to reach out and hug him too, but you had to wait for Jack to set you down on a seat.

And then Angela was on your case, poking your ribs, prodding your arm, and flicking you in the head for some reason. Muttering about Blackwatch luck and amateur medics, she took your arm out of the sling and straightened it out. You winced as she wrapped it in binding fabric and injected something expensive and possibly alive into your bicep. Then she took the bandage off your right hand and the two of you winced at the sight. The whole hand was scraped raw, like hamburger. Your fingers were streaked in dried blood, and you were missing more than a few fingernails.

"I dug a vent. The air wasn't safe. We were...not in good shape."

Angela's eyes widened briefly and then she blew out a breath. "Your blood CO2 levels are high, but lower than we expected, given the environmental readings. I must congratulate you on your luck, or perhaps your quick thinking."

You didn't respond, because you weren't sure how to explain what you'd seen or if you'd seen anything at all.

She cleaned your hand, and then wrapped it in a protective mitten bandage, before giving you another injection, turning on the emitter, and menacing you with an IV. She placed the solution on your lap.

"You are spending the night in the infirmary," Angela said sharply. "Because you need rest to heal. Got it?"
You grumbled in disappointment, but very quietly, and only after Angela had moved on to harangue Jesse about his knee.

Jack had gone to help...bring everyone else back to the ship. Everyone else who hadn't made it. Gabriel sat down beside you, and you rested your head on his shoulder.

"That was a good declaration," he said, kissing your cheek.

"I love you too, Gabriel," you said, realizing you hadn't said it to him in the cave. "I'm sorry- I'm just...head's not on right."

"You have nothing to apologize for, corazon. But seeing you and Jack happy like that was...it was good. For all of us." He lifted you onto his lap and frowned at your mitten. "What's the damage?"

"Concussion, CO2 poisoning, broken arm, mashed up fingers, and...mental stuff," you recited. "Angela is trying to make me stay in the infirmary. Can I just come sleep in your bed, please?"

Gabriel gave you a weary smile. "I'm not going to go against Angela on this," he said. "But I'll spend the night in the infirmary with you. All right?"

"OK," you said, watching Jack come up the ramp, his expression grim. "Rodriguez-"

"We can debrief later," Gabriel said, adjusting your IV. "Do you want help getting your armor off? For comfort. That's all."

You nodded very slowly, the world suddenly starting to spin. Oh. There were painkillers in that IV. Goddamnit Angela-

You managed to stay upright long enough for Gabriel to remove your chestpiece. The last thing you saw was Jack sitting down beside you, one hand clasped in Gabriel's, the other resting on your forehead.

"Just rest," he said. "We've got you."

Smoke and fire obscured the satellite imaging now. The sun had started to set, and by the time the air cleared, it would be nightfall. The dark would worsen visual conditions. It had been ten minutes since the omnic forces came out of the water. Gabriel paced the office, the combination of adrenaline and raw emotion making it impossible to focus. Jack, in contrast, sat very still behind Gabriel's desk, quietly suggesting different trajectories to Athena.

They were pointedly not discussing your chances of survival. Gabriel needed to remain collected and Jack strategized best when he was divorced from his emotions. His compartmentalization was a strength, though on some level that cold detachment grated like sandpaper on the inside of Gabriel's skin. But they had to keep it together while there was still a shot at saving you.

It felt too much like security theatre: all for show with no meaningful action taken. He was not there. He could do nothing in this moment. And the helplessness gnawed away at him, tearing
through soft tissue first, and now working its way through his bones.

Gabriel cycled through several possibilities, none of them pleasant. Maybe it was a blessing that they couldn't see what was happening. Because while Gabriel never considered himself a weak man, he didn't think he was strong enough to sit by and watch you die.

"I've called in air support," Jack said, but that wasn't enough and they both knew it. Jack folded his hands, resting them under his chin.

"We don't have enough people nearby to mount a rescue. Everyone's too far out or needed to hold the perimeter." Unspoken was the fact that the Strike Commander could not pull a dozen squads from their posts to rescue one squad. Not when they couldn't even verify if there were any survivors at this point.

Gabriel's frown deepened. It was obvious what they had to do. But the best way...?

Jack shook his head. "Gabe-"

"Shut up, Jack. I'm thinking," Gabriel said, hoarsely.

"Even if we leave right this moment, there's no guarantee-"

"I fucking know that, Jack. Mateo. Jesse. Lucky. We can't afford to lose a single one of them, but-" Gabriel exhaled slowly. "I'm going in. I'll take a small stealth squad. We'll-"

"No." Jack's voice was firm. "You won't."

"Jack, I know you're not suggesting we sit back and do nothing-" Gabriel's voice was low and dangerous.

"I didn't say that." Jack stared at the screen. "Your Blackwatch agents are capable, but this requires a full combat squad. Athena, get Gérard, Ana, and Rein down here."

"Wilhelm can take more hits than Tataryn," Gabriel said begrudgingly.

"We need a better strategy. We're too close to this, Gabe. All I want to do is hop a transport and race out there, but that's not good enough. We can't rush in there half-cocked."


"...Torby has an aerial-mounted EMP radial gun in the latter stages of development." Jack stared at the beach. "It's supposed to cover a precise area. Might be worth a shot or three."

The office door flew open and instead of Ana, Gérard, or Reinhardt, Mihret stood panting in the doorway. "I came as soon as I could! I managed to boost some of the civilian comm signals. They're jammed too, but not as badly. We've got a few locals who were already out scouting and radioing back reports-"

Jack narrowed his eyes. "Athena, who else did you-?"

"I told you not to run ahead," Ana snapped, pushing Mihret out of the doorway. To Gabriel's surprise, the hacker didn't protest, he just pulled up a chair and waited his turn to talk.

"Athena bring up topographical maps of the region. Overlay with known hostile omnic movement patterns," Ana said. The screen popped up and Ana frowned, studying the layout.
"Layer with human settlements and mark Overwatch patrol routes."

"Torby has a few new rumbly-booms that he think could be useful," Wilhelm announced as he entered the office.

"I am afraid, I don't have much real-time information on the region, though I know the cave networks are extensive." Gérard came in, already armoire up in Overwatch blue. Gabriel tried to focus on Ana's increasingly-complicated map, but all he could remember was that Gérard loathed that color on himself.

No one pointed out the obvious. That despite their best efforts, it could be too late. It could be for nothing. And Gabriel was grateful for their discretion. He didn't quite like the way Wilhelm and Gérard kept shooting worried glances at him, when they thought he wasn't looking. He noticed that Ana was sharper, more on edge than he expected, and perhaps that had more to do with McCree than you. And Jack poured over the maps, weapon schematics, and satellite footage, trying to stay busy.

"We can't all go. Someone has to stay behind and maintain the chain of command," Ana said, after a moment. "And I don't know about you, but I am not comfortable leaving Gérard in charge."

Gérard laughed. "I will only make a few changes, my friends. Perhaps Director Petras' estate will be much improved by being remodeled after a smoking crater."

That comment alone had Gabriel sorely tempted to vote in Gérard as Strike Commander for a day, consequences be damned. "Ana-"

"I'm going in, don't you try to stop me," she said, glaring at him. "Strategically, you and Jack fulfill the same roles. We need Reinhardt as a shield. We need my sniping. We need an engineer or a combat hacker. And we need a medical team for any survivors."

Jack looked up, shoulders drooping, mouth flat. Jack had been to all the funerals from the recent spate of attacks.

But Gabriel had lost Sinaga already. He couldn't afford to lose Jesse. And you...? The thought tore through him, like he'd swallowed saw blades and broken glass. Gabriel gritted his teeth, looking at Jack.

Jack shook his head. Gabriel knew that Jack couldn't let himself to think of you right now. Not while he had a job to do.

"Gabe, let me go," Jack said, clasping his hands. "We can't risk everyone- I know...I know what they mean to you. And I'll bring them home, I swear." He couldn't promise who would be alive, but no one would be left out in the cold. And though Gabriel knew Jack would do his best, but he had no intention of staying back.

"You're not leaving me behind. Just try and stop me. My people are down there too. Leave fucking Wilhelm in charge-"

Jack flinched, rubbing his forehead. "Gabe..." Jack hesitated, the nickname heavy with expectation and thickly veiled emotion.

"Jack," he replied pointedly, daring the other man to push. His jaw twitched as he locked eyes with his lover. Jack bit his lower lip, face pale, the mask of the Strike Commander slipping. "We'll do this together. That's the only way."
"...Yes. Thank you," Jack exhaled slowly. "Your presence is welcome."

Gabriel understood then that Jack had very clumsily been trying to protect him, to soften the blow of what might be coming. Because Jack thought you were dead. He ground his teeth, not in the right state of mind to appreciate Jack's attempt. This was not something Jack could shield him from or vice versa.

"Gérard, if you have to bomb Petras' estate, just make sure none of that gets traced back to us, do you understand me?" Jack asked.

"...I would like to go too," the spy said mildly. "Chanceux is my protégée, after all." He glanced at Gabriel, his smile fading. "But if you think things would be better handled by my staying behind and taking command, well, I live to serve."

"This is a terrible plan," Ana said, but made no formal objections.

"Are we sure Gérard didn't arrange it this way?" Gabriel muttered. "We all go off and suddenly he's in charge."

"You know, I like the sound of this more and more. All right. Go on then. Off with you all. Hurry up. I will be redecorating the Strike Commander's office. Oh, and I shall fire that little shit in the cafeteria who keeps adding water instead of cream to the tomato bisque."

"Oh look, the power has already gone to his head," Lindholm muttered as he stalked into the office, already fully-armored. "No, the radial EMP gun isn't ready: it works for sure, but there's also a 53% chance of it also disabling the vehicle. So no, we're not taking it. But I fine-tuned some of the stealth fields on the dropship. We should be able to get there fast and quiet."

"Gear up. We leave immediately," Jack was on his feet, shoulders squared.

There was a rush out the door and Gabriel hung back with Jack, letting Wilhelm charge out first. He reached out, taking Jack's hand.

"Thank you," he said.

"Your turn next time," Jack said, squeezing his fingers. "I can't always be the one to-"

"I know." Gabriel exhaled and leaned forward, embracing Jack from behind. The blonde man slumped against him. "I know."

"After this, we'll take that break, I swear," Jack said. "We've earned that much." Unsaid was that in the worst case scenario, they would need the time to mourn.

"If she's-" Gabriel's voice wavered.

"If she's just sitting on the beach eating cake, laughing at Mateo's jokes while McCree makes drinks, I'm going to feel silly," Jack's laugh was too tight and he spun around, tucking his head against Gabriel's shoulder. His breaths came too quick and shallow, and Gabriel rubbed his back.

"There isn't time for you to talk, gentlemen. If you don't leave, I don't get to be in charge and you lose plausible deniability," Gérard said, sitting on Gabriel's desk. Mihret stood quietly at his side, his head bowed.

"We're going," Gabriel barked, tugging Jack toward the door.
"Commander Morrison, Commander Reyes..." Mihret's voice wavered and when Gabriel looked at the boy, he was staring at the floor, wiping his face.

"Yes?" Gabriel asked, gruffly.

"I'll tell...Lao," he said. "But please, just...bring her home, sir."

Gabriel gave a sharp nod, and released Jack's hand. It was time to go.

They kept a distance from the attack site, though it sacrificed speed, while Athena and Ziv fed them coordinates and data on omnic movements. They took the overland route, landing several miles away from the attack site and traveling in the dark. There wasn't much conversation. No playful banter or clever jokes. Not from Gabe or Ana. Torby was the only one talking. Jack could hear Torby grumbling under his breath at Reinhardt, but everyone else kept a grim silence. Angela stumbled in the dark, and he heard Torby gruffly telling her to be careful.

Jack kept his thoughts to tactics and potential complications. He focused on logistics and strategy, making contingency plans for a variety of conditions.

He did not think about finding you. He could not think about finding you. Because he had seen the wreckage. He had seen the omnis. And while he was an optimist by nature, his combat calculus was too well-honed to ignore the low probability of finding survivors.

When they finally made it to the wreckage of the Orca, the sky still a deep star-marked blue. That was where they first encountered hostiles.

Gabriel threw himself into battle, and Jack was glad it was dark and he couldn't see his lover's face. Gabe was stunning, and whenever he fought, Jack had trouble looking away. But this blood thirst was born from rage, and Jack wasn't sure he could process thoughts of your death and maintain command. So he reminded himself that he was Strike Commander Morrison, and there was a mission to complete. It was disturbingly easy to slip into that cool, tactically-minded persona, to immerse himself in facts, figures, and trajectories, to suppress uncomfortable feelings and continue with a task-oriented approach. Jack Morrison knew how to be a bastard when needed, and later, he would have to look himself in the mirror and wonder if it was worth it.

Gabriel discovered the first few bodies: you, McCree, and Mateo were not among them. Ana recovered the cold OR-14, McCree's bullets in its chassis. There had been survivors in the crash. Jack dared to let himself hope as he followed the trail of wreckage down the beach.

But it was there that Jack found Mateo, cold on the sand, his eyes closed, his body stiff. He exhaled slowly, checking for a heartbeat or any sign of life. He found nothing.

"Gabe-" His voice was hoarse, and it took a few tries to say more. "Gabe-"

"Is it-?" Gabriel was at his side, hands gripping his shoulders.

Jack shook his head. "No, Mateo-"

Gabriel let loose a stream of Spanish, rapid-fire expletives that eventually took on religious overtones. The curses became prayers for the dead. Jack understood that much.
"There are footprints leading away from the crash!" Reinhardt boomed.

Jack and Gabriel spent another long moment staring at their friend.

"I shouldn't have-" What was he going to tell Ray? And Leah? And Mateo's mother...? The waves roared in the distance and Jack closed his eyes. And if Mateo was dead, Mateo Fucking Rodriguez, the goddamn Wolf of Santiago, then what chance did you have?

Did you know? Did you know how he felt? He thought you did. But did you really know? How could he be sure? You were clever, of course. But that wasn't something people just went around assuming.

Jack had been given several chances to tell you. After Operation I Need Coffee. At any point when you'd been alone with him, in the office, in his room, in Gabe's bed... Because for some stupid reason, he'd thought there'd be more time. There he went, putting the "Jack" in "jackass" again. The idea of losing you, was bad enough. But without you ever knowing that he-

"Stop it Jack. It's not on you," Gabriel snapped, pressing his forehead to Jack's, his gloved hands clasping the back of Jack's neck, centering his focus. Gabriel's expression was severe, grief masked by determination.

Jack shuddered in the moonlight, unable to get the vision of Mateo's cold waxy death mask out of his head. Your limp form half materialized in his mind's eye. How long till..?

"There's no time for that Jack. I'm pissed as hell about Mateo, but we have to keep moving."

"Yeah," Jack said, voice unsteady. Because he had to bring you home too. Because maybe you wouldn't be able to make it on your own. Because maybe... "You're right." He kissed Gabriel on the cheek. "Sorry."

"Keep your head, Morrison," Gabriel's tone was soft. "They're all survivors."

"Yeah," Jack murmured. "You're right, babe." And he told himself that, even if he didn't truly believe it.

The two of them went back up the beach toward the wreckage of the Orca.

And that's when the second wave of omnics attacked.

There had been three attacks so far and the sun was up. They'd found more bodies. Gabriel recognized two of your students, Chey and Forrester. Chey would have made it into Blackwatch if he'd had the inclination. Gabriel shook his head, and then narrowed his eyes. He was pretty sure that was your carbine clutched in Chey's cold hands.

"Lindholm."

"What?" Lindholm was at his side immediately.

"Is that-?"
Lindholm squinted, narrowing his eyes. "Yeah, that's hers. And yes, I'm sure Reyes. I know my own work."

Gabriel swallowed, unable to picture you just giving up your weapon. He gritted his teeth. Things weren't looking good.

"Found...Serik," Ana called, and shook her head.

Angela trailed behind them, her expression grim as she marked the spots where their people had fallen.

Wilhelm kept searching the brush, clanking every step of the way.

Gabriel was about to ask if he could stomp around way over there, when something barked at him. He squinted into the bushes at a little black and gray, possibly white under the dust, dog with a blunt muzzle, stubby legs, and pointed ears. It had something shiny around its neck, and it growled at him.

What the hell was a dog doing all the way out here? Gabriel crouched low. "Come here boy. We won't hurt you--"

The dog went quiet, still eyeing him suspiciously.

Gabriel reached into his pocket and found an energy bar - no chocolate - and crumbled some up in his hand.

The dog hesitantly trotted up to Gabriel.

"What's...huh." Jack stopped beside him.

"Come on, boy," Gabriel said, keeping his tones even.

The dog sniffed the tips of his gloves, and Gabriel lunged, scooping it up in his arms. The dog struggled, but Gabriel held his palm flat, letting the animal nose at the food in his hand. It took a few seconds for the dog to relax. Gabriel spoke softly to it, petting it gently. He was too healthy and well-fed to be a feral stray. He took one look at the chain around the dog's neck and recognized the pendant.

"He's wearing Lucky's compass," Gabriel said, voice shaking.

"Come on," Jack said, excitement lighting up his face. "Maybe he can lead us back-"

"I'm not letting this dog run around a battlefield," Gabriel scowled. "He could step on a mine or get crushed by Wilhelm!"

"I would never!" Wilhelm shouted, suitably outraged.

"Accidents happen," Gabriel said tightly.

"I did not mean to step on your toes that one time!" Wilhelm shouted, exasperated.

It wasn't the only reason Gabriel wore metal boots, but he was very grateful that he had been, considering Wilhelm had been in full power armor.

"Shut up and follow the tracks," Ana said sharply. "Jesse's spurs leave distinct marks. And they lead toward those rocks."
Heart beating faster, Gabriel carried the dog under his arm, scratching its ears. The dog gave a little yip and suddenly it wiggled free, jumping forward.

"What the hell, Gabe? How could you throw the dog?!!"

"I didn't throw him, he jumped!"

The dog bayed, and ran up to an unstable-looking rock wall.

Jesse's voice cut through the stones, coming from inside.

"Lucky?" Gabriel heard himself say, his voice oddly calm.

"I'm here," came your voice, and he let himself breathe.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I used the "reunion I love you" cliche. I think I'll be able to live with myself though.

There will be reunions and more fluff. And of course, funerals, which aren't as fun. But there will be less crying. Because I don't think I've ever gotten so many messages about making people cry. I uh...sorry? I'm not really sure how to use black magic and bathtub full of tears, so if you have any suggestions...

Back on the job hunt, though there never seems to be anything in my area that I am qualified for. Or I'm overqualified. __; Ranger surgery is Friday, so I'm a little nervous, though he'll probably be fine.

There is a Mexican restaurant down the street that just started serving tortas, and OMFG, I had to have two last weekend, like two separate trips and four days of eating giant sandwiches and what have I done? (Ate a lot of bread, and pickled peppers...)
Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

You're back in the infirmary. Again.

Chapter Notes

This was delayed because my cousin came in to debate politics and because I was trying to write a chapter 69 joke and cracked under pressure.

**

"So, if you were Soldier 76 and Gabriel was Soldier 24, was there a Soldier 69?" You lay sprawled across Jack's chest, sheets bunched up around your hips.

"Gabe and I had Soldier 69s all the time," Jack chuckled and you groaned, knowing you had walked right into that one.

"Seriously." You poked Jack in the nose. "Was there a Soldier 69?"

Jack sighed, suddenly looking serious.

Gabriel yawned, rolling over to spoon Jack. "What's wrong, babe?"

"Nothing," Jack leaned back to peck Gabriel on the cheek. "She was just asking about Soldier 69."

"Sorry, I'm still waking up. Give me a moment and I'll be good to go-"

"Goddamnit, I just wanted to know if there was any such person!" You scowled.

Jack nipped your shoulder. "There are only two soldiers you need to be interested in-"

"Jack's just salty because if he'd joined a week earlier like I'd asked, he would've gotten that designation," Gabriel rested his head on Jack's chest. "Instead, Lieutenant Dover got it. Benjamin Dover, if I remember correctly"


"No, Gabe." Jack laughed, his whole body shaking. "That wasn't it. It was that Major. What was his name?"

"Goff," Gabriel supplied helpfully. "How could you forget? You had the same first name!"

Jack snapped his fingers. "Yeah, Major Goff! Major Jack Goff!"

You scowled. "Seriously, guys?"
"OK, OK, for real, though, I remember this," Gabriel hugged you. "It was Connie!"


"...Her last name isn't Lingus, is it?" You asked, already knowing the answer.

"How'd you know?" Jack slapped the bed, his entire body shaking. "Do you like her too?"

Groaning, you buried your face in the pillow. "I'm going back to sleep now."

"But wait, you'll miss the Soldier 69!"

You awoke in a cold infirmary bed, your left arm in a brace, your right hand bandaged up. You were in a hospital gown, prostheses removed. Breathing hard, you looked around, relieved to see Gabriel sitting in the chair beside your bed, a tablet in his lap. He was in sweatpants and a hoodie, and you wondered how much time had passed.

"Gabriel-" Your heart beat too fast, and he leaned over the railing.

"I'm here, corazon."

You took a deep breath and closed your eyes as he carefully embraced you.

"I'm cold," you said.

"Are you asking me to climb into bed with you?" He murmured, already lowering the railing.

"Yeah," you said, voice low. "Please. And uh...what time is it?"

"It's 2200 hours, same day as we found you," he said, sliding in on his side. "Jack's making arrangements." He paused. "He'll be here later too."

"Jesse?"

"Healthiest out of all of you," Gabriel said. "But Angela's keeping him overnight too." He rolled onto his back and let you crawl onto his chest, helping you find a comfortable angle for your arms.

"Távio and Daniels?"

Gabriel raised a brow. "He's Távio now, is he? That boy sure has some opinions about you."

"It's a very naive case of hero worship." You snorted. "He slept against my shoulder calling for his mãe." You shook your head. "And it's shorter than Maeda Vargas."

"Another Mihret, great." Gabriel sighed. He had one arm under his head, the other rubbing
"Távio is less mouthy than Ziv. But I realize that’s not a high bar. Most people are less mouthy than Ziv." You yawned, and your stomach growled, but you didn't want to move, not with Gabriel holding you.

"Daniels is in ICU. She still hasn't awakened. She might not," Gabriel said, voice a low rumble, reminding you of a cat's purr.

You began to wonder if you had made a mistake, if you'd left Daniels, if there had been time to hand Távio off to Jesse then go back for Chey-

No. Human lives weren't numbers to be plugged in and out of equations. You couldn't interchange them neatly. You and Jesse made your decisions in the heat of battle. You did the best you could with what you had and what you knew. You exhaled slowly, trying to let that reminder sink in. You would have to repeat it many times, but eventually your stubborn brain would accept the facts; you knew this from experience.

"How bad?" Gabriel asked.

"Not as bad as the Ninth Circle," you said. "But I'm still processing."

"Ana will handle your debrief, but we can do that tomorrow," he said. "Maybe we should get you some food."

You just flattened yourself against him. "You're not going anywhere."

Gabriel laughed. "Athena, will you please ask Jack to pick something up from the cafeteria?"

"Of course, Commander Reyes," she said cheerfully. "And Lucky, it's good to hear you awake and active. We were all very worried. Ziv is currently inebriated with Agent Tataryn, and Winston, but he wants you to know- Oh, he doesn't want you to know. But he is very glad that you are alive and mostly intact."

Gabriel smirked at you.

You blinked. "Thanks Athena."

"Don't the nurses normally bring food?" You wondered.

"Since we're spending the night here, your room is off-limits to everyone tonight, but Angela. She's already been by a few times," Gabriel nuzzled your cheek. "If anyone asks, you're debriefing us. In a completely professional fashion."

"Yeah, I don't think I can pull your pants off with my hands all fucked up," you said, looking at your broken arm.

"That was a terrible joke... But you can always use your teeth," Gabriel said, flicking your nose.

"You're right," you said. "But my teeth don't have thumbs. So I'll probably just bite the closures off your pants."

Gabriel laughed. "Don't tempt me, corazon. You need to take it easy." He kissed you,
hands tightening around your waist. "You scared us bad. Know it wasn't your fault, but..." He pressed his forehead to yours. "You need to stop being such a shit magnet."

Your laughter was tight and you had trouble meeting his warm brown eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be-"

"I know." He hugged you closer. "Not on you. I'm just venting."

There was a knock at the door and a muffled, "It's me." Then the door opened, and Jack came in, carrying a bag of takeout boxes. He was still in his coat and armor. "Athena said you were hungry." He glanced over, a small smile on his lips when he saw Gabriel stretched out underneath you. "Hey."

"Hello handsome," Gabriel winked.

"Hi," you said, a little unprepared for the way Jack glowed when he looked at you. Those shockingly blue eyes were soft with emotion and he set the food down on the bedside table and sat down, leaning over to kiss you, then Gabriel.

"Nice to see you putting Gabe to good use."

"Shut up, Jack." Gabriel didn't actually sound offended though. He just rubbed your shoulders.

You chuckled and scooted over a little so Jack could rest his head against Gabriel's arm. "I don't think this bed will fit the three of us."

"Want to try?" Jack's smile turned mischievous.

"Angela will murder us all," Gabriel said. "And you don't want to jostle Lucky."

"True," Jack sighed. "It's just for tonight," he reminded himself, looking wistful. "Tomorrow night, you pick the bedroom. Then we can all cuddle."

"We can switch out later. I'll move and you can use Gabriel as a body pillow," you said.

"Nope," Jack leaned over and rubbed his nose against yours. "The moment we take our eyes off you, you'll sneak off, get into a ridiculous amount of trouble, and then Angela will skin us alive. I had to ask very nicely for special permission to get Gabe and me overnight privileges. And she very clearly emphasized "no sparring." Which is hilarious, because I've only now realized she thought we were in bed together long before it actually happened."

You blinked. The first "no sparring" orders came after Shanghai Noon and Lao shooting you. But you'd just started the relationship then. Oh yeah, she'd seen your bruises after Lacroix's Code White in the Alps. And you'd told her you were sparring. Because you had been sparring, not having kinky sex. Huh.

Your stomach gurgled and you glanced at the food.

Jack unpacked several slightly squashed cheeseburgers, a thermos, and some dodgy-looking fruit cups. Gabriel grabbed a cheeseburger, eating it one-handed while Jack got out a spoon for you. You eyed the soup warily.

"The cafeteria tomato soup isn't-"
"Try it." Jack practically shoved the spoon in your mouth. It was creamier than usual, less harshly acidic, and was that sherry? You raised a brow. "I uh...left Gérard in charge while we were out. He was adamant about changing the recipe. He also ordered a remodel of my office, but I think I managed to halt that."

You nearly choked on the spoon. "You left...Lacroix in charge?"

"Ana wasn't going to stay behind. Gabe wouldn't either." Jack shrugged, like remaining here at base had never been an option. "After Rein, he was next in the hierarchy."

You squinted, unsure if it was more disturbing that Lacroix had been left in charge or that Rein was that high up in the chain of command.

"The soup is good though," Jack offered you a burger. And you had to stretch out your neck to reach it. Jack laughed and closed the distance. "Sorry."

Gabriel was on his second burger by the time you were halfway through yours. Jack took a burger in two massive bites, before spooning you more soup.

"What happened to Bandit?" You asked, suddenly remembering the little black and white dog. You flinched at the thought of him alone on the beach, watching the Orca take off. "We didn't leave him behind, did we?"

"Come on baby, I wouldn't abandon a dog in the middle of nowhere. And McCree would've mutinied and stayed there if we tried," Jack said, shaking his head. "No, the dog's with Reinhardt right now. We'll make arrangements for him later."

You looked at Gabriel. "Can we keep him?"

"Don't you start too," Gabriel gave a heavy sigh. "I told the kid we'd figure something out later. I know, corazon, that little dog helped us find you. I am very aware. Jesse already made this argument."

"Jesse adores that dog. When he woke up in the cave, that was the first thing he asked about."

Jack gave you a sympathetic smile. "You like him too, huh?"

"Jesse's OK, but Bandit's great." You tried to keep a straight face and Jack had to set the soup aside while he laughed.

"And when he's out-"

"Wilhelm, Mihret, Ana, Genji, and several other agents have already volunteered to dogsit the beast," Gabriel said, rolling his eyes. "Last I saw, Wilhelm was sharing his currywurst with the dog. I told him he was cleaning up whatever mess came out afterward."

"Any idea where he came from?" You asked, grinning into Gabriel's chest at the thought of the little dog on Rein's lap.

"Mihret did some digging. Nejem's unit adopted him awhile ago," Jack said. "Kind of a unit mascot. He was originally named "Dasri." But judging by how everyone is fussing over him, he just responds to the happy dog voice, period."

"So, he's a veteran Overwatch dog," you said. "That should be a thing by the way."
Gabriel snorted. "Really?"

"Oh yes. I realize he may not be a trained guard, sniffer, or tracker, but he has performed services for the organization as a whole-
"

Jack nodded somberly, laughter in his eyes. "Do you want me to give him a medal?"

"Sure, if that convinces Gabriel to let Jesse keep him," you said.

"Do you want a dog?" Jack asked, expression sly.

"...I can't have one right now," you said. "But maybe someday. And I'll practice with Jesse's."

"Neither of you know what you're doing. The kid has never had a dog-" Gabriel scowled.

"Well you and Jack seem to be experts. You can help him. Otherwise, how else is he going to learn?" You beamed at Gabriel, and out of the corner of your eye, Jack looked very smug.

"Eat your soup," Gabriel said gruffly, grabbing the thermos and spoon off the bedside table. "I'll think about it."

At some point, Gabriel and Jack had switched out, and when you woke up, Gabriel was gone, but Jack was beside you, coat draped over the chair, arms around your waist.

"His turn to get some work done," Jack murmured sleepily in your ear.

Your head was fuzzy and you glanced down at your arms, wondering if you could get the bandages off your right hand today. It was a good thing you had gloves, because seeing a hand without fingernails always reminded you of torture.

"You OK, baby?"

"Groggy," you said, scooting closer to Jack.

"You can sleep," he said. "I'll stay till Gabe gets back. It won't be like last time, honest," he said, kissing your forehead.

It took you a moment to understand that he was talking about the aftermath of Candle Arc and Lucerne. "Don't worry about flowers," you said, voice scratchy. "Just glad to have you and Gabriel. Also happy to be out of that hole."

Jack shifted beside you, eyes closed. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not yet," you said. "It hasn't all sunk in." You took a moment to review the last twenty four hours. "Wait, did I really declare my love for you in front of Rein and Távio?"

"Yup," Jack said, eyes still closed, but his smile widened. "Too late to take it back now."

"It was overdue," you said.
"Mmm," Jack said diplomatically.

"I'm sorry."

"I know. I should have said it too. But didn't want to pressure you." Jack yawned, opening his eyes. "I love you, sweetheart." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I figured it was obvious by now. Not to mention, I'm crammed in this tiny hospital bed on my best behavior and you're wearing a this thin cotton thing that doesn't even fasten properly..."

You laughed. "Only you could make hospital gowns sound sexy."

"Gabe and I have had our share of...reunions in them. They're very convenient," he said, looking smug.

"...I do love you; I didn't just say it because you rescued us. In case you were wondering," you said after a moment.

"I know," Jack said he leaned over, nose to nose with you.

"Yeah," you said. "I guess you do."

"How are you feeling?"

"...Exhausted. Physically, mentally, emotionally, astrologically...you name it." You shook your head. "None of it's really sunk in."

"That mission went very...bad. I think you know it helps to talk about it sooner rather than later."

"OK." You blinked a few times. "I don't know where to start."

"You were in that cave overnight. Were you scared?"

"...Yeah," you said, too tired to be proud. "I was terrified that I'd go to check on one of the others and they'd be dead already. I'm going to have all kinds of nightmares about Daniels and I don't even know her first name."

"Nadine," Jack said. He rubbed your back. "What else were you feeling?"

"A lot of regret. Pain. Some despair." You swallowed. "Head wasn't right and I wasn't sure if help was coming or if we'd be trapped in there..." You exhaled slowly, suddenly very cold. "I left Chey. He and Távio were wounded in the same attack. He told me to get Távio first. Asked for my gun to hold them off-" You clenched your teeth. "I know it's not my fault, not really. But I still left him. I didn't even like him that much, and that makes it worse."

"Maeda Vargas would have been easier for you to carry. He's smaller and you were injured," Jack said. "And I understand you were retreating with heavy pursuit."

"I know. I know my actions were defensible and logical, but my feelings- Not so much." You shivered and Jack pulled the blankets up. "Jesse and I talked through some things, but the gas really messed with us. And it's...very lonely in the dark."

"I wish we had got there sooner," Jack said.

"You came for me," you said, voice whisper soft. "That's what matters."
"Of course, we did," Jack said, roughly. "You can't possibly think we'd leave you behind."

You shook your head, leaning forward to kiss Jack's face. "I wasn't thinking clearly. I wasn't sure anyone would find us, and with the omnics actively using the distress signal as bait, it would be foolish to send anyone else into a trap." Let alone the Strike Commander and the upper echelons of Overwatch command.

There was a long pause. "I was scared," Jack said, voice distant. "Gabe, too. He wanted to rush in. I had to sit back and ask for help strategizing. Didn't trust that I was thinking clearly either."

"I know how that is. You mess me up," you said. "I can keep my cool with Gabriel. We're more alike. But you? You make me crazy, Jack."

"I've seen Gabe get you plenty worked up and vice versa," Jack laughed. "But I think I understand what you're saying." He nuzzled your throat. "I'm just so sexy, you can't function."

"...I cannot refute this," you said, reluctantly.

Jack nodded solemnly. "I know."

Shaking your head, you pulled the blankets closer. Hospital blankets were always too thin and bordered on useless.

"Hey, after we wrap up this business, I was wondering... Well, I made the arrangements, but if you don't want to, I understand..." He shifted beside you, rubbing your sides. "I was going to wait till later, but I think we could use a vacation. Just you, me, and Gabe. Gabe thought it was a good idea, and I wanted to surprise you, and I know we all have vacation time, but, maybe it's better to ask?"

You stared at his hopeful expression, brain taking a moment to process his words. All those times he'd quickly shut off his tablet screen or switched windows on his computer; you wondered if this was the reason. "How long have you been planning this?"

"Since we rescued Feng," he admitted. "Athena and Gabe helped."

"...Yeah," you said, your throat suddenly dry. You swallowed a few times. Gabriel had known, that night in the office, when he'd been teasing you about taking you along on vacation. "I'd really like that. Where to?"

"That part's a secret." He grinned smugly.

You blinked. "Really?"

"I'll confirm the reservation today," Jack said, unable to hide his satisfaction.

You awoke to Gabriel entering with boxes of pancakes and bacon. You could smell them through the containers. There were probably eggs and fruit too, because Gabriel didn't do meals in half measures.

Jack chuckled, squeezing you lightly. You hurt less now, though your right hand was still
unsteady.

"How are you feeling?" Gabriel asked, sipping his coffee.


"That's a good sign. Your body's healing. Jesse ate three breakfast burritos and Maeda Vargas ate four."

"Daniels?" You asked.

"Still comatose," Gabriel said. "But Angela has her stabilized now."

"OK," you said, watching Gabriel unpack the food.

"Ana will be here later to debrief you. Word's already gotten out about your daring escape and rescue. Mihret drank too much last night and spilled some of the beans." Gabriel scowled.

You sat up, flexing your right hand. You wouldn't be doing detail work, but you could probably hold a cup. "Unwrap me?"

"Later," Gabriel purred, holding out a tall glass of orange juice with a straw. You leaned over and took a big drink. Gabriel held the glass up till you finished. "Angela will be by soon. You can wait till then."

You rolled your eyes as Jack sat up and pivoted, reaching for the bacon.

"Stop that!" Gabriel smacked Jack's hand. "I'm making Lucky a plate first."

"But Gabe-"

"So help me, Morrison-"

You kissed the back of Jack's neck, draping your right arm over his shoulder. "I don't think I've said this yet, but I love you both," you said and they fell silent.

Gabriel set the food aside, leaning forward to kiss Jack. Jack hugged your good arm to his chest, smiling the whole time. Gabriel turned his head, cupped your face, and placed a gentle kiss on your lips.

"I love you and this idiot too," Gabriel murmured. "Now eat your breakfast, before Jack does."

By the time Captain Amari entered, Jack was out of bed with his coat on and his hair combed. Both men sat at your bedside, doing their work remotely. It was a startling contrast from your stay during Candle Arc.

She looked polished in her uniform, and she wore a look of satisfaction. You wondered what had passed between her and Jesse, but knew better than to ask.

"You're looking better," Captain Amari said, her tone professional, her smile not so much.
"Well-rested even," she said smugly.

Gabriel shot her a dirty look. "Really, Ana?"

Captain Amari did not look the least bit perturbed. "It's vexing that the only time I can count on Lucky getting enough rest is after a near death experience. And mostly because Angela drugs her."

You blinked. "It's not just near death experiences, I get lots of sleep after-" You stopped, even as Gabriel rested his face in his hand. Jack, however, preened under the attention.

"I think she's counting le petit mort," Jack said, his accent pretty bad. You wondered if you could get him to say that in front of Lacroix.

Gabriel now had two hands over his face, when he should have been covering his ears.

"...Anyway," Captain Amari said, her smile widening. "I'm just glad that you're all right. Jesse told quite the tale."

"...I don't know how. He was passed out for half of it," you said.

"Then I definitely need your side of the story. This will be an on the record report." Captain Amari just pulled up a chair and sat. "We'll begin recording in a moment. Are you ready?"

"Shit spiders," you muttered.

"That's not a "no," agent."

You closed your eyes, taking a deep breath. You remembered the terror of the freefall, your stomach dropping as you lost consciousness. You remembered the way Rodriguez's eyes widened as began to bleed, dead almost before he knew it. You remembered Forrester and Chey in the moments before their deaths; you hoped Forrester never saw it coming and didn't feel a thing. You didn't know what to say about Chey's selflessness: terms like "glory" and "sacrifice" sounded so hollow right now. You swallowed, your mouth suddenly dry. You had lived through it once. You could do it again.

"I'm ready," you lied, as Jack offered you a glass of water, holding the straw in place for you.

The first part of the story was easy. Yes, you acquired the prisoner. Yes, the new team seemed to be integrating smoothly. Yes, it was a routine pickup, you were just along to help with the transition if necessary.

She didn't ask how much you liked Rodriguez, or how pleased you were that Chey and Távio were getting along, or how glad you were to go on a run with Jesse. Because none of those things were pertinent to the mission, even if they were important to you.

You recounted the sequence of events after the distress call. Yes, Rodriguez had been cautious. Yes, he was aware it could be a trap. No, you don't know what hit your ship. No, you don't know how you ended up on the beach several hundred meters from the crash site. Yes, Rodriguez was with you. Yes, your arm was broken in the crash. But Rodriguez was there to center you, and you understood that your stealth field was what saved your life, that and Rodriguez hushing you as he died, the OR-14 already looking for more humans to skewer.

You wavered then, unsure if you should share his last words for the official record. They
were so personal. And you didn't know if Chang wanted to know that his last thoughts were of her.

Captain Amari sat there patiently and when you looked at Jack, he was wiping his eyes, Gabriel's hands kneading his shoulders. You wanted to take his hand in yours, but you couldn't. Later, you would tell him the whole story, off the record.

You told them it was Jesse doing the shooting, let you know that there were other survivors. You didn't need to explain what a relief it was to know that he was alive. You were pretty sure they could hear it in your voice. You didn't tell them how damn happy Távio was to see you.

Serik had taken Daniels ahead. Everyone was retreating toward the caves, with Jesse and you providing sporadic cover fire. But it was nothing against the Bastions. You weren't sure if it was the second or third salvo that killed Forrester. But then Chey was calling for you, his leg broken, Távio stunned on the ground.

You had to take a few gulps of water, your throat raw with thorny words. "He told me to take the boy." You sighed. The mission debrief was not the place to express your complicated feelings. "He asked for my gun, and said he could wait for me to make a return trip. We both knew there wouldn't be time. Jesse still tried to go back for him."

"Is there a reason you should have prioritized Agent Chey instead of Agent Maeda Vargas?" Captain Amari asked, her voice oddly soothing.

"No, ma'am. Agent Maeda Vargas was smaller and easier for me to...help," you said, looking at your splinted arm.

"I see no good reason to question your actions, Lucky. Perhaps you shouldn't either."

"Ma'am," you said, voice rusty.

You had not seen Serik fall, but you looked up to see Jesse carrying Daniels. And then he'd come back for you and Távio. He then galloped back out to see what he could do for Chey and came back with Bandit. Jesse was the hero of the story.

You described the cave-in in the barest of terms. The rocks fell. The lights went out. Jesse hurt his knee. And you extended your stealth field, hoping the omnis would think everyone died. It was strange to talk about this. You knew Athena was transcribing your words, but after Shit Spiders, most of your post-mission reports had been written. Not an option this time, but you were feeling things now that you hadn't in the moment: fear, dread, more grief.

You described the survival procedures. You looked for an exit. You found water. And then you and Jesse talked about your options, and took a rest. You didn't talk about your failure as a friend and how you were ashamed that you had not tried to work things out with Jesse sooner. You certainly didn't speak of seeing your dead and the words that passed between you; you didn't know how to explain what you had seen or dreamt. You certainly couldn't express the regret you felt about not being honest with Jack when you had the chance. You sat there silently, for too long, until Captain Amari cleared her throat.

"There was...gas. I woke up and everyone else was out." You inhaled deeply, appreciating the clean, if astringent hospital air. "I had to get fresh air into the cave. So I dug. Broke my tanto in the process." Your voice waivered then and Gabriel reached out, hand resting on your shoulder. You raised your right hand. "I only managed a small hole. But I put my compass on the dog and
pushed him out, because the gas was affecting him the most."

Captain Amari nodded. "Did you have any breathing apparatus or anything to help you work? It seems odd that you were the only one conscious enough to dig."

"There'd been a crash. I think we were all concussed. Jesse was in the best shape, but he'd exhausted himself during the battle." You weren't sure if that was the real reason, but it was the only one that didn't make you sound insane.

"I see," Captain Amari said.

"I had to take a break, but with some prodding, everyone but Daniels woke up. The fresh air helped. I slept some more and when I reawakened..." Távio and Daniels were huddled against you and everything hurt. You sighed, trying to remember useful things. "We were all bundled together for warmth. It wasn't too cold, but Daniels kept shivering. We were pretty sure she was in shock. Jesse was listening at the vent." Waiting for Bandit to come back, more likely. But you didn't point that out.

"Did he try to dig more?"

"I don't think so. We heard shooting, and decided against calling for help till it died down. If the omnic came back, we were sitting ducks. So we waited." You didn't mention how unspeakably relieved you were to hear Gabriel's voice. You didn't bring up how agonizingly difficult it was to just sit there and wait, to see if you would be rescued. You only spoke the facts, describing what happened, and sometimes giving speculation when asked. You weren't sure how to tell the real story, and to be honest, it had no place in the official report.

Angela unwrapped your hand, rolling her eyes as you begged her to scratch it. She did though, somewhat amused by the dumb smile of relief that spread across your face. You were still missing fingernails, and your skin looked patchy, but the damage was mostly cosmetic now, and it would heal.

"So, may I please go now?" You asked, after she checked the splint, ran a bioscanner over your head, and stuck you with another shot in the left arm.

Frowning, Angela gave you a hard look. "You're on medical leave for at least a week. If you fight me on this, I'll make it two."

"Yes, ma'am," you said meekly, hunching over and not missing Gabriel's slightly incredulous look.

"I want you to take it easy. That arm needs a few more days to heal properly. You need to make sure you're taking enough fluids. And no spar-"

"The only thing I'm going to be fighting is anyone who takes my blankets or food," you said, the very picture of sincerity. "I intend to take it very easy. Go on vacation even."

Angela squinted at you, like you were fucking with her. "Yes, well, try to limit your physical activity," she said dryly, turning that cool gaze on Gabriel.
You smothered a snicker as Gabriel glared right back.

Angela remained unfazed. "All right. You're discharged. But if you have any trouble-

"Yes, doctor, I'll be the very model of caution."

And while Angela didn't look convinced, she at least appeared to be placated. She dispensed some medications, repeated her instructions, and gave you a distrustful look before she left.

You still needed Gabriel's help getting dressed. And he took his time. Someone had "forgotten" your underwear again. You just rolled your eyes as you stepped into your fatigue pants and Gabriel wrapped his arms around you, slowly fastening the button, kissing the nape of your neck while he worked. He sat on the chair in front of you, lifting your feet onto his lap so he could tie your boots. You could at least put the hoodie on by yourself.

"Thank you," you said, when he was done.

"Where do you want to sleep tonight?" He asked, voice husky.

"Your room," you said.

He chuckled at that. "You're going to have to field some visitors today. I guess I could stash you there now. Keep you all to myself." He flashed you a wicked grin.

"Tonight," you said. "I...should probably check on the others and find Ziv."

"Mihret's hungover. I think Amélie was having coffee with him later." Gabriel gave you a long look. "What exactly is going on there?"

You shrugged. "I don't know."

Skepticism practically dripped from his pores. "If you say so. Do you want me to walk you back to your quarters?"

"No thanks. I had better visit Jesse and Távio first." You paused. "Where's my gear?"

"I'm getting it repaired," he said.

"OK. But my tanto-"

"...I've got a K-Bar you can borrow, if you like."

Unspoken was the fact that your dagger was broken. It would never be quite right for battle now. And what use was an unreliable blade? You wondered if that was a metaphor. "I...don't know."

"We can get you something similar. I can't pretend like it will replace your weapon, but the quality-"

"I just want the pieces," you said after a moment, your voice a little choked.

"Of course," he said. "Just...give me a day or two, OK?"

You blinked. Repairing it was a waste, you understood that. Had he thrown it away? You took a deep breath, hands shaking.
"I wanted to see if Lindholm could do anything for it," Gabriel said, meeting your eyes. "But don't get your hopes up."

"...Oh," you nodded, relieved. "OK. Thank you."

"Go on," Gabriel ruffled your hair. "I have work to do."

Chapter End Notes

Ranger has surgery tomorrow. I'm sure it will be fine. *mutters neurotically to self*
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

Informing everyone that you are indeed alive is exhausting, but it beats the alternative.

Chapter Notes

Surgery patient dog is fine. He has weaponized his cone and is very salty about the whole ordeal. The vet says he's growing several more, but that as long as they aren't in inconvenient places, we can leave them alone. So yeah, yuck.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Angela hadn't gotten around to discharging Jesse yet, and he was sharing a room with Távio. You stopped there first, with some barely-acceptable gift shop flower arrangements for both of them.

Távio was awake and flipping through the movie selection at an alarming rate. Jesse sat with his bad leg elevated, drinking what looked like a mangonada. Where had he gotten that? You wanted one too. To your surprise, Shoal sat by Távio's bed, smiling, though her eyes were red-rimmed and her nose rubbed raw.

"Lucky!" She was on her feet and threw her arms around you, nearly knocking the two vases out of your good arm. "Oh shit! I'm sorry!" She quickly helped you set the flowers on the bedside tables. "I heard you were in isolation! I thought it was really serious!" She sniffled and you hesitantly patted her back.

"No, Angela wanted to keep an eye on me and didn't want me persuading anyone to help me escape." You shrugged. "I don't know why she doesn't trust me..."

Jesse gave you an amused look, knowing full well why you didn't have visitors. "Flowers? For me, sweetpea? You shouldn't have," he drawled.

"There are no secret meanings here. Get well soon, asshole," you said.

Távio was watching all of you, his eyes big, but his mouth firmly shut. You wondered how much he remembered from the cave.

"For you too, Távio," you said, giving him permission to join the conversation. Not that he needed it, but you figured he would be hesitant to interrupt his former instructors.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, staring at the vase with suspicion. You knew that look. He didn't know what to do with flowers either.

"They're supposed to be cheerful, since you're stuck in here. Reinhardt told me it is important to have some beauty and color when you're laid up in the infirmary," you said,
explaining badly.

"OK," Távio said, obviously not impressed.

"Ah-ha! There is our unlucky girl!" Tataryn peeked his head in. "Can you stop getting hurt? You are making my life so much harder!" He swept in setting a bottle of absinthe on Jesse's bedside table and a bottle of vodka on Távio's. He leaned over and kissed you on the cheek and you rolled your eyes.

"I would rather have the liquor."

"I heard you were incommunicado, otherwise I would have brought yours," he said smoothly, and you wondered if you would actually get anything from him.

"You really need to get better at gifting, sugarpie. Tataryn has you beat," Jesse smirked.

"I just got discharged!" You scowled.

"Excuses, excuses," Jesse shook his head.

Shoal laughed and then grabbed a tissue, blowing her nose. "I'm so glad you guys are all right. I heard about..." And she trailed off, sniffling. "I'm sorry. I know I wasn't even there..."

"It wasn't fun," you said, studying your right hand.

"It was just a...bad run," Jesse said after a moment.

Shoal's lower lip trembled. "Yeah."

Tataryn gave an unconvincing smile, his jaw clenched too tight. "We'll drink to Chey and Forrester."

There were nods of agreement.

You blew out a breath. "Sucks."

"Does," Jesse agreed.

The five of you sat in quietly for a moment. Something needed to be done about that region. You just didn't know what.

"So, I heard you got a dog," Tataryn said, breaking the silence.

"He literally jumped in my arms while I was running," Jesse said.

"Probably saved our lives," you said, and Jesse smiled.

"Any word yet on the boss's decision on Bandit? Or do I call him "Dasri?" I don't know. I'll see what he likes best," Jesse toyed with the brim of his hat.

"I haven't gotten to see him yet. Where's he at?" Shoal asked.

"Mercy put him through some exams and vaccinations, and now my pup is staying with Commander Wilhelm, though Captain Amari offered to take him too." The way he said her name was gentle, and you wondered what had passed between them.
"I think he might be coming around," you said. "The Strike Commander has a soft spot for dogs."

Both Jesse and Tataryn gave you pointed looks that translated as "no, the Strike Commander has a soft spot for you," but you ignored them. Jack totally had a soft spot for dogs, but it didn't hurt that Gabriel had a soft spot for you.

Távio was still staring at the flowers.

"But really, it's a miracle you guys survived," Shoal said.

Tataryn patted her shoulder. "Lucky is like a very pretty cockroach."

"What?" You resisted the urge to hit him. "You can stop talking now."

"She is a master-survivor. It is good rescue came soon, because she would have eaten the rest of you to survive," Tataryn continued, ignoring your dirty looks.

"She would not!" Shoal laughed. "Quit picking on Lucky."

"No, Tataryn." You rolled your eyes skyward.

"She carries hot sauce in her belt," he stage-whispered.

You could neither confirm nor deny that accusation.

Jesse and Távio exchanged shit-eating grins. "I'm happy never finding out," Jesse said.

Tataryn just laughed, not the least bit ashamed.

You swung by Reinhardt's office to find him trying to concentrate on paperwork while Bandit sat in his lap, stubby little tail wagging happily when he saw you.

"Lucky!" Reinhardt boomed as he saw you. "Already up and about? You have such an inspiring work ethic!"

"Angela's put me on med leave for a week, so I'm technically not supposed to be working," you said. "I came by to thank you for digging me out...and to see Bandit."

Reinhardt waved his hands, cheeks turning red. "There are no thanks between us, Lucky. That is what friends do." He gave you a bright beaming smile and you fought the urge to shield your eyes. "But you can buy me a beer and currywurst any time!"

You made a mental note to order some delivered later this week.

"As for this one, I think Jack's going to let us keep him," he stage-whispered. It was still louder than your indoor voice and you laughed. You reached out and patted the dog on the head, grinning as he licked your fingers.

"Jesse won't stop asking about him."
"I will sneak him in for a visit later. Angela doesn't have to know," Reinhardt said, and you wondered if he would stick Bandit down his shirt. You pictured the dog popping out of Reinhardt's collar and had to cover your face.

"He'll like that," you said.

"And I was also very happy to see Jack and Gabriel with you. I was worried for awhile, you know. You are so quiet and withdrawn-" You raised a brow at that, but then decided that most everyone was quiet and withdrawn compared to Reinhardt. "-and Jack is under a lot of pressure, and Gabriel has a...fiery temperament. Our circumstances make relationships hard. But it seems that they are good to you and you are good for them."

You rubbed the back of your neck, unsure of how to respond to Reinhardt's pleased expression. "Thank you. I...agree."

"Oh Bandit! Where's that little gubben?" Torby cooed, opening the door, carrying a large hamburger. "Lucky..." he trailed off, stuffing the burger behind his back. "I didn't know you were out of bed." Torby gave you a sharp look, daring you to comment.

"Thank you for coming to dig me out," you told him, ignoring how Bandit jumped out of Reinhardt's lap and Torby discretely dropped the whole damn burger on the office floor. That little dog was going to be a big round pupper soon. "I really appreciate it."

"Oh. I uh.." Torby shrugged, turning pink. "You're welcome. But don't let it go to your head."

"Of course not," you said solemnly.

Genji found you while you were looking for Ziv. You were starting to hurt again, your muscles still sore all over. You had to take a break in the cafeteria, wincing as you turned your head to find Genji right behind you, pulling out a chair.

"You should be in bed," he said.

You sat down, and dug out a pain pill. "I'm just achy," you said, shaking your head. "And unlike you, I don't like spending time in the infirmary."

Genji regarded you coolly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

You shrugged. "Me neither. I'm on pain medication, I don't know what's going on, and I can't operate heavy machinery either."

Genji just looked at your splinted left arm, and even though you'd reattached your prostheses, you didn't want to jostle it too much. Then he looked at your right hand, shaking his head. "The pain medication isn't what's affecting your abilities."

"It was a joke," you said. "I still haven't taken my pill. Can you get me a drink? I don't want to dry swallow this."
Shaking his head, Genji walked off, and you wondered if he would actually come back, but he did, carrying a bottle of lemonade. He even opened it for you and you gave him a wry smile.

"Thank you. I uh...talked to Jesse. Apparently, I'm an idiot," you said, after a moment.

"I know," Genji said. "But it's good that you spoke with him."

You rolled your eyes. "Thanks, Genji."

"Feng wants to do another night out..." He leaned against the table. "Hanzo's in. I know you're on med leave, but maybe after?"

You blinked. "Hanzo...is going willingly?"

"He wants to check on Bayan."

You nodded slowly. Then wondered when Feng started scheduling things through Genji. You didn't feel snubbed, so much as puzzled. Had Genji made a friend? The thought made you grin. "Yeah, sure."

"...It is good that you made it back," he said, studying the floor. "After Lacroix, you are the most skilled at handling my brother."

You choked on your lemonade. "I...what?"

"You have a talent for dealing with difficult people."

You just rolled your eyes. Yes, you had plenty of practice dealing with difficult Shimadas. Both of them. But saying that right now, while you were already in bad shape, was unwise. Because Genji could most definitely hold a grudge.

You stared at the cards taped to your door. One bulky one was from Vo, her chicken scratch handwriting very distinct, and you were pretty sure it was full of glitter. You were surprised to see some from your former students. Shoal had left one and Joon had too. You carefully gathered them up, cursing silently. Responding wouldn't be the problem, but your manual dexterity had not quite recovered yet. One arm full of cards, you glared at your door, trying not to drop more cards as you hit the keypad.

"Do you need help?" Athena asked.

"Please."

The door popped open and you dragged yourself into your room, dropping the cards on the desk. You appreciated the gesture. You just couldn't open them properly. Hell, you probably wouldn't be able to wear gloves either. It was best that you were on leave. Basic tasks were a struggle.

Grumbling, you wiggled your fingers, trying to regain some control. This was going to put a damper on your plans for tonight.

There came a knock, and you sighed. "Athena, who is it?"
"Zenyatta," she said. "Do you want me to tell him that you're resting?"

Your teenage AI was willing to lie for you? You shook your head, unable to cover your smile. "No, I think I can handle him. Can you get the door?"

The door opened and you managed to pull it all the way.

Zenyatta hovered by the threshold. "Greetings Agent Strike. I am glad to see that you are well."

"Thanks," you said, unsure of where he was going with this. "Did you need something?" You didn't invite him inside, partially because you weren't that close, partially because you didn't think your one damaged chair would hold him.

"I would like to express my condolences for you losses." He nodded at you. "I truly am relieved to see that you are alive," he said. Oddly enough, you believed him, even if he did think you were a spy. "If my presence bothers you, I can leave."

"Well, I have to visit everyone anyway," you said with a shrug. "I feel like shit, but if I hide out, they're going to think I'm dying or something, and it will be very dramatic. Best to get the reunions out of the way."

"That is an interesting way of looking at things," he said. "Though I think your friends would understand if you needed to rest."

Belatedly, you realized that Zenyatta testing the waters on your feelings about omnics. You shook your head. You weren't going to be hugging OR-14s or Bastions any time soon, but humanoid omnics were downright cuddly in comparison.

"Well, I'm here. And alive. Still."

Zenyatta looked down at your right hand and your arm.

"I had heard about your...injuries. I also wished to offer my assistance, if you would have it."

You blinked a few times, and resisted the urge to ask him to open jars or juggle. "Umm...with what?" You asked, unsure of how Zenyatta was going to "help" you.

"I am capable of channeling omnic energy into mending," he said. "If you wanted to see me work."

You blinked a few times, unsure of what you were hearing. "My prostheses and augments are replaceable-"

"I can heal organic tissue," he said.

You tilted your head to the side. "Really? It won't interact strangely with Dr. Ziegler's nano-tech?"

"It should not. If anything, they amplify each other. I utilized this technique on Genji earlier this week. He suffered no ill effects."

Huh. He sure was interested in Genji. "Is this a secret Shambhali technique?"

"It is...uncommon," Zenyatta said hesitantly, and you understood that you were not
considered trustworthy enough to hear about it.

You waited for Athena to butt in with something like, "Don't fall for his jokes!" or "It's a trap!" But she was silent.

"Sure, what the hell?" You sighed, holding out your arms. "I just took a pain pill too. Is this going to fuck with my head?"

"No," Zenyatta said. "Now, embrace tranquility." There was a chime as a ball of yellow light engulfed you, prickling along your fingers. It wasn't unlike an emitter, though it didn't feel quite as warm and calming.

Your breathing stayed slow and steady. You weren't sure how long you stood like that but you held still till the light faded.

"Lucky, are you all right?" Athena asked, sounding concerned.

You wiggled your right hand and it responded faster than it had before. "Yeah, I think so." Your body ached just a little less, and while you weren't sure if that was because of Zenyatta or the pain pill, your range of motion had improved. "Thank you," you said. "Is this a lesson in disguise? Because I'm too dumb to pick up the subtext."

"Do you need lessons in compassion?" Zenyatta asked.

"If this is just about compassion, wouldn't you be in the infirmary offering to help out?" You paused, wincing at the severity of your words. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful. You helped me. I appreciate it. But there's a hole in your logic."

"Perhaps. But this is a gift from me to you. Since I am to be an ambassador for my people. And I appreciate your trust, especially after the hardship you have endured. It gives me hope. After all, a closed mind is already defeated."

You blew out a breath. He was still making you feel like the bad guy. "I don't hate omnis, you know."

"I know," Zenyatta said, strangely confident. "Hatred is not strategy. And you think in very strategic terms."

You thought of Talon, of the murderous rage you had for them. Perhaps you were too close, you and Gabriel both. That's why you needed Lacroix, who planned without pity or passion. "I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"You do not have to feel hate to look at someone differently. It can be fear. It can be envy. It is whatever makes them different in your eyes and justifies that treatment. Whatever makes it easier to think of them as less worthy or more favored than yourself."

Omnics didn't feel hunger, they didn't need warmth, and they could just swap out broken parts. It sounded easier than your life had been. But that was ignorance. You didn't know how omnis lived, not really: you didn't know how much it cost to keep them going, what kinds of restrictions, both legal and social, they faced. The omnic experience in most of the world would be very different from the human one. Hell, you didn't have a clue how omnis "felt." Zenyatta wasn't wrong to call you out, though you didn't particularly enjoy it.

"Zenyatta, you are smarter and probably kinder than me. Do I have unresolved issues, some of which involve omnis? Yes. But I also have unresolved issues with food, a lot of dead people,
and toasters. I'm working on it. And to be honest, I'll probably be working on it till the day I die."

"And I am offering my assistance," he said, utterly tranquil in the face of your honesty. Damn him. "Sometimes an outside perspective can do you good. The path to peace is not an easy one, but it is attainable. Should you want my help-"

"Can you absolve me for the dead?" You snapped. "Can you bring them back? Can you wake up Agent Daniels? Because I already have at least six funerals to go to this week, and I don't want there to be seventh."

Zenyatta tilted his head to the side, his face almost comically blank. "I have pushed you too hard again."

You bit your lip. "This isn't a good time for that discussion, Zenyatta. Not with me."

"I understand. But when will it ever be a good time for you?" He asked, mildly.

You glared at him, furious that he was pushing, but more infuriated by the fact that you did not have an answer for him.

Irritated as you were by your encounter with Zenyatta, you were more irritated to find that he had really helped you out. You were able to pull on your gloves with only minor problems. Your aches were not as severe any more either. Well, you could have handled that entire meeting better. Lacroix wasn't going to like this.

You verbally transcribed a report, and then saved the file, preferring to send it after you'd met with him. You really weren't up for another dressing down right now.

"Ziv is in Lacroix's office with Amélie, should you wish to join them."

"Was I out of line?" You asked Athena.

There was a long pause. "You were understandably upset. Zenyatta is not like anyone I have ever met. I don't know what to tell you, except I think he is trying to elicit reactions from you, if only to build a thorough profile of your character."

"Do I ever make you feel...lesser?" You asked hesitantly.

"Never," Athena said. "But I am only one entity."

"Yeah, I know." You weren't saying, "I'm not a bigot, my best friend is a "insert minority here." You understood that just because you were good to Athena, didn't mean you were good to other inorganic life. "Sorry. I'm still raw from...everything. I could have reacted better. Just wanted to make sure you were OK."

"I am fine, Lucky. Are you?"

"No," you said. "But that has nothing to do with Zenyatta."
You dragged yourself to Lacroix's office, and knocked. The door opened and before you had a chance to brace yourself, Ziv squeezed you in a bear hug, lifting your feet off the floor. What the hell? When had he gained that much upper body strength? You stiffened and he set you down, a little sheepishly. But one arm stayed over your shoulders, like you'd try to escape if he didn't hold on to you.

"I'm glad you're not dead," he said brusquely, his tone belying the wobbly expression on his face, the wounded look in those amber eyes. "Now stop cutting it so close."

"Good to see you too," you said, meaning it.

"Chanceux, you should still be in bed," Amélie scolded. She patted your cheek. "We were so very worried. And your poor hands..."

You blinked, a little surprised that she knew.

"I visited you yesterday, but you were still pretty out of it," Ziv said, one arm still draped over your shoulder. "Didn't stay very long because Reyes was there looking all rabid and distressed. I wasn't sure if he needed a chew toy or a hug. Either way, I didn't want to be involved."

You glanced over at Lacroix. He had turned off his view screen and watched you with keen eyes.

"Heard I have you to thank for the improved soup," you said.

"I chose to do the most good where I could," he said with a little shrug. "Jack does not approve of the office redecoration, but he left the tomato bisque in place."

Something about that made the inside of your skull itch, but you were too tired to think about it now.

"You really have an ass bordered by noodles," Amélie said brightly.

You looked down at your butt. Was that dick joke?

"It means that you are very fortunate," Lacroix said, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"...Athena, does it really mean that?" You watched as Amélie giggled into her well-manicured hands.

"Yes, Lucky. She referenced, "avoir le cul bordé de nouilles." Some regional variants of the idiom substitute "anchovies" for "noodles," but it is a colloquial phrase that means "you have very good luck," Athena chimed in and you really weren't sure if she was in on it too, or if this was a real thing.

You glanced at Ziv who looked as skeptical as you felt.

"Well, then...I'm...I have...Noodle Ass. Huh."

"We need to have that tea party to celebrate your safe return," Amélie said, clasping your shoulders. "And we will bring that adorable puppy that Agent McCree rescued. I will get him a little bowtie. He will be so dashing."
"O-K," you said, a little taken aback by her enthusiasm.

"You look exhausted and sound even slower than usual," Ziv said, watching you struggle to process everything. "Maybe you should get a nap. We can talk later."

"Yeah," you said. "Sure." You paused. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm glad to see you," he said out of the corner of his mouth, shoulders slumped, one arm still hugging you. "But now I have to be nice to Reyes..."

This wasn't your smartest idea, in fact, you weren't sure if you were up for it at all. But you that wasn't going to stop you from making questionable choices. Squirming awkwardly, you pulled on one of Gabriel's t-shirts and crawled into his bed. Your clothes folded neatly and put on his dresser. He had new blankets, heavy velvety ones that felt good against your skin. You weren't planning on taking a nap, but nestled against Gabriel's pillow, in his warm bed, the linens smelling like him, you fell asleep.

You awoke to the bed dipping under someone else's weight, and you reached for your tanto, your heart dropping when you remembered it wasn't there any more.

"You OK, baby?" Jack asked flicking on the lights. He leaned against you, wearing just his black fatigues, holsters still on.

The pressure was uncomfortable, but you took a deep breath. "Yeah."

"Tired?"

"A little."

"How's your pain?" He brushed your hair back, watching you like a hawk.

"Manageable. Have some pills on the nightstand. Probably due one."

Jack got you one and a glass of water.

You sat up slowly, wincing. Yeah, you were still sore. It was better than before, but your neck ached. You took your pill, sighing as Jack rubbed your shoulders, his hands warm and firm.

"Hungry?"

"A little."

"Gabriel should be here soon. He's picking up the food." Jack nuzzled your neck. "So you like wearing our clothes?"

You squirmed as Jack's hands slid lower, one on your back, the other resting on your belly. "Tired of losing mine," you said.

Jack chuckled. "It's all right, sweetheart. You can wear our shirts; we don't mind." He tugged on the t-shirt, stretching the collar so he could kiss your bare shoulder. "Did you just want to cuddle tonight? That's fine too." He kept rubbing your back, his mouth hot against your skin. "I
know you're sore, so we can't be too enthusiastic..."

You exhaled slowly. "No, I don't just want to cuddle tonight-" Your breath caught as Jack cupped your breasts, his hand gentle as he kneaded the soft flesh.

You leaned over and kissed him hungrily, thighs squeezed together while his tongue darted past your lips.

"You know Gabe's really going to enjoy coming home to us already playing in his bed-" Jack voice was low and pleased.

"You mean he won't be salty that you started without him?" You laughed and Jack's mouth dipped lower, teeth grazing your throat.

"Walking in on him fucking you into his desk was one of the hottest things I've ever seen," Jack growled. "You were making the cutest noises and he was struggling not to just tear you apart right there-"

You ran your fingers through Jack's hair, sighing as he squeezed your breasts through the t-shirt. "Help me get this off-"

"Leave it. Gabe'll like seeing you in his shirt," Jack said. "It'll come off right after." He went lower, pushing the blankets down as he lifted the shirt up, exposing your lacy black panties. He paused, giving you a sly look. "You were prepared."

"Definitely," you agreed, blood running hot. You spread your thighs. "Try not to ruin them."

Jack dragged two fingers along your slit and you raised your hips, heart beating faster. "I'll replace your lingerie. Already put something new on order for you," Jack murmured. "You can wear it on vacation-" His fingers slid underneath the fabric and you moaned as he began to stroke your folds.

"Jack-"

"So wet already?" His voice came out low and harsh. One finger dipped inside you and you cried out. "...and so sensitive. Sweetheart, were you playing with yourself earlier?"

You shivered as Jack watched you, a hungry gleam in his eyes, his smile a little too tense. "Maybe..."

"And you couldn't even wait for us to get back. Didn't realize you needed it so badly. Would have gotten here sooner. Going to have to fill you up and make sure you're taken care of." He pushed two more fingers in and you spread your thighs wider. He bent over you, teeth worrying away at your shoulder. "You're going to have to tell me how rough you want it, baby."

"Still sore," you sighed. "Can't take it too hard, even if that's what I want."

"All right," Jack murmured, pulling out his fingers and licking them individually, his tongue curling around each digit, as he cleaned your slickness off. "Let's get those panties off." He slid them down and you raised your hips. He tossed them on the floor, and parted you legs, pushing your knees up.

You whimpered as he blew on your slit, laying on his stomach between your legs, his calloused fingers ghosting over your clit. He paused, and then swallowed loudly.
"Sweetheart," his voice came out raw. "Is there something you wanted to tell me?" Now that your panties were off, he could see the bright blue plug in your ass, stretching you out for tonight.

"Wanted to be ready for you," you murmured, and Jack lunged forward, kissing you roughly.

"So you've been waiting here like this since you got in?" Jack growled, hands pressing you flat against the bed, his cock rubbing against your thigh. "Such a good girl." He raised one leg over his shoulder, unfastening his pants, his eyes never leaving your face. "I was going to take my time. Be gentle. Keep it slow and sweet, make you feel...appreciated." He paused, lips going down to your throat, where he sucked the skin hard, till you shoved him away, knowing that he'd left a mark. He chuckled as you rubbed the tender skin. "Now I just want to hold you down and give you all the cock you've been craving-"

You kissed him then, worried that if you let him talk, he'd get even more worked up. "Jack-"

"Yes?" He purred, nose to nose with you.

"Just...don't get too carried away, OK?"

His smile tightened, jaw clenching.

"I nearly lost you out there, sweetheart. I really thought I was too late," Jack whispered in your ear. "But then there you were, bruised, and beautiful, and most importantly alive, and telling everyone around us that you love me. You think that doesn't affect me? I'm not "steamed cornmeal on weak ass milk toast," like your little shit of a protégée thinks. You're mine, and you finally admitted it. All in all, I think that deserves a bit of a celebration, don't you?" He kissed you again, clasping your right hand in his, careful not to squeeze too hard.

When he broke the kiss, you were panting and rubbing against his knee, dripping wet. "Jack-" you mewed.

"We both know I'm nowhere near as vanilla as I look," he said, strain creeping into his voice. "But you know I never want to do anything to you that you don't like, right baby?"

"Jack, I'm not worried about that. I just meant if you get too rough, I won't be able to last-"

"And that would be a shame since you went to all that trouble so me and Gabe could both have you tonight. Yeah, you're right." He nuzzled your throat, gently kissing the spot he'd bruised earlier. "I'll be good to you, sweetheart. Just need to be inside you."

He dragged his weeping cockhead along your slit. "Love how you feel around me." He pushed inside you and you nearly arched off the bed, keening as he stretched you out, fingers rubbing your clit. It was all so much more intense with a toy in your asshole and for a moment you didn't recognize your own breathless whimpers.

"Oh fuck-"

"What's wrong, baby? I've barely put it in." The words came out low and excited, his shaft inching deeper, while he held you flat against the bed. He didn't rush, instead keeping his motions agonizingly slow. "Maybe I should have worked that pussy a little harder, you're still so tight-"

"Damnit Jack!" You writhed underneath him, trying to get him to go faster.
"Still not all the way in," he said, brows arched wickedly. "Are you sure you can take all of me?"

"Stop teasing and give it to me!"

"Now who's getting carried away?" He nipped your bottom lip and thrust inside, hips flush against yours. Your mouth dropped open in a perfect "o" and your breath caught in your throat. He raised your leg higher. "All right sweetheart, but remember that you demanded this."

"Want you-" You whined as he began grinding against you, his thrusts shallow, though he stayed sheathed deep, increasing the pressure inside you.

"Touch your clit," he ordered, releasing your hand. "The faster you go, the harder I'll fuck you."

Your fingers were immediately between your thighs, stroking yourself rapidly as your need built.

"Is this what you needed, sweetheart?" Jack gave a low growl and sped up, his smile savage as he found a rhythm that matched your pace.

You moaned, head thrown back against the pillow, eyes fluttering shut as he lifted the t-shirt, his hands squeezing your breasts. You frantically ground against your hand, Jack's cock pistoning smoothly inside you. You slowed down, just to watch him grit his teeth and follow in suit, teeth bared, expression harsh. Lazily, you drew wide circles around your clit, giving Jack a cocky grin. He shot you a feral look, the veins in his arms and neck cording as he strained to keep himself under control. The sight had you clenching and shaking around him.

You kept the leisurely strokes, starting to speed up, then slowing back down. Jack followed your lead and you giggled.

"Do you want me to stop playing nice?" He rasped.

You shook your head. "I like how you're looking at me."

"Like I'm going to stop holding back and fuck you so hard you feel it in your throat? Because I can do that."

You shook your head, smiling. "Behave Jack."

He raised a brow, eyes softening. "I am being very good right now."

"You're very good to me," you sighed and sped back up, Jack's fingers digging into your hips.

"I can do better," he purred, rocking his hips. "You just have to show me what you want."

Biting your lower lip, hips bucking for more friction. Jack moved with you, eyes half-lidded, cheeks flushed. You wanted to do more, You tried to go faster, but your fingers still weren't fully recovered and were starting to ache.

"Jack-" His name came out a plea.

"Yes, sweetheart?" He leaned in mouth hot against your throat.

"My hand...can't," you whimpered in frustration.
Jack's smug look evaporated. "Shit, sorry baby. You looked healed up. I was so distracted, I completely forgot about that." He lifted your hand to his lips, kissing your knuckles. "Don't worry, I'll take care of you." He braced himself over you. "Harder?"

"Please Jack." You wiped the sweat from his brow and he clasped your hand to his cheek.

"Anything you want," he said, eagerly kissing your collarbones. One strong hand slid between your thighs, his fingers continuing the teasing pressure against your sensitized flesh. "Need you so badly, sweetheart," he exhaled in your ear.

"You have me." You shook as he stretched you out, the sensations almost too much. His thick hot length kept stroking in and out of you while his calloused hand fluttered against your clit. And all the while, your ass throbbed, the pressure of being stretched intensifying the entire experience. You groaned, muscles squeezed taut, body rigid as he pushed you closer to the edge. "Jack, if you keep-

"That's it baby, I can feel you shaking. Don't hold back. All this is for you. Come with me," he growled. "I promise I'll take good care of you tonight. Want to hear you scream." He rubbed hard circles around your clit, the friction of his touch and the fullness of his cock finally pushing you to the breaking point. Jack fucked you into Gabriel's mattress, the force of his thrusts making it feel like he was driving the plug deeper inside you. The combination was too much. You were drowning in pleasure, with no brakes and no control over your body.

You arched off the bed, your limbs straining. You clamped down around him, and you could feel your body squeezing both his cock and the toy. He didn't let that stop him. The pressure on your clit just made you thrash harder, but Jack didn't let up.

Your name was a sigh on his lips as he stiffened above you, and a flood of liquid heat pouring inside you.

Breathing hard, Jack rested his forehead against yours. "Don't get too carried away, huh?"

You laughed weakly as he cupped your face, watching his brow furrow in concentration. He pulled out slowly, and you lay there, trying to catch your breath.

The door opened and you both looked up.

Gabriel kicked off his boots, holding a drink carrier and a box of what smelled like tacos. He set the food on the table and slowly made his way over, his nostrils flaring as he saw you spread out on his bed.

His grip tightened on the vibrantly layered red and orange drink in his hand, the straw coated in a brick colored powder.

"Is that mangonada for me?" A sweet, tart, savory, and spicy mix of lime juice, mangos, chamoy sauce, and chili powder, you'd been wondering where Jesse had gotten his. Now you knew.

Gabriel held the tamarind straw up to your lips and you drank, savoring the cool complexity of the drink.

"Honestly Jack, you couldn't wait for me?" He looked between the two of you, eyes dark with lust.

"You're one to talk," Jack groaned, sitting back on his heels. "Came in to find her in your t-
shirt, and some lacy panties. Turns out she'd been playing with herself and look at her, Gabe. How was I supposed to resist?"

Gabriel set the drink on the nightstand, a satisfied smile on his face when he saw the t-shirt. His eyes widened as he took in your disheveled state, Jack's cum staining your thighs, and the bright blue silicon toy still inside your other hole.

"Did you-"

"She did it herself, before I got in. Said she wanted to be ready for us."

Gabriel took a deep breath. "Hermosa, I want a turn too." He sat on the bed, lifting his shirt over your head and tossing it on the ground. "You think you can go again?"

"Please papi," you murmured. "I missed you too."

He kissed the skin between your breasts, pausing to nibble on the side of your neck before tracing the shell of your ear with his tongue. "Were you a good girl for Jack?"

"Yes." You shivered as his warm hands cupped your face and kissed you, his beard tickling your skin. "And he was good for me too."

Gabriel raised a brow, glancing over his shoulder. "Is that so?"

Jack just pushed his damp hair out his face, grinning like a fool as he leaned over, cheek pressed against Gabriel's shoulder. "Do I get a reward too, papi?"

Gabriel snorted and leaned over to kiss him. "What do you want, Jackie?"

"All three of us together now. Lucky went through all that trouble to get ready for us; we might as well give her what she wants."

"...Is this how it's going to be?" Amusement tinged Gabriel's words. "The two of you ganging up on me?"

"Oh, so you're going to be in the middle?" You asked innocently.

"Is that what you want?" Gabriel asked, as he tossed his belt on the floor.

"...Maybe later," you sighed, admiring the way his abdominals rippled when he moved. Off came the pants and you could feel the stupid smile on your lips as you watched him bend his knees and flex his heavily muscled thighs.

"You're drooling," Jack said in your ear.

You immediately wiped your mouth, but found it dry.

Jack laughed and you were unsure if you should classify his delight as "cherubic" or "impish." Wait, you knew the answer. It was evil. His amusement was evil. He was evil.

"What's wrong, corazon?"

You looked up.

Gabriel knelt on your other side, one hand slowly fisting his cock. You rose onto your knees, kissing him as he pulled you against him. He was always so much warmer than you, and
you embraced him, rubbing yourself against his thighs.

He dropped backward, taking you with him. You lay sprawled across his chest, sucking on his neck as he held you. "You ready?"

Nodding, you sat up, wincing slightly as the plug moved with you. Gingerly, you straddled his hips. Gabriel placed his hands on your waist, steadying but not rushing you. With one palm flat on the bed, you lowered yourself onto his shaft, panting as you took him a few inches at a time.

Gabriel held still, fists clenching and unclenching. Inside you, he was scorching hot, and you closed your eyes, taking a moment to savor just how he fit with you. You shifted forward, your weight on your knees as you stretched across Gabriel's chest, absorbing as much of his heat as you could.

"You done teasing me?" He asked as you focused on breathing.

"It's hard to move with the plug inside," you said.

"You're just going to have to practice," he purred. "Now relax. Jack?"

"Already on it."

You took slow deep breaths as Jack carefully began to withdraw the toy.

"Oh sweetheart, your tight little hole doesn't want to give it up. Going to squeeze my cock like that?"

"Damnit Jack-" You squirmed, but Gabriel held you in place, kissing your cheeks while you panted. Jack slowly pulled toy the rest of the way out.

"You're ready all right..." Then came the familiar soothing coolness of the lube being poured inside you.

Jack kneaded your ass gently, and you could hear him slicking himself up before he began to push.

You flattened yourself against Gabriel, moaning into his chest as Jack stroked your back, kissing the nape of your neck while you clung to Gabriel. Your body still resisted Jack's intrusion, but he started off as slow as before, giving you time to adjust.

Gabriel tilted your chin up, the intensity of his gaze taking you off guard. He covered your mouth with his, the kiss more aggressive and demanding than any words he had spoken. You moaned as he raised his hips, driving deeper inside you, thrusts harder than you expected.

For a moment, you couldn't breathe, and you didn't care. Caught between the two of them, you shivered, nerves alight with heat and pleasure. Spots appeared in your vision, and seconds later, Gabriel released you, panting harshly as he rolled his hips upward, bouncing you between his body and Jack's.

"Gabriel-"

"Love how you say my name," he growled. "Need you so badly right now." He nipped your lower lip, eyes never leaving your face.

"Love you too." The words came out strangled as Jack wrapped one arm around your waist,
his body molded against your back. "You and Jack both. Need you both."

"You gotta tell me if it's too much," Gabriel shuddered, peppering your face with kisses. "All right?"

You managed a quick nod, then squealed as Gabriel's tip dragged against your sweet spot, Jack's cock already in you to the hilt. Your toes curled as you tried to separate the sensations, but they had you all twisted up, tension building into tighter and tighter coils. You didn't have the leverage or control to set the pace, but right now you didn't care. You were there with them, like you needed to be. Nothing else was nearly as important.

"Want to fuck you so hard that Jack's coming from it," Gabriel growled in your ear.

"Mmm, maybe you can," Jack purred in your ear. "Love watching her come undone." He nuzzled your neck. "Can feel your cock through her, Gabe. And she certainly feels it too. Look at her shaking. Are you speechless already, sweetheart?"

"Shut up, Jack," you sighed, no heat in your words. "It's Gabriel's turn."

"If you just wanted to hear papi talk, all you had to do was ask," Jack gripped your hips. "Or are you trying to wind me up?"

"Trying to go easy on you." Gabriel squeezed your breasts, tongue flicking out to lick your nipples.

"You don't have to." You ran your fingers along his jaw and he sucked in a sharp breath. "Jack, you do. For the moment."

"So bossy," Jack laughed, but he kissed the skin between your shoulder blades, sending shivers down your spine.

"Think that once I start pounding you, Jack's going to have to keep the pace." Gabriel gritted his teeth. "That what you want?"

"You just kissed me like you needed me more than air-"

"Forty eight hours ago, I thought you were dead," he rasped, and everyone froze. "We both did. No one said it, but that's the goddamn truth."

Jack's grip on you tightened, but he didn't deny Gabriel's statement.

"Oh." Your voice was small. "I'm-"

"I know it's not your fault." Pain twisted Gabriel's face, and he shut his eyes. "Just got a lot of pent up-"

You kissed him lightly. "Same."

There was a pause as he pushed your hair back. He stared at your face for a long moment, nose to nose with you. "You don't get to leave us like that," he said sharply. "One day you might decide to walk away. And it will break my goddamn heart. But not like that, corazón." The ferocity in his voice surprised you, though his grip on your arms stayed gentle.

"I'm sorry," you said weakly. "I didn't want to go anywhere. Back when I was trapped in that cave, I just...I wanted to be home, in bed with both of you. But I couldn't dwell on it. The
thought of never seeing you again—" Your voice broke and suddenly Jack's arms were around you, and Gabriel was kissing you like he could draw the grief from your lungs.

When he released you, your eyes were watering and you took deep shaky breaths. Neither man moved, though they stayed in place, anchoring you.

"Going to grant your wish. You're not leaving my room tomorrow," Gabriel growled in your ear. "You understand? You get to spend the day in bed and before you complain about getting "bored," I'll clarify that Jack and I are going to keep you plenty occupied. Got that, baby?"

"Yes, sir," you said, corners of your mouth lifting.

"Are you that confused already? Going to call me, "papi" next, sweetheart?" Jack teased, hands squeezing your breasts.

"Shut up, Jack," Gabriel said, reaching over your shoulder to ruffle Jack's hair.

"...Just want to feel you both. To know I did make it out of there. That I'm home again," you exhaled, the confession raw and deep.

Gabriel snapped his hips upward and you gave a cry of surprise.

Jack growled, and just like that, the conversation was over.

You clung to Gabriel, head thrown back as he kissed the side of your neck, his cock stretching you wide, filling you in tandem with Jack. They both worked in unison, leaving you briefly empty and aching for them, before sheathing themselves back inside you. Gabriel bottomed out against your cervix, while Jack didn't face any limits, his length so far inside you that he knocked the air from your lungs.

You clawed at Gabriel's arms and chest, swearing as Jack pulled your hair, turning your head to the side so he could kiss you too. They buried themselves in you, giving their all, taking everything, and not letting go.

You had no control and you didn't care. You took them, sobbing their names, begging for them, though you couldn't form complete sentences. It didn't matter. They understood what you needed.

Secure between them, you writhed as they kept a matching rhythm. You could clearly hear the slick sounds of them sliding in and out of you. Jack rambling as he drew closer to his own release, alternating between sweet and filthy words. Gabriel ground against you, almost silent as he focused on you, that desperate look on his face speaking clearly of fear, relief, and need. You kissed him frantically, trying to chase the shadows from his eyes.

They were too much you. You came violently, your orgasm rippling outward, and dragging them deeper inside you. Jack gripped your waist with bruising force. Gabriel sunk his teeth into your shoulder, and you moaned, trembling between them, so overwhelmed that your limbs did not respond to your basic commands.

Laying limp between them, your breath hitched as Gabriel reached over you to kiss Jack. Your body was slick with sweat and other fluids.

You sniffled, cheek resting against Gabriel's collarbone. Your heart beat wildly, and you closed your eyes, just memorizing the feel of them.

Gabriel massaged your shoulders and you lifted your head, managing a lopsided smile. His face was still lined with sorrow and worry, but he hugged you to him, and you felt him twitch inside you.

"Tell me to stop. Tell me you're sore. Tell me you're too tired," he growled in your ear.

"No," you said, your tone firm, your expression gentle. "No, no, and no."

"Stubborn idiot," he said, kissing the top of your head. "Guess I'll have to try harder."

Gabriel carried you to the shower, while Jack changed the sheets. Your limbs weighed too much, and you could barely hold your head up, but you were content.

"Stay awake," he murmured. "Don't want you to drown."

"In the shower?" You managed a laugh.

"With the way your luck runs? It's a real fear."

You yawned. "You wouldn't let me drown, Gabriel. Even if I tilted my head back and fell asleep with my mouth open."

"No, but I might be tempted to put something in there."

"Oh, I really might choke to death-"

"I was thinking a few drops of body wash ought to teach you-"

You smacked his arm and he laughed. Gabriel held you against his chest and you luxuriated under the hot water, jaw slack and eyes closed. He set you on the tiles gently, and massaged your legs, frowning at the bruises already forming on your thighs.

"I told you to keep going," you said.

"I know," he said gruffly. "Just...you're still healing from your ordeal. I don't like hindering that."

You kissed his nose, grinning as he grumbled under his breath. Once you were done, he dried you off, his motions slow and methodical. A lot of this you could do yourself, but letting Gabriel do it for you was...nice.

"Do you want to eat?" He asked as he lifted you up.

"Definitely hungry," you said, head lolling against him. "Don't know if I can stay awake though."

Gabriel brought you out and set you in the clean bed. Jack gave you a quick kiss before heading to the shower. And Gabriel held the straw for the mangonada to your lips. You gulped it
down, the tart and sweet drink almost a shock to your system. Somewhat refreshed, you opened your eyes.

"New taco truck started up downtown. It's passably authentic," Gabriel said. "Asked them to come out here for a day, and they did pretty well." He set the boxes of tacos on the night stand, and retrieved some plates for the now cold food.

"I noticed. You took Jesse a mangonada this morning," you said with a mock scowl.

"...I didn't," Gabriel said then paused. "But Ana had a few..."

You blinked.

Jack emerged from the bathroom, naked, his skin very pink, his smile sleepy.

"Tacos and cuddles, now," he demanded, curling up beside you.

You managed to summon the strength to fold a blanket over him. "You are a taco. And now I will cuddle you," you said, and rolled onto him.

"Now we are a taco supreme," Jack said.

"What does that even mean?" You wondered aloud.

"It means Hoosier still thinks Taco Bell is real Mexican food," Gabriel said in disgust. "And there's no point in wasting this food on his lack of taste."

"But Gabe-" Jack whined, "trapped" underneath you. "I was kidding!"

"And your sloppy ass can go sit on the couch to eat. I am not sleeping in tortilla crumbs again," Gabriel said sharply.

"But Gabe-"

Laughing, you sprawled across Jack and kissed the back of his neck, knowing full well that Gabriel wasn't actually going to make him move.

Chapter End Notes

I've been slightly homicidal this week. The stress of last week (OMG MY DOG) has wore on my nerves and work is...well, you know how I feel.

Behind again, though I'll try to power through. Cousin's birthday involved a lot of socializing. Which is exhausting.

So much fluff. Cutting it with angst, but look at all this fluff! It sticks to everything...
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

Sometimes you need a few days for things to sink in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Everything was too quiet. And here in the dark, that was a bad sign. You flinched, wondering if Daniels had finally stopped breathing. You were afraid to check. But then you had Jesse to worry about, and Távio. You weren't losing another squadmate, damnit.

You sat straight up, inhaling sharply as you opened your eyes. The lights were dim, but on, and you blinked a few times, knowing you were somewhere safe, but your sleepy brain delayed in processing the sudden shift in locations.

You glanced around, recognizing the bed and the furniture. Gabriel's quarters. His bed. You inhaled slowly, your mind catching up with your body. You'd been rescued. Your memories of the past 48 hours flooded back and you dropped flat on your back.

The bed creaked as Gabriel sat down beside you.

"You all right?" He asked, voice soft.

"Was disoriented," you said, rubbing your eyes.

"Bad dreams?"

"...Wasn't sure where I was," you opened your eyes, sighing as Gabriel reclined beside you. "I'm OK."

"Didn't mean to leave you," Gabriel murmured. "Jack had to take to step out to take a call. And I went to check on him."

"I'm fine," you said, a little embarrassed.

Gabriel shook his head, face drawn in weariness. "You think I don't recognize that waking gasp? Even if I didn't know about your nightmares, I've had plenty of my own."

You shrugged, leaning against him as he rubbed your back. "It wasn't bad. Just thought I was back in that hole. Worried that everyone else was...already dead." You focused on a piece of fuzz on the blanket, determined not to sound shaken. Your hands didn't hurt as much, and the emitter was running on the other side of the bed.

Gabriel kissed your bare shoulder. "Want to talk about it?"

"Yeah, in a minute. I had some stuff to tell Jack anyway," you said, thinking of Rodriguez's body heavy against yours, his voice slurring as he faded away. You bit down hard, squeezing your eyes shut. You couldn't talk about everything. Not yet. But he needed to know about Rodriguez.
And maybe you needed to say something about Chey and Forrester.

The door opened, and Jack stepped back inside, still dressed down in black fatigues. He glared at his phone, his lips curled in a snarl. "Is it my imagination," he growled. "Or is Andre Graziani getting more fucking annoying every time I talk to him?" The anger in Jack's voice surprised you.

"Andre's always been an ass," Gabriel sighed. "But I think he resents your promotion more than most."

"Andre never liked me," Jack said with a shrug. His expression softened when he looked at you. "Sorry, sweetheart. Had to finish calling some people about Mateo."

You flinched.

Jack crawled onto the bed and lay his head in your lap. "Hey, no one's blaming you, except maybe you."

"Andre's blaming you, Jack, isn't he?" Gabriel asked, not sounding the least bit surprised.

"...In a lot more words, yeah." Jack sighed. "Managed to throw some more conspiracy theories at me. I might as well take credit for everything from the JFK assassination to the Omnic Crisis."

"He's always been an ass about authority figures," Gabriel said, patting Jack's chest. "I'll handle him."

"Good, he likes you," Jack muttered.

"How's Chang?" You asked.

Jack exhaled. "Hard to say. I gave her the news, she nodded, thanked me for telling her, and promptly cut the connection. She's coming in for the funeral. A lot of people liked Mateo. Don't know if you'll see this many SEP vets in one place ever again." He rolled onto his back, staring up at your face. "Sorry, baby. I didn't mean to drop this on you while you were waking up."

You shrugged. "Had some heavy shit to share anyway."

Gabriel kissed your head. "Want some coffee first?" It was a rhetorical question; he was already off the bed and moving.

"Yeah," you said. "Thank you."

Jack scooted up, resting his head on the pillow next to yours. Worry creased his brow. He opened his mouth, then shut it, and began to rub your arm.

Gabriel sat down beside you, holding a travel mug and a plate of croissants. You took one, and had a bite and a sip of coffee, giving yourself a moment to collect your thoughts.

"...I left some stuff out of the official report," you said.

Jack frowned.

"Nothing mission-related, just private stuff," you added quickly. You closed your eyes, remembering how Rodriguez tried to wake you, talking about empanadas. You had no trouble recalling the conversation in verbatim. So you started from where you woke up on the beach, and
ended on his last words.

"Shh, it's OK," you said, matching his gentle cadence, trying not to think of his strangely peaceful face and failing. "It'll be OK." He had been bleeding out onto you then. "Doesn't even hurt..." He was almost gone at that point. "Never hurts when I'm with you, Ray." you said, voice a dry whisper. "And that was it." You stared at your knees and drank your coffee, but didn't taste it.

Gabriel stayed quiet.

Jack closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

"I didn't think she'd want that in the official report. I don't even know if she wants to know..." You shook your head. "I'm sorry."

"No, thanks for being discrete," Jack said hoarsely. "I don't know if Ray wants to know either, but...you made the right call."

That wasn't what he was originally going to say. But you didn't question it. You just reached over Gabriel and set your empty cup on the nightstand. You wanted a cigarette, but knew better than to smoke indoors. Instead, you wiggled back under the blankets, still sandwiched between your lovers.

"The funeral is later this week," Jack said. "It'll be the last one out of them all. Wanted to give everyone time to get here." He didn't look at you. "We're at thirteen right now. Nejem's squad had no survivors, except for the dog."

"I'll be there. For all of them," you said, realizing that it was time to get a dress uniform. You exhaled slowly. Well, you were on med leave, you had the time. You weren't sure if you would be able to attach the ribbons and medals that sat in your bottom drawer. Maybe you could skip them.

"I will too," Gabriel reached over to rub Jack's cheek.

"We'll leave for vacation next week," Jack told you. "After this, I think we'll need it." He took a shaky breath and closed his eyes.

You hugged him, and he clutched you against his chest, fingers digging into your back.

Gabriel slipped under the covers, one arm around your waist, the other gripping Jack's hand.

The three of you stayed like that for a long time.

True to his word, Gabriel kept you in his bed, under the healing rays of the emitter. You cuddled and dozed, trying very hard not to think about things just yet. Exhaustion made it easy to sleep. Jack had to leave a few times to manage operational issues, but each time he returned quickly, and you didn't miss the way he looked for you when he got back, like maybe you'd disappear just because he left.

Gabriel worked remotely, but refused to let you use a tablet. Instead, he turned on a
cooking show, and alternated between cursing his subordinates (some of which deserved it, others not so much), and holding easy conversation with you about things the two of you could make. You were itching to try replicating those ribs you'd brought back from Shanghai. But Gabriel seemed strangely fascinated with the smoked peach, habanero, and moscato preserves they were making on the show.

"So where did you say we were going?" You asked, casually, resting your chin on his shoulder.

"I didn't." Gabriel didn't look up from his work.

"Oh, well, do I need to bring-"

"All taken care of," he said.

You frowned. "Scuba gear? Hot weather clothes? Bathing suits?" He'd said Vanuatu before, but you weren't sure if he meant it or not.

"Bold, yet naive of you to assume that you'll be wearing clothes," Gabriel purred, tweaking your nose.

You rolled your eyes. "You're hilarious. But seriously, should I-"

"Relax and let us handle it? Yes," he said with a smirk.

"But Jack-"

"Has me and Athena double-checking his work. It'll be fine."

"Can I help?"

"Nope," he said smugly. "Everything's done."

"You're making me nervous!" You scowled.

"You trust us, corazon?" Gabriel asked, tone innocent, smile anything but.

"You guys are jerks."

"Such an ingrate," he laughed, kissing your nose.

"Is it just...us?"

"We'll have some extra security in the area," he said. "But they're scheduled as reserves, not active duty. Athena will be handling the perimeter. And she's under strict orders not to tell you a thing."

"...What?"

"Don't think I don't know how the two of you chat."

You gave a huff of frustration, a little irritated that your secret "source" had been compromised. The fact Gabriel had turned his considerable black ops training into planning a goddamn vacation meant that you would have a very slim chance of getting straight information out of anyone. You could try accessing some of his meta data, but that any overt tracking of commanding officers got flagged pretty quickly. Though maybe Ziv could...
"You just can't handle surprises," he said, looking completely unbothered by your displeasure and your scheming.

He wasn't exactly wrong, and you shrugged. "Guess not." Considering you were just used to bad surprises now, everyone should expect that.

"Hmm, looks like some of your friends are asking after you. Your "Távio" included," Gabriel said. "Jesse's handling them. Don't worry about it today."

"Not you too. He's not mine." You rolled your eyes, knowing full well that he was trying to distract you and partially succeeding.

"So you don't mind if Jack sends him to Antarctica?"

"Gabriel!"

He snickered, hand over his heart. "Steamed cornmeal on weak ass milk toast." Jack's still sulking about that."

"I did not keep that idiot alive so that Jack could ship him out-" You snarled.

Gabriel just laughed harder.

You slid down under the covers, glaring sideways at him.

"So grumpy," he purred, setting aside his tablet and pulling the blankets back. "It's a good thing I know exactly how to cheer you up..."

The taco truck was back again today, and you picked up two cups of mangonada and several fish tacos before you went to visit Távio and Daniels.

Daniels was in the ICU, and still unconscious. In the bright hospital lights she looked different than you thought. But then, your view of her had been obscured by blood, dust, and darkness. She was smaller than you remembered with short brown hair and very tan skin. She was close to your age, and you knew nothing about her.

"Hey, Daniels. Nadine. Whatever you prefer." You cleared your throat. "You can wake up any time. I meant what I said back in Greece. Your mission is to stay alive, and while you obviously haven't failed it yet, you're just kind of cruising. I really expect more effort from Overwatch agents, you know?"

There was, predictably, no response.

"You don't even have to go to the funerals. Yeah, they're going to suck, but you have a medical exemption. We're up to thirteen now, counting both Rodriguez and Nejem's squads. It's going really to suck," you trailed off, not likeing the memories of your previous stays. "Don't make it fourteen, OK?"

You walked out briskly, making your way to Távio's room. You weren't sure why he hadn't been discharged yet, and since you weren't in his chain of command, you weren't privy to the information.
He sat in bed, staring at the wall, the flowers drooping on the bedside table. He blinked when he saw you. "Ma'am."

"Távio," you said.

There other bed was unoccupied still. Which was good; you preferred privacy. You pulled up a chair and unpacked the tacos and set a mangonada on the table beside him.

"Some of the others have been by," he said. "Got some frantic messages from Jeong and Lowell. Not sure what to say. Jeong and Forrester were kind of close."

"Honestly, there's nothing you can say that won't hurt. Your best bet is to choose the way that hurts everyone the least."

Távio brushed his curls out of his face. "Thought you'd be by, yesterday. But Agent McCree said you needed rest."

"Literally, stayed in bed all day," you said. "...Still not a hundred percent, but I hate sleeping in the infirmary. Spent too much time here already. You shrugged. "Nothing against Dr. Ziegler and her staff; they're great," you added quickly.

"Who's that guy you hang out with? The hacker with the 'fro? Like...he's come by a few times, peeked in, grunted, and walked back out. What's his deal?"

You sighed, rested your face in your hand, and blew out a breath. "He's friends with Jesse too."

Távio gave you a long skeptical look, and you groaned inwardly. "There are a few Blackwatch agents monitoring your progress," you said, deciding to take the professional route and not start cursing Ziv's awkwardness. "I've had more than one inquiry about how you'd fit in various units."

The boy just shrugged, not looking nearly as excited as you expected.

"...But I haven't accomplished anything yet," Távio said. "That last mission, I just kept my head down, got knocked out, and had to be rescued by you."

"You survived," you said. "That's always a win."

He stared at his lap, then flinched. "Thank you, ma'am. I don't mean to sound ungrateful, I just...I thought I'd be more help than that. If anything, I got Chey killed."

"You did no such thing," you said sharply.

"It was me or him, and you saved me instead of him," Távio said. "Not that I'm saying it's your fault, ma'am-"

You handed him the mangonada. "Shut up and drink this. That's an order."

He blinked and obediently took the cup.

"My arm was broken. Chey outweighed you by quite a bit, and he was down a leg. Even if you weren't there, there was no guarantee I could have gotten him to safety in time." And you took a deep breath, realizing no one had given him the whole story. "Chey told me to take you. He was hurt bad, more than just the leg, and he chose to stay behind. I don't know what passed between the
two of you, but it wasn't done out of obligation and it wasn't just expedience. He liked you. Blaming yourself misses the whole point of Chey's decision. He knew what he was doing and he wanted you to survive."

Távio shuddered, and took a deep slurp of the drink, not looking at you.

"If you have to blame anyone, you can blame me for not fighting him harder on it. But it's not on you, and it never was."

Távio sat there. "...I don't know."

"It's a lot to process." You leaned back in the chair. "I can recommend a good counselor."

Távio blinked, his lip curling. "I'm not crazy. I don't need-"

"I see one from time to time."

He stared at you, like he didn't quite believe it. "But you're..." He didn't finish the sentence, just set his drink down and shook his head. "Why?"

"That's awfully private," you said with a snort. "There are a lot of reasons, but I guess mainly because I've seen a lot of terrible things and buried too many people. It messes with your head. Sometimes I need help straightening out my thoughts because I'm too close to see that they're not...healthy."

Despite his shock, Távio was quick. "Chey isn't your fault. If you'd saved him instead of me, you'd be feeling just as guilty and missing my better-looking face," he patted his cheeks.

You laughed softly.

"And I...see what you're saying. Chey isn't my fault either. It's the fucking omnics that killed him. But...it doesn't feel that way."

"You got it," you said. "You handed him a fish taco. "And you have to tell yourself that about a few hundred times before it finally starts to sink in. Honestly, it's kind of ridiculous how dense we can be."

Távio opened his mouth, looking like he wanted to ask more, and then just shoved half the taco in, crunching down on the corn tortilla, crispy fried fish, shredded cabbage, and a spiced lime-cilantro krema.

You slurped your mangonada, watched him eat the taco in two bites. He stared at the paper wrap for a moment, as if puzzled by the sudden disappearance of his food. You handed him another taco,

"Where'd you get these?" He sighed with pleasure. "The food here isn't...bad. But it's kind of bland."

"New taco place opened up. Commander Reyes recommended it." You took one for yourself. "Personally, I'm looking forward to forgetting what ration bars taste like. Hint: they always taste like dirt, partially because I'm sure that's a main ingredient, and also because you eat them in the field where you can't wash your hands..."

"I don't remember everything that happened," he said. "I'm sorry I wasn't more help." He shot a look at your hands.
"We were all a mess. You did what you could. We made it out, so there's no point beating yourself up."

He took another taco. "I...didn't say anything embarrassing back there, did I?"

You very diplomatically shoved the rest of the taco in your mouth and gave yourself a moment to think. He would be terribly embarrassed if you were completely honest with him. "Nothing I think you should feel self conscious about," you said, unsure if he remembered what he said about Jack or your rather blatant declaration.

There was an awkward moment of silence. "I...uh...don't remember," he said biting his lip, eyes downcast. "Should I?"

You kept your face blank. "That's up to you. I said some things I'd like kept private. So whatever you recall, I'll ask that you be discrete about what you repeat."

He nodded vigorously. "I want to join Blackwatch. Of course, I understand discretion."

"All right then," you said.

"But I have one question, completely off the record, I'm sorry if it's too personal."

"Oh boy," was all you said.

"Who is "Shin?"

Your eyes widened briefly and you set your drink down. "...Why do you ask?"

There was an odd pause. "I...heard you mention him was all," he murmured, not making eye contact. "...Never mind. It's not my business. I'm sorry."

You exhaled slowly, hands balling into fists. "Shin was another agent. We were together till he died," you said, and it didn't hurt as much as you expected.

"Oh." Távio looked away. "I'm sorry."

You took a long drink of mangonada, washing down the words and the discomfort in your throat. "...I wasn't shouting his name at the rocks, was I?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Távio said. "It was nothing. Really." He spoke fast, words running together. "I'm sorry. I know that stuff's private. I won't mention it again."

You wondered if you had mumbled Shin's name in your restless sleep. Perhaps you said Jack and Gabriel's names too. You didn't think you did much talking in your sleep, but you wouldn't know. You would have to ask.

"Umm...thanks for the food, and the company." Távio rubbed the back of his neck. "I uh...should probably let you go. I know you're a busy person."

You hesitated, unsure if you should ask more. "It's no trouble. I'm on med leave too. Am I tiring you out?"

"Not at all!" He said quickly. "I'm really glad you came to visit. It's...boring here."

"I know," you said.
He reached for another taco. "So, did you mean it when you said you'd make me some of that karaage? Agent McCree kept talking about it while he was here. Made me really hungry."

Your lips quirked. "Yeah. I'll make some for you and Jesse. Daniels too if she ever wakes up."

"She might be a vegetarian, you know," he said. "But if that's the case, I'll eat her share."

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Tataryn and the fish torpedo were waiting for you when you left the infirmary.

You groaned, remembering then that it wasn't just rogue omnis that wanted to kill you.

"I'm off duty and sticking to socializing with people," you said. "Though I have to go see Lacroix next." You weren't looking forward to that talk.

"We can just walk with you," Tataryn beamed. "I'm just a nondescript Blackwatch agent out walking my friendly drone."

You elbowed him as you passed, shaking your head.

"I am not following you," he continued, and you could hear the evil delight in his voice. "We are just coincidentally heading in the same direction. Imagine that..."

"It is a lovely day, Fedya," Athena said brightly.

"With a lovely view," Tataryn said, and you knew he was staring at your ass.

"Lucky does have nice hair," Athena said.

"Lucky has a lot of nice parts."

"Like her personality!" Athena chirped.

"And her legs."

"So very good for running!" Athena added, her cheer sounding a little desperate.

You blew out a breath, ignoring Tataryn's narrations the entire way, Athena trying very hard to keep the banter wholesome. It was actually a relief to step into Lacroix's office and shut the door.

Lacroix sat at his desk, frowning at his viewscreen.

"All right. I'm here. Let's have it." You sank down in the chair, waiting for the cutting remarks about your social skills to start.

"Letting Kwento visit us overtly might have been mistake," he sighed, not looking up. "Someone took a shot at her today in Geneva: she's fine, but the chatter about plots has more than doubled. Talon mostly, but also known Petras collaborators. Do you know Sakai in InSec?"

"Not really," you said, processing what Lacroix was telling you. Hell no. Kwento had to
live, if only because you'd already put all this damn work into courting her. You were not collecting the bad karma for Spinshot. No fucking way. "Why?"

"She's one of Petras' informants, probably not the one who tried to kill you, she was off-site for the period of time between Lyon and your discovery. But she is one of the agents Athena monitors."

You blinked. "How many informants and/or moles have you dug up?"

"I have two dozen people under surveillance now, though I doubt that's all of them." Lacroix shook his head. "Amélie is reviewing the records, sorting them by culpability. Some of them are completely unwitting - people Petras chats with when he comes in, getting gossip and background information. Mostly, they're just pleased to be helping the director out. Others are a lot less innocent, and those are the ones I'm focusing on. Anyway, Sakai is part of the latter group. Don't know if her family has ties to the Shimada, but she's definitely sending regular reports back to Petras. Some of them mention you."

"...Huh."

Lacroix nodded. "Indeed. Nothing groundbreaking though. Your personal life and secrets are safe for now."

"Great," you said, not sounding the least bit enthusiastic. "What are we going to do about Kwento?"

"I'm monitoring the situation," he said, not looking up.

"OK." You frowned. That could mean a lot of things. From personal involvement to deciding Kwento wasn't worth taking the heat for. You weren't sure how you felt about that.

"Interesting exchange with Zenyatta," he said and you stiffened.

"...I tried." You glared at the desk.

"Yes, I can see that." Lacroix opened his cigarette case and lit a Gitanes. "He was baiting you, Chanceux."

"It worked." You rubbed your forehead. "Sorry."

"I would have done things differently, and honestly, you could have done a better job of keeping your temper in check." He shrugged. "But given the circumstances, your reaction was not unreasonable and milder than I expected."

You blinked as he held out his cigarette case. You fumbled to grab one before he drew them back. He waited with an amused expression, then offered you a light. You took it, your hands still not fully recovered.

"Athena was right. He is trying to goad you into revealing things. What? I am not sure. This goes beyond your role as a "mole." But I can tell you this, Zenyatta is the type that wishes to offer you redemption, and now that you've portrayed yourself as a complex, if flawed, individual, he will most likely pursue that option. Watching him work will be most intriguing."

"...What does that even mean? Because it sounds like I'm going to be your social guinea pig. And that's a terrible idea."
"I don't think Zenyatta is any danger to you, physically," Lacroix said. "Though it would be a mistake to underestimate his combat skills."

"Has he asked you about the fate of traitors or something?"

"He has inquired about amnesty in a roundabout fashion." Lacroix gave you a shrewd smile. "He thinks in strange angles. I rather enjoy our conversations."

You blew out a lungful of smoke and easily pictured Lacroix and Zenyatta sitting casually at a table, conspiring against you in little ways, looking polite and calm the entire time. You shuddered. You weren't fooled by their "dignified" appearances.

"I'm sure the next time you speak, Zenyatta will apologize again for being so insensitive. Just like you will apologize for losing your temper." Lacroix's tone was light and easy, but the order was unmistakable.

"Yeah," you said. "I figured."

"What do you think he is really after?" Lacroix asked, folding his hands.

"I'm not sure. I think there might be a few things. But if he's trying to convert me, he's going about it all wrong. Other than that, I don't know. I don't get what he's angling for. I know he's doing a lot of research on me. Wouldn't it just be easier to out me to one of the brass if thinks I'm a mole or a danger to Overwatch?"

"He still might," Lacroix said. "If he wasn't so sure Gabriel would take you out back and dispose of you himself."

You blinked, unable to picture that at all.

"Kwento knows what has happened to some of our traitors. I'm sure she has shared that information with him."

You just nodded.

"He, or maybe Kwento, wants something from you very badly. But he isn't trying to get you killed or put you at risk yet. I find that interesting, don't you?"

You weren't sure if "interesting" was the right word. But it gave you something to think on.

You did your best to keep a low profile, despite the fact one of Athena's drones now followed you everywhere. She had smaller models, discrete ones the size of songbirds, but this fish torpedo was armed, and you strongly suspected that Jack and Gabriel had been conspiring with her.

Apparently, Daniels was a well-liked pilot. Having been the one to carry Daniels to "safety," and then rescuing and adopting an adorable dog to boot, Jesse was getting quite a lot of positive attention from the blues. It was good: he deserved recognition, and you knew from experience that Jesse did not get to be the "good guy" enough.

Távio was out of the infirmary. The crash had done some damage to one of his eyes, but
Angela had fixed him up pretty well. He was still on med-leave, and you found yourself checking in on him periodically. He was back in the Overwatch barracks now, awaiting a new assignment.

Jesse had snuck Bandit into his quarters, and while the dog had chewed up some of his gear, Bandit wasn't barking or drawing unwanted attention. You were positive that Gabriel knew about it, but he was ignoring it for now.

You hadn't slept alone since you returned. Tonight the three of you were staying in Jack's quarters. The funerals started tomorrow, and while you had acquired your dress uniform, you weren't sure you could attach any of your service ribbons or commendations. And to be honest, you still weren't sure how you felt about them.

Letting yourself into Jack's room, your eyes widened as you saw Gabriel sitting on the couch, his sewing kit on the coffee table, a dress shirt folded neatly beside it. Jack divvied up bowls of takeout pasta: it looked like fettuccini with alfredo sauce, shrimp, and a generous mix of vegetables so everyone could pretend like it was a healthy meal. You kicked off your shoes and dismissed Athena, setting the unmanned drone on a chair by the door.

"Look at you homemakers," you sighed, leaning over the couch to kiss Gabriel on the cheek. You froze when your eyes fell on his work. "...Gabriel?"

"Yes, corazon?" He didn't look up, just continued to attach the ribbon bars, amusement clear in his voice.

"...Where did you find those?" You stared at the ribbons and medals that he was affixing to your new dress uniform.

He paused. "Your bottom drawer. I think I got all of them. Athena gave me a catalogue of your awards." He looked up. "Figured you wouldn't be up for doing this yourself."

You glanced at Jack. He handed you a large bowl of pasta and you took it. Though you trusted Gabriel with...everything, you still didn't like the idea of someone going through your things without permission.

You sat down on the couch, on the far side from Gabriel, unsure of what to say.

Jack sat between you, leaning over to kiss you. "If you're going to wear the dress uniform, you should wear your commendations, sweetheart. You earned them. If you've forgotten what they're for, we can go over them-"

You shrugged. "I don't like looking at them."

There was a moment of silence.

"Ah." Jack nodded. "Fair."

Gabriel didn't stop till the ribbons and medals were all in place. "Not even the ones you got for saving Lacroix?"

"Definitely not those. And which time?" You scowled. "Because I regret that on a daily basis."

"How about for saving that civilian in the day spa? And there's the one you got for rescuing Mihret. Hell, I'm pretty sure you got one for retrieving Agent Lao too." You knew that. Just like you knew you had awards for "saving" Jack on occasions like Cobblestone Dust, Spinshot, and I
Need Coffee. And there were several others, some of them run of the mill like "years of service" or "sniper qualified." Others were more specialized, and a lot of those, you didn't like to think about. They weren't all here, some being classified as "sensitive" and put in cold storage.

You shook your head, because you knew what they were trying to say. You just didn't agree.

"Jack, I think we both know that she doesn't see them as recognition for the good she's done. She sees them as reminders of the times she's failed, at least in her mind." Gabriel looked up, his expression severe. "And that's just not true."

"For...reasons, it would be best if you did wear them," Jack said. "At least to Mateo's funeral."

"OK," you said. "Thanks." You ate your pasta quietly and then got ready for bed, already dreading the series of funerals. You didn't know how Jack did it. He was a better person than you.

You went to bed first, taking the side closest to the door. They'd been putting you in the middle lately, but tonight your skin felt wrong and you just curled up under the blankets, trying to slow your heart rate.

You could hear Jack and Gabriel talking in hushed tones in the other room. But you burrowed under the pillow and forced yourself to ignore them.

Recognition didn't mean anything. Gabriel was right. You couldn't think of the day spa and not think of Marta and the rest of the murdered civilians. You couldn't think of the Ninth Circle and not remember losing everyone. You didn't deserve a goddamn medal for saving Lao, because you'd been months behind, and really, that's just what you did for your people. Maybe you did deserve a few awards for saving Ziv and Lacroix though, if only because they were awful. You'd had to exhibit copious amounts of patience to keep from killing them yourself.

You didn't want to think about whatever commendations they would try to give you for Greece. You didn't want them. You wanted Chey, Forrester, Rodriguez, and the rest of them alive. You wanted that mission to be a boring waste of your time. You wanted this all to be a bad dream. Squeezing your eyes shut, you tried to blank your mind and fall asleep.

Shin and Captain Patel were just beyond the rocks. All you had to do was keep digging. They were depending on you. Your chest ached, and your hands were stiff and sore. You couldn't get your prostheses to respond. So you clawed helplessly at the stones, knowing that they would suffocate soon, with their little dog Dasri, and goddamnit, you were the only one who could save them. Sobbing angrily, you pounded your fists against the rocks, too weak to move them.

"It hurts. And it should always hurt," Lao said, her voice soft in your ear. "You waited too long and you've let everyone down."

You sat straight up, hand on your chest, your heart beating too hard against your ribcage.

You blinked, as Jack stirred beside you. You were in Jack's room. Captain Patel and Shin were long dead. Bandit was fine. And Lao? Well, Lao hated you, but she was alive. You took a deep shuddering breath.
"You OK?" Jack yawned, his voice still heavy with sleep.

You took a second to recover your voice. "Fine," you said a little breathless. "I'm fine."

"OK," Jack murmured, throwing one arm around your waist. "Want me to-"

"I have to go to the bathroom," you said, sliding away from him.

"Mmm." He grunted, a little disappointed. "OK." You watched him roll over and spoon Gabriel.

Taking a deep breath you grabbed your clothes and headed to the bathroom, giving yourself a once over as you dressed and made your hair look manageable. The clock said 2:46 AM, and you splashed water on your face, your skin crawling, your nerves shot. You wouldn't be able to go back to sleep now. And you didn't want to wake your lovers. Hands shaking, you grabbed your cigarettes, and quietly slipped out of the room.

Mind a little hazy, your feet guided you to the elevator. You stood there, forcing yourself to breathe slowly. Insides raw, you hit the button for the roof and rested your forehead against the wall.

It was just a dream. But that helplessness, that frustration, that guilt, all that was real enough. You wiped your eyes and got off the elevator, going up the access stairs.

"Lucky?"

"Yes, Athena?"

"You seem to be distressed."

"I just need some fresh air and a cigarette."

There was a pause. "But the roof is-

You snorted. "I'm not Bayan. I just need to clear my head. Roof was the closest spot."

"You're not supposed to smoke outside designated areas," Athena said hesitantly.

Growling, you went out the door. "Don't care right now."

The night air was still cool, though it was becoming summer. The moon was full and you stared at it for a moment. You found a spot beside the access point and crouched down, sticking a Gitanes in your mouth and then flicking open your lighter. It took a few tries, the wind up here was fierce, but you got it lit and slumped against the wall.

You needed to go to the memorial wall tomorrow. Before the funeral. You would burn incense. You would pour whiskey. You would mumble a thanks to Captain Patel’s personal version of Durga. You would do all these little rituals that were meant to absolve you of your guilt and grief, and maybe they would work, if only for a little while. Then you would go to the funerals, and you would face the scrutiny of your peers.

You were on your third cigarette when the door opened. You froze, reaching for your tanto, only to remember that it was gone. Swallowing, you listened to the heavy footsteps and wondered if one of Petras’ people had seen an opportunity in your solitude.

"There you are," Gabriel said, voice rough. He stood there in the moonlight, still in pajama
pants and his hoodie. He'd left off the hat and his hair was sleep-mussed.

You took a deep breath and bit down on the cigarette.

Gabriel came over to the wall, and stood beside you, back against the wall. "Those things are terrible for you." He sounded disapproving, more so than Jack, and that surprised you a little.

You shrugged. Your hands weren't shaking any more.

"Bad dreams?" He asked.

"Yeah." You finished your cigarette and set the butt next to the other two. You would toss them in the trash on the way back down.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really," you said.

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. "You're upset with me."

You shrugged, not wanting to sound ungrateful and unreasonable, but also not wishing to be dishonest.

"Is it just the ribbon bars?"

"Mostly."

He grunted. "And?"

"Didn't like you digging through my stuff either," you said with a sigh and took another cigarette. Sure, they grabbed you clothes from time to time, but this was different. This was more invasive.

Gabriel nodded. "All right. That's fair. I'm sorry."

"I know you were doing me a favor. I just-"

"I get it, corazon. Boundaries. I'm sorry." He sighed heavily. "I'll ask in the future."

You nodded. "OK."

He glanced down at you. "Can I hug you?"

"Need a minute," you said, chest tight.

"...It's not just the ribbons. It's what I said earlier," he mused. "Going this long without a dress uniform is unusual. Not the record, I think that's Vo, but you've been actively avoiding it."

You shrugged.

He crouched down beside you, shoulders not quite touching yours. "I'm sorry. I didn't think it would bother you this much."

"It's not all about you," you scowled. "The funerals. The dead. It's all interconnected."

Gabriel reached over, one hand resting gently on the back of your neck. "It's finally sunk in, has it?"
"Yeah." The word came out dry and brittle.

"...What did you dream of?"

You studied your bare hands. Your fingernails were growing back faster than expected. And while you wouldn't be lifting anything with your left arm for another week, it didn't hurt as much.

You took a deep breath and then you told him about your nightmares, which weren't so much terrifying as heartbreaking. Then, hesitantly, because maybe there needed to be context, you told Gabriel about what you saw alone in the cave. You didn't tell him everything, because some parts still hurt too much, but you told him about Captain Patel, Shin, and traces of Rivka. You admitted that you started digging where they told you, but that didn't mean a thing because it was a sensible spot and your subconscious knew that.

But seeing them, hearing them, having them so close only to lose them again... That shattered your heart.

And when you were done, you buried your face in your knees and sniffled. "I know it wasn't real," you said. "But part of me wishes it was. And part of me can't handle the idea that they're gone again. Which is stupid because-

"You're never going to stop missing them," Gabriel said, his voice distant. "But I'm glad you understand that they would be proud of you. And maybe," he patted the top of your head. "Maybe it wasn't all in your mind."

You blinked. "Gabriel, you don't need to pretend -"

He shrugged. "There are lots of different takes on the afterlife. I think it would make sense if you had a couple people looking out for you, especially given all the shit you get into. But I understand, there's no proof. Believe what you want, corazon, but there's no shame in hoping that the people you love aren't completely gone. Not everything needs an explanation."

You laughed sharply. "Yeah, OK."

"You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners. Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?" His delivery was rich and sonorous, and he was obviously quoting something.

You blinked. "Yeah, that was lost on me."

Gabriel chuckled. "It wasn't bad, seeing them again, was it? Even if it wasn't real."

"No," you choked out. "It wasn't bad."

"Do you still feel like you let them down? Or is it more the grief of loss?"

You wiped your eyes, and Gabriel kissed the top of your head, his hands soothing on your shoulders. "I...think I'll always feel a little guilty. And it will always hurt that they're gone. But...yeah, seeing them and then losing them again, that's what stings."

Gabriel smiled at you, like he knew something you didn't. Which was fair. He knew lots of things you didn't.
You raised a brow.

"That will get better, corazon. I promise." He sighed heavily. "You ready to come back inside?"

"Yeah." You looked wistfully at your cigarettes. "I guess."

"...You really shouldn't smoke." Gabriel clucked his tongue. "I don't care how many nanotech filters they've installed and what kind of genetically modded tobacco they're using~"

You yawned and stood up. "Let's go."

Gabriel frowned at you. "I'm serious."

"Boundaries, Gabriel. You only get to try to fix one of my problems at a time. The rest of them are mine," you said as he rose, giving you the "Commander Reyes is going to snap you in half" look. It wasn't quite as effective when he was in his pajamas, having just been cuddling you a few minutes ago.

You opened the access door to find Jack leaning against the wall, his concerned expression disrupted by a yawn. He reached over and flicked you between the eyes. "Just going to the bathroom, huh?"

"I did go to the bathroom," you scowled.

"Up here? Eww." He laughed as you pushed past him, shaking your head. He followed close behind. "Feeling better?"

"There wasn't any toilet paper."

Laughing harder, Jack caught you around the waist, before you could exit the stairwell, and kissed the top of your head. "I'm sorry you're feeling bad. I'll make you hot chocolate when we get back to the room, OK?"

"...That'd be nice," you said, some of the tension seeping out of your shoulders as he held you. "You know, I didn't want to disturb you two-"

"I was awake," Gabriel said, shutting the access door.

"I was expecting you to come back and stick your cold hands under my shirt," Jack murmured. "And I was disappointed when you didn't."

Gabriel snorted. "Come on, let's go back. We have a long day ahead of us."

You lay sprawled out in Jack's bed, sipping hot chocolate, and trying to overlook the fact he used water and not milk. There were mini-marshmallows bobbing in your cup, and you were back in the middle, Jack's head on your chest, Gabriel's arm under your neck.

"Thanks for taking care of the uniform," you said. "I guess if I'm wearing it, I won't be looking at all the decorations."

"It's not just that, corazon. I can look at a man in dress uniform and tell you where and how long he's served, what he's accomplished, and from that, I can guess just much you can trust him in battle. They tell a story. And even if you can't give the details about your missions, the rest of Overwatch should recognize your mettle."
"I'm happier when they don't notice-"

"It's too late for that," Gabriel said. "You started getting attention during Cobblestone Dust. Spinshot, the terrorist attack in Zurich, and your teaching position all increased your profile. And now, given everything that happened? You're very visible within Overwatch. There's no point in downplaying it any more."

You grumbled, knowing he was right, and that it would make your espionage duties more difficult. You blew out a breath as Jack kissed your collarbones.

"Personally, I think you'll just look extra sexy in uniform."

You rolled your eyes. His mind would go there.

"Gabriel even ironed your pants. Knife-sharp pleats. I bet if you ask nicely, he'll do your hair too.

You snorted. But Gabriel was the best stylist out of all of you. You drained the rest of your drink and Gabriel set the cup on the night stand.

"Thank you," you said, kissing him.

He chuckled. "You're welcome. Now get some sleep. You're awful when you're tired."

Chapter End Notes

This week has been really unproductive on the writing side. But then it's been stressful stupid problems: House is a mess. AC is won't turn on. Lawnmower is keeps dying. Garage door is possessed. Sinuses are gross. My brain is broken... Individually these are minor issues, but it's been like "If one more thing goes wrong..." And then two more things go wrong and I'm like "!!!!!!" FREAK OUT AND BREAK THINGS! (OK, so I don't actually freak out and break things. I just sit there and silently panic while telling everyone "Yes, everything is fine. This is fine. I am fine." It's really an overreaction, and don't I know it!
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

Food, friendship, and funerals.

Chapter Notes

We're coming up on 8 months. Yeesh guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn't quite like dressing up for a formal occasion. You stood there in a navy blue uniform, white shirt, and black tie, the material scratchy, the cloth free of wrinkles. Gabriel had tied your tie, and helped you pin your hair back.

You made faces in Jack's mirror while Gabriel helped Jack straighten his tie and arrange his hair. You put on your gloves and reached for your tanto.

Sighing, you dropped your hand, and debated taking Gabriel up on his offer for his knife. The grip was different, and while it was a good solid knife, the weight and balance just didn't feel right in your hands. You would have to go dagger shopping soon. Maybe Genji and Hanzo would come.

You thought about that for a moment, picturing Hanzo wrinkling his nose and saying, "You're going to choose that one?" Never mind. You weren't going to invite Hanzo. Tataryn was good with knives, but he liked them smaller, more flexible, stilettos rather than daggers. Jesse would be fun to take along, though he might not be very helpful.

"You look beautiful and Jack can't wait to jump you. Now come on, we need to get moving!" Gabriel yelled from the doorway.

Sidearm holstered discretely against your chest, your lips quirked upward. You grabbed your hat - it was a silly hat - and followed Jack and Gabriel out of the room.

The first few funerals were for Nejem's squad. You didn't know any of them very well, but you stayed at Gabriel's side, ignoring the stares and whispers as you walked down the aisle. Maybe your hat was on crooked. No, Gabriel would have told you to fix it. You kept your eyes straight ahead, expression stony.

Jesse sidled up to you, also in a somewhat wrinkled dress uniform, Bandit on a leash beside him. Gabriel raised a brow, but said nothing. Jesse sat down and held his cowboy hat over his chest, giving you a long look.
"Is there something on my face?" You asked out of the corner of your mouth.

"You sure got a lot of color, sweetpea. Didn't realize how many doodads you'd picked up." He squinted at you. "I think you may have more than I do..." He lowered his hat, displaying his own decorations. You had more on your chest, but who could say how many of his were still in cold storage and still highly classified? You recognized some of his, though you didn't have Gabriel's fluency in reading other people's service history.

"Yeah, because your missions go according to plan and don't have random bullshit ruining them."

Jesse covered his mouth. Bandit came over and sat on your foot, wagging his stubby tail. The service hadn't started yet, so you reached down and scratched his head, then quickly straightened up.

Rein and Ana took their seats by Jack. Lacroix showed up too, Zenyatta in tow. You bit the inside of your cheek, and then checked to see if you were wearing pants, just to make sure you weren't having a nightmare.

Távio, in a uniform that didn't fit him quite right, walked briskly up the aisle, and immediately took the seat next to Jesse. Technically, there wasn't a seating arrangement, but the officers sat closer to the front. He hunched over, not making eye contact with anyone.

"You know, you could have just asked us to save you a seat," Jesse said. Bandit leaned over to sniff Távio's shoe.

Távio gave a sheepish smile. "Sorry. I thought I'd know more people." He froze when he saw Gabriel looking at him, like he hadn't noticed this was the Blackwatch row. "Uh...sir." He saluted, lips drawn back in a panicked smile.

"Maeda Vargas," Gabriel said.

Távio's smile widened, though he looked more terrified than happy. He worked his jaw a few times, but no words came out.

"You're right," Gabriel said to you after a few seconds. "Much better than the other one." Gabriel faced forward and Távio stared at him, mouth hanging open in awe.

Jesse elbowed you, one hand covering his mouth.

You shook your head, also facing forward. You were sure you'd hear more about this later.

Chey's funeral drew the sparsest crowd. He had no family that Overwatch could find, and he had not exactly gone out of his way to make friends. Of course, Shoal, Tataryn, Jesse, and Távio still attended. You didn't have enough stories to tell about him, making the memorial feel incomplete.

But Jack was up there in front of the banner-draped coffin, awarding Chey posthumous honors, for holding the line, for helping you save Távio, and maybe just for spiting his killers in true petty Blackwatch fashion. It was a grim service, Jack trying to soften it with words about
sacrifice, camaraderie, and brotherly love.

After the funeral, Távio disappeared, declining invitations to drink with you and the other instructors.

He messaged you later that night to ask which counselor you recommended.

Forrester's funeral was the worst. Her parents were there, looking stricken and brittle as they viewed their daughter's coffin. You wanted to avoid them, because you knew from experience that nothing you did or said could make it better. Words didn't fix heartbreak. But you, Jesse, and Távio still paid your respects to them. And while they didn't come out and say, "Why her? Why not you?" when you shook their hands and gave your regrets, you could feel the question hanging in the air between you and the accusation in their eyes. You had no good answers.

Tataryn and Shoal had an easier time of it. Forrester had apparently written letters home, and mentioned both of them extensively. Maybe she had talked about Jesse, you, and Távio too, but that was overshadowed by her death and your proximity to it. Tataryn and Shoal stepped up, giving Forrester's parents some measure of comfort by sharing their recollections of her.

Your survivors' trio bowed out as soon as possible. The three of you went out for a drink or six, and you retreated to Gabriel's room as soon as you could get away.

"So Commander Reyes knows who I am..." Távio said hesitantly. He chopped the garlic while you mixed the sugar, sherry, and soy sauce. Jesse sat at the table pouring tea for everyone, Bandit sat politely under the chair. You didn't mind that he was in the kitchen, though Jesse had agreed to keep him from getting underfoot. All that boiling oil could be dangerous.

"Of course he knows who you are," Jesse said. "You're one of those cadets who nearly blew up the training field."

Távio winced. "Uh..."

"And he was there for the rescue and retrieval," you said, stirring the chopped chicken thighs into the bowl. You had bought extra skins from the butcher. The rice was in the cooker. Jesse and Távio were getting a meal and then you'd make another batch for Jack and Gabriel. Távio was going to have to help you tie on the skins, but you were managing.

Jesse made tea, grinning as he waited for the inevitable question.

"What did he mean by "better than the other one?" Távio asked.

You sighed, prepping the dredging stations and starting the oil. "Jesse, can you get those croquettes out of the freezer?"

"Oh, do you have the potato curry ones or the crab cream corn ones?" Jesse perked up,
peeking into the freezer.

"Both."

"You're the best. Wait, are these store-bought, not handmade?"

You held up your healing arm and your middle finger, still using your right arm to work.

Jesse just laughed. "I ain't complaining, sugarpie. I appreciate it. You making that fancy clear clam soup too?"

"No, Jesse you specifically asked for karaage and rice." You glared at him over your shoulder.

Jesse flashed you an easy smile. "Aww, come on..."

"I don't have any of the stuff," you scowled. "It's not like I've had a chance to go shopping lately!"

"But I thought you were going to make it up to me," Jesse rested his chin on his hands, trying to make sad puppy dog eyes and failing because he kept snickering.

"Jesse McCree, if you keep pushing me-"

"Where did you learn to cook this stuff, ma'am?" Távio asked quickly.

"Shin," you said, not looking up from seasoning the rice flour. There was a moment of silence and you glanced over your shoulder. Jesse looked a little surprised that you'd answered honestly. But Távio nodded solemnly. "And you don't have to call me "ma'am," any more."

"Sorry, ma'am." He paused. "Habit ma- just habit."

"So polite. Never expected you'd be such a straight shooter," Jesse said, grinning at Távio. "Always thought you were more of a rebel."

"I am," Távio scowled. "I just know better than to cross Agent Strike."

You rolled your eyes upward.

"What did you do to them, honeycakes?" Jesse asked, snickering.

You shrugged, and checked the oil. You dropped a few croquettes in, watching the panko-coated patties bubble.

There was a knock on the doorframe and Ziv stepped in, narrowing his eyes when he saw Távio wrapping the chicken.

"I brought vegetables and prawns," he said brusquely. "If you're doing tempura."

You sighed, knowing you would smell like oil for the rest of the day. Still, everyone needed vegetables, even if you were deep frying them. "Yeah, but you have to chop them."

"I know that," Ziv said, glaring at the back of Távio's head.

Jesse's grin just widened, and he had to pull his hat low before Ziv noticed.
"At least Genji, Hanzo, and Vo are off-site. If they knew you were making *karaage*, we'd have a fight on our hands," Jesse said.

"Whatever, you can just set Reyes' rabid ass on them," Ziv snapped.

Beside you, Távio stiffened.

"Ziv," you said in warning tones.

He grumbled something under his breath and took the vegetables to the sink. He'd brought sweet potatoes, broccoli, mushrooms, and asparagus. You iced the water and then mixed up the tempura batter.

"You've met Agent Ziv Mihret, haven't you?" Jesse asked Távio, his amusement very clear.

"I've seen him around," Távio said, more diplomatic than you expected. But he knew where he fell in the hierarchy. Ziv had seniority. You wondered how long the deference would last.

Jesse continued. "Ziv this is-

"I know," Ziv said, and retrieved a cutting board and knife.

You cleared your throat.

"Would you like some tea?" Jesse asked, eating up the drama.

"Sure," you said.

"Yeah," Ziv said.

"Uh, yes...please," Távio said, carefully.

"Anyway, this is the "other one" you asked about," Jesse said to Távio as he handed him a cup of tea.

You nearly facepalmed, but Ziv didn't notice, just sulking as he chopped vegetables.

"When are you going to Shanghai again?" Jesse asked.

You shrugged. "Genji's actually in charge of this social excursion."

"Genji?" Ziv asked incredulously. "As in Genji "I'm Too Cool to Sweat" Shimada? He's in charge of the social calendar?"

Jesse looked uncertain. "Really?"

"Yes," you said, like it was completely natural. "Hanzo wants to visit again and Feng is always happy to have guests. You guys want to come or something?"

"No thanks, Zhai Feng is creepy," Ziv said.

"You're friends with Zhai Feng? The tech heiress? The alleged Triad Boss? The one that was on the cover of Time Magazine? Like, you know her?" Távio perked up.

"...Alleged?" Ziv asked, giving you and Jesse sharp looks.

"Ziv, maybe you should just be more discrete," you said.
"Wait, is he cleared for Blackwatch shit or not? And does he know about-"

"No," you and Jesse said in unison.

"But he was-"

"Mihret!" Jesse laughed. "Shut up."

Ziv glared at you all. "So you're just hanging out with the kid not telling him shit? What the hell?"

"Ziv, there are these things called "security clearances" and "compartmentalized intelligence." It's not personal, it's work."

"He'll find out soon enough with the way you carry on-" Ziv scowled.

You and Jesse exchanged looks. Ziv was the one with the big mouth.

"Should I...go?" Távio asked looking rapidly between the three of you. He was going to be dizzy and nursing a bad case of whiplash if he kept this up.

"No, I have to make two big batches of karaage, I'm down a hand, and I need all the help I can get," you said.

"Two big batches?" Jesse teased.

"You, Ziv, and Távio get one and-"

"He's "Távio" now?" Ziv nearly shouted.

"Ziv, relax. You'll always be her number one sidekick, if only because no one else will put up with your bullshit!" Jesse said playfully.

Ziv glared at him. "Don't you start with me, dime store cowboy! I will share your browser history with Captain-"

"For fuck's sake, Mihret, we can be social without blabbing everything to everyone. You need to learn to keep your mouth shut," Jesse growled.

"Number one sidekick?" Távio asked you.

"Ziv is part of the espionage team I'm on," you said.

"Who's your number two sidekick?" Távio asked, glancing discretely at Jesse.

You sighed, tempted to say "Tataryn" or "Athena." But Távio wasn't cleared for any of that. Maybe this had been a mistake.

"I don't have sidekicks," you said, shaking your head. "Ziv, you're cutting those mushrooms too thin. You can just halve them. And Távio, don't forget to dredge the chicken twice, once before you wrap it, and once after."

Ziv rolled his eyes, but adjusted his technique, and Távio obediently went back and gave the wrapped chicken a second dredging.

Jesse just watched you with a shit-eating grin on his face. He held up two fingers, gleefully
mouthing "sidekicks" at you.

You shook your head in exasperation and started pulling the crispy golden croquettes out of the oil.

"Minions then?" Jesse wondered aloud.

Ziv threw Bandit a piece of broccoli. The dog gobbled it down.

"Hey! Is that safe to feed my dog?"

"Yeah," Ziv scowled. "Don't you know anything? Dogs are omnivores. No onions, grapes, or chocolate. But he can eat broccoli."

"Yeah, but it will probably give him gas. Enjoy your farting dog."

You turned around to see Gabriel lingering in the doorway, his grin sharp.

Ziv muttered something impolite under his breath and Távio stiffened beside you.

"Any of that for me?"

"Second batch."

Gabriel frowned.

"I promised Jesse and Távio some back in Greece." You blew out a breath, as Ziv coughed meaningfully. "And Ziv is helping me out too."

"All right," Gabriel said, his tone amused. "I'll see you later then."

Jesse sat at the table, looking far too pleased. Ziv started dipping the vegetables and prawns in the tempura batter, surlier than before. Távio had a calculating look on his face, glancing between you and Ziv, then you and the empty doorway.

You weren't sure what conclusions he was drawing from all this, and to be honest, you didn't think his imagination could be more outlandish than the truth.

"That was...really good," Távio groaned, slumped facedown on the table.

"Yeah." Ziv leaned back in his chair, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"I can't move..." Jesse rubbed his belly, having unbuckled his belt to loosen his pants. Even Bandit looked extra bloated, and you were pretty sure you'd told Jesse not to feed the dog so much fried food. Oh well, you didn't have clean up after him.

You had the second batch of karaage done, and you smelled like oil. You'd managed to save some tempura and dipping sauce, along with a few croquettes. The second batch of rice was almost done, and you'd packed the karaage away.

There were quite a few dishes in the sink and you were too tired to think about them.
Instead you finished securing the food payload and checked your messages to see where your men were at. You had one message from Jack.

*Ray's here. We're in my quarters.*

You messaged back that you were done and would up be up shortly. Then you sighed, wondering how you were going to get all that food upstairs unnoticed with only one arm. Your current companions had a serious case of the itis and you doubted you could get them to move.

"You almost done?" Gabriel asked gruffly from the doorway and you nearly jumped.

"I'm ready," you said, gesturing to the multiple containers. "How'd you get here so fast-" You gave Gabriel a skeptical look. "You haven't been...hanging out there waiting for your serving, have you?"

Gabriel gave you a thin smile. "Not at all. Just telling busybodies like Tataryn and Wilhelm that you were busy, there was nothing to see here, and that they could find their own damn dinner."

Shaking your head, you grinned as Gabriel picked up the rice cooker and the chicken. You took the rest of the food, leaving Ziv, Távio, and Jesse in their food comas.

"Chang's here," Gabriel said. "Jack's talking with her about how it went down. Figured she wouldn't want me there."

"That's probably for the best," you said.

"Jack's probably going to invite her to stay for dinner," Gabriel grumbled.

You smiled and had to resist the urge to pat him on the back in public.

The two of you took the long route, Gabriel focused on the food, while you kept an eye on potential witnesses. People were used to seeing you with Commander Reyes. You were his assistant after all. But it would raise eyebrows if the two of you were seen hanging around the Strike Commander's quarters.

"Maeda Vargas seems to be fitting in," Gabriel said as you entered the officer quarters.

"Ziv's not happy," you said.

"Mihret's just jealous," Gabriel said. "Because he's an immature, insecure, petty little-"

"Mmm, Ziv fits right in. After all, petty is a Blackwatch trait," you said entering the code for Jack's quarters.

Gabriel did not look amused. He opened the door, and kicked off his shoes. You followed.

Chang sat on the floor drinking a beer, an untouched slice of cake on the table. She was out of uniform, in a black tanktop and jeans, her expression flat, her shoulders tensing when she saw Gabriel. Jack was in sweats, sitting on the couch. He grinned when he saw you, his smile growing wider when he saw the food.

"Chang," Gabriel said with a nod, his tone not quite as needling as you remembered.

"Reyes." There was no warmth in her voice, but then Chang was not a very...outgoing person. "I can leave now-"
"You should stay," Jack said brightly. "Have dinner with us."

Chang looked at you, dispassionate as a shark.

"I made käraage, rice, tempura, and the croquettes are store-bought, but my arm's still fucked up, so sorry."

"Thank you," she said, still staring at your face, her expression never changing. You weren't entirely sure what she was expecting.

You and Gabriel unpacked the food while Jack grabbed everyone more beers.

"This stuff is great," Jack sighed, reaching over to grab a piece of chicken. "Apparently, several Blackwatch agents will beg, barter, steal, and fight for it. Not that I blame them..." Jack trailed off, crunching happily.

Gabriel got out the disposable plates and passed them around.

You dropped onto the couch, groaning softly as Jack rubbed the back of your neck.

"Thanks for cooking," Chang said, though she had not tasted anything yet. She was watching Gabriel out of the corner of her eye, like she expected trouble.

"Relax, Chang. I'm not going to pick a fight now," Gabriel said, piling käraage onto his plate. "Unless you try to take my food. Then I'll fuck you up."

Chang's answering smile was savage. "You'll try."

Jack just rolled his eyes. "Ray, eat your food. Gabe, behave. Lucky, if you don't get yourself some food, there won't be any left."

You'd munched while cooking, because that was your right as the cook, and really, you had to make sure everything tasted right. You made a small plate, and leaned against Jack. Gabriel dropped a tempura prawn on your plate.

"You're going to make Chang suspicious if you don't eat more," Gabriel said.

Chang gave him a hard side eye.

"I made a full meal of this stuff for some of the other agents," you explained, because that reaction was not out of character. "I've been eating and cooking all day."

"I have no reason to distrust, Strike," Chang said, gazing blandly at Gabriel. "Even if that isn't her real name and she's a sneaky, underhanded, Blackwatch agent."

You nearly choked on your rice.

"That was a compliment," Jack said, a small smile playing on his lips.

"I uh...Thanks?"

"No, thank you for being...circumspect about Mateo," Chang said, not looking up from her plate. She took a few pieces of käraage, but focused on the tempura.

You realized then that Jack had told her then. "You're welcome," you said, though that sounded wrong. "I'm...sorry about how everything played out."
"It wasn't the kind of thing you could control," Chang said and took a bite of sweet potato.

"Yeah," you said, no longer surprised by her abruptness. "Still sucks."

"Yes." Chang stared at her plate for a solid minute. "The food is good," she said, tone still flat, though lacking any signs of dishonesty.

"Thank you."

Gabriel didn't even try to make small talk, he just filled his plate and ate, which was probably the best thing he could do.

Jack alternated between dropping food on your plate and making sure everyone had a drinks. You started pushing it onto Gabriel's plate. Gabriel just took it, looking content, if not happy.

"Michael and Maggie asked me to bring you things," Chang said, she didn't look at Gabriel. "I have packages for you in my bags. I'll get them later."

"Thank you," you said.

It was a more awkward dinner than you had been prepared for, but not as bad you expected. Gabriel kept his comments to a minimum, and Chang was obviously trying to be polite, even if she was bad at it. And Jack was just so weirdly happy, probably because Chang and Gabriel weren't fighting. You didn't know how to read the situation. Instead, you ate your food, stole that cake off the table, and curled up on the couch between your lovers.

There were a lot more prayers, tears, and laughter than you were accustomed to seeing at an Overwatch funeral. Rodriguez had a large family: parents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, nephews and nieces. The entire family had not made it to Zurich, but there were about two dozen of them here, talking, crying, and hugging everyone. They weren't solemn or quiet. They told jokes and invited everyone to the wake afterward, having arranged special permission to use the cafeteria kitchen. It was obvious that Rodriguez had been well-loved. And at points, you and Jesse both had look away, though he clapped you on the back too hard and you rested a hand on his shoulder. Blackwatch agents did not have funerals like this.

Rodriguez lay under a thin shroud, a white candle burning in each corner of his casket. Because of the circumstances, he had not received a traditional *velorio*. After this service, his remains would be returned to Fairfax, Virginia, and buried in the family plot.

You counted almost two dozen people who looked SEP: impressive physiques, battle scars, good posture. Some of them were in Overwatch, like Chang. Others came in US Army uniform. A few just wore suits. Jack, Gabriel, and the Rodriguez family sat in the front. To your surprise, Chang stayed close to you, like maybe you could protect her from random hugs. Jesse and Távio were your funeral companions now, and they sat in your row too, Távio shooting questioning looks at Chang and Jesse looking very uncomfortable, though you couldn't tell if it was the ceremony, the company, or both.

There was singing, a Catholic mass, and a goddamn slide show: Rodriguez had been a photogenic guy from birth through adulthood. And after Jack made his formal speech, detailing
the Wolf of Santiago's unclassified exploits - and there were many - he talked about Mateo, his friend. He spoke of long nights in a foxhole, and how Rodriguez's jokes and light-hearted observations made the time pass quicker. Voice thick with emotion, he talked about a battle where Rodriguez had literally thrown several grenades back at the enemy, his battlecry, "Nobatterbatterbatter!" Jack shrugged at the ridiculousness of the baseball taunt, his smile sad.

"And..." Jack took a deep breath. "I don't want to tell this story. But long before I was the Strike Commander, I was just "Morrison," another dumb grunt in the field. And Mateo made me promise, if I was at his funeral, that I would tell this story." Jack shook his head. "For the record, I hate this story and Mateo's a jerk for making me do this."

There was a smattering of laughter, but even more people leaned forward in their seats. Jesse perked up and you raised a brow. Chang just sighed.

Jack shook his head, obviously reluctant to start.

"Quit stalling, Morrison!" Gabriel shouted, and you covered your mouth with your hand.

"I lost a bet," Jack said, closing his eyes. "Or Mateo beat my score in a training exercise. I don't remember how it happened. But I ended up press ganged into one of his crazy schemes." Jack rested his face in his palm. "All I had to do, he said, was help him get this one girl's attention." Beside you, Chang stiffened. "Easy right? Mateo didn't have trouble getting attention, romantic or otherwise. But this situation was different. This girl was well aware of Mateo's reputation and quite possibly immune to his sweet talking. We spent a week trying to soften her up. We tried a lot of things: flowers, desserts, serenades, and there was the flaming piñata, which wasn't supposed to catch fire, but accidents happen-"

Chang buried her face in one hand.

"It was bad. Really bad. Every time I tried to help Mateo do something...romantic, it just failed." Jack sighed. "So eventually, this lady has had enough. She called us out in front of the entire squad, and proceeded to tell me all the reasons she why wouldn't date my oblivious ass. And I am obligated to share some of those reasons: we don't have the time to hear the entire list, suffice to say, that was fifteen minutes of scathing trauma that I have yet to recover from." Jack cleared his throat.

"She didn't like fruitcake, which at the time I didn't understand was viewed more as an insult or a death threat, than a courting gift. My singing was compared to a hemorrhaging donkey in its death throes. I was obviously an idiot, because who sets a piñata on fire and ruins all that candy? And the invitation to Waffle House was not appreciated, because it was broad daylight and she wasn't drunk," Jack sighed. "Then she sympathized with Mateo for having such a moron for a friend-" Jack shook his head. "And they had dinner that later night. I'm pretty sure Mateo could have asked her out on his own, without putting me through all that, but...he thought it was funnier this way. And Mateo appreciated a good story."

Chang relaxed, and you wondered if this story was about someone else, or if she was just relieved he left her name off it.

Afterward, numerous relatives got up at the podium and told raucous stories about Rodriguez, how he'd set the woodshed ablaze with homemade fireworks, or made armor for his chickens, or gotten caught pretending he was his own twin while seeing three different girls.

It was at the end of the service, after the speeches, the awards, the hymns, and the praying that you started to relax. Which was a mistake.
A tall, well-muscled woman US Army dress uniform stalked up to Chang. Her wavy brown hair was up in a bun, and she had very broad shoulders. Her features were sturdy and honest, and you suspected she was bad at lying. She towered over Chang, frowning at your entire row, and for a moment you were worried.

"Leah," Chang said standing up.

"Ray." Leah crossed her arms. "You could have sat with us, you know."

Chang shrugged. "I just followed Lucky over. Wasn't thinking too hard about...anything besides getting here." Chang's words were stilted, in her usual monotone, her discomfort obvious. And it clicked then, that even if she couldn't love Rodriguez the way he wanted, he had been important to her.

Leah's harsh expression crumpled, and suddenly she was hugging Chang, "I'm sorry, Ray! I-I-" She began to bawl, and Chang sighed, reaching out delicately to pat Leah's back three times, before ducking out of the hug at with shocking speed. "Oh, you hate being- Oh shit!" Leah shook her head. "I'm sorry!"

Chang shrugged, like she was used to Leah's emotional outbursts. "I know, you can't help yourself."

Leah sniffled, but didn't seem offended. "Sorry," she repeated. "I just...I didn't think it would be him-"

Chang nodded, shoulders lowered. "I know."

"He was so- It's not right!"

"I know," Chang said.

"Yeah. Yeah. I know you do. I just- I'm bad at saying the right thing," Leah mumbled. "We'll drink later. Andre's over there, and Lucy came, and so did Blue, and Reyes still owes me a bottle of scotch."

"Yeah," Chang said, voice raspy. "Gotta make it through the wake first." She took a deep breath. "Have you met Lucky?"

Leah blinked. "This is the one...?"

You stiffened, knowing Távio and Jesse were listening closely.

"Yeah," Chang said.

Leah squinted at you, giving you a once over. "Not what I expected."

You blinked. "Better? Worse? Shorter?"

"You're not...high maintenance," Leah said. "But I only met the one..."

You shrugged. "I've heard stories."

"She was all bedroom eyes, breathy whispers, and innuendo till you wanted to gag," Leah said with a scowl. "Yeah, she was pretty, but-"

"Ears," Chang said.
Leah blinked. "Yeah, you're right." She looked at Jesse and Távio. "So you guys knew Mateo?"

"He was my new CO," Távio murmured, eyes darting between Leah and Chang.

"Lucky and me were just along to...help," Jesse said. He stared up at sky. "Wish I could've done more."

"After the crash. Agent McCree got the pilot, Daniels, and Agent Strike dragged me to shelter," Távio said quickly, like he expected accusations.

"There's not much anyone without shielding can do directly against an OR-14 plasma blade," Leah said. She crossed her arms. "We've seen the official report. Knowing the Strike Commander has some benefits."

Chang snorted.

"Gotta warn you, Andre is out of sorts-" Leah said.

"When isn't he?" Chang asked, not actually looking interested.

Everyone fell silent as a woman stopped at your row. She wasn't very tall, but she wore a long black dress, her handsome face lined with grief, her long black hair streaked with gray.

"Tía Elena," Chang said, her voice soft.

"It's good to see you again," Rodriguez's mother said, her jaw trembling. "How are you holding up, mijita?"

To your surprise, Chang bent over and hugged Rodriguez's mother. Leah gaped as Chang gently patted the older woman's back. "Reciban mis condolencias. Les acompaño en el sentimiento," Chang murmured, her accent flawless.

Rodriguez's mother hugged her tighter, sniffling against Chang's chest. "¡Ay! Ray-" She trailed off in a flurry of Spanish, Chang responding fluidly.

Leah watched, her eyes wide and she glanced at you, clearly telegraphing, "Are you seeing this? Is this happening for real?"

Rodriguez's mother drew back a little, taking a shuddering breath. "You have to be careful, Ray. I know you are tough, but I still worry about you. You will come visit us when you get a chance?"

"Of course, Tía Elena," Chang said.

"And bring Jack and Gabriel. They work too hard-" Rodriguez's mother wiped her eyes. "You all work too hard, You're still so young. You need to take time for yourselves. Mateo always said he would but-" She broke down then, clinging to Chang, and you half expected Chang to pull one of her ninja escapes, but she stood there, carefully stroking the older woman's hair, her motions very deliberate. Like she had to focus extra hard on being comforting, though her stare did not lose its raptor-like intensity.

"Maybe we should give them a moment," Leah said, backing up, her eyes still on the scene.
"Good idea," you said, looking away. Jesse and Távio had already stepped to the side.

"Wasn't expecting..." Leah shook her head. "Well."

"Chang's not as tough as she pretends," Gabriel said, leaning over your shoulder to clasp Leah's hand.

"Big talk from the guy who's had her break both his arms."

"And my nose, and my knee, and an ankle, I think..." Gabriel shrugged. "I gave as good as I got."

Távio looked between Gabriel and Chang, his expression slightly horrified.

"Don't be fooled by her slight build. Chang's the top-rated melee fighter in SEP," Leah said, noticing his face. "She's not as big as Reyes or Morrison, but she's quick as a snake and can hold her own. Disturbingly good with a gun. Heals faster than the rest of us too. It's like all the ability that should have been put into social graces, got channeled into her combat skills."

Távio looked between you and Chang.

"She'd win," you said. "In a straight up fight. She'd win hands down. She wouldn't even need hands. She'd kick the shit out of me, and I wouldn't even see it coming."

"But Lucky here is too smart to try to take one of us in a fair fight," Gabriel laughed and you remembered Christmas Eve on the farm and heat spread through your body.

Leah looked at you, her gaze speculative. "I didn't expect Ray to like you."

You blinked.

"Lucky nailed her with a paintball," Gabriel said smugly.

"And I brought enough cookies and whiskey to share," you added, because that seemed like a more reliable way to make friends.

"That wasn't meant as an insult," Leah said quickly. "Ray doesn't like most of the people that J-" She stopped herself. "Ray is prickly. She's a good friend though."

Chang liked you? You couldn't be sure, though she had sat next to you at the funeral. So, maybe that was a sign of approval in her world? Well, she didn't dislike you. You knew she would have said something a long time ago if that were the case.

"This her?" The speaker stopped beside Leah. He was a broad bald man with velvety dark skin, wraparound sunglasses, and an ill-fitting suit. It actually didn't look bad. It sat just too tight across his shoulders, hampering his movements, and you got the impression he didn't dress up very often.

"Andre," Gabriel said, voice cool.

"Reyes," Andre nodded. "Good of you to fly the whole family over."

"That was Jack," Gabriel said mildly.

Andre shrugged. "OK. But I bet you had to remind his flaky-"
"Andre," Gabriel said, tone warning. "This is a funeral."

"Still ain't right what they did to you, brother."

"I know. Jack knows. We've talked about it extensively," Gabriel said casually. "And the situation is more complicated than you know. So unless you're going to come back and help us fix it-"

"No way!" Andre scowled. "I'm not working for Uncle Sam. I'm not working for the UN. I'm done with those two-faced, back-stabbing-!"

"-Then you don't have to worry about it," Gabriel said smoothly.

Andre frowned at the podium, where Jack was speaking with a few people, SEP by the look of them. "Going to finally come clean about Ai-"

"Andre, I love you like you a particularly stupid brother," Gabriel said crossing his arms. "But we're at Mateo's goddamn funeral, and you're going to behave. His mother is right over there, and I do not want to punch you in front of Tía Elena. If you make me, you will feel all that irritation, regret, and anguish up-close and first-hand. Literally. Do you understand me? We can talk later."

Andre didn't move, but he took a deep breath, the tension dropping just a little.

"Afterward, if you're feeling helpful and discrete, we can discuss conspiracies. Otherwise, you can mind your own damn business." Gabriel leaned forward. "Because things are messy enough without you making a bunch of noise about things I'm trying to fix behind the scenes."

Andre took off his shades, his steely blue cybernetic eyes glinting too brightly in the sun. "I fucking knew it-"

Leah glanced between Gabriel and Andre, her brow furrowed.

"You can come too Leah, if you promise not to tell your USG handlers what we're talking about. It could be treason." Gabriel winked.

"Shut up, Reyes. After all we went through in Kandahar and Algiers..." she scowled. "What's a little treason compared to that?"

Chapter End Notes

The past week has been stressful and overwhelming. Air conditioning is fixed - something ate through one of the low voltage wires and that was an unexpected bill. Lawn mower is still a WIP. Grass could conceal an antelope or three. Work is driving me to distraction. Temperature has been high 80s to mid 90s with heavy humidity. Think I had some kind of summer cold, not sure, I've been kind of out of it, but my productivity has been very low. And I am super super behind. There might be delays on some upcoming updates.

I'm getting your tumblr asks and will respond to comments today or tomorrow. Just been pretty meh for the past week and looking forward to sleeping most of the day today. (Because self care! Also: sloth!)
Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

Taking care of business before your trip.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The wake was held in the cafeteria. Apparently, several relatives had gotten up early this morning, taken over the mess hall, and cooked enough for all the funeral goers. It smelled divine. Távio kept sneaking looks between super soldiers and the buffet line, like he was worried about getting a serving. You could have sworn you saw Jesse wipe a trail of drool off on his serape.

You stayed with them, catching sight of Jack and Leah or Gabriel and Andre looking at you and whispering. Chang had joined a few other SEP people. You helped yourself to tamales, arroz con pollo, and sopa de albondigas. The meatball soup was rich and well-spiced, and you sighed, wondering the polite way to ask someone for their recipe at a funeral. Amélie would know. She knew all those tricky etiquette loopholes.

After you were done eating, you discretely checked your messages.

*Going up to Jack's room with the gang. Come on up when you get a chance.*

Finishing your food, and relieved that this was the last funeral, you excused yourself, not missing the curious look Távio gave you, and headed off to change out of your damn dress uniform.

"You provide the funding, I'll provide the data. And you then you're going to-" There was a smack, and judging by the familiar resonance, it was Gabriel's hand on the back of someone's head.

"Andre, you *still* don't tell me what to do," Gabriel growled.

"Fuck you, Reyes," the other man grumbled. "You still need to tell Mr. Roberts-"

'Guys-" Leah's voice sounded more exasperated than upset.

"What makes you think I haven't already?"

You walked into Jack's room, a little surprised to see six people sitting around the coffee table, talking, drinking beer, and eating Jack's plain salted potato chips. And then they all turned to look at you, six combat veterans, all hyper-alert.

"Hi, sorry I'm late." You waved, feeling like a specimen under a microscope. No one
stared too long, but you could feel them taking in your measure. Judgment always made your neck itch. Maybe it was in your favor, but you had no idea.

Andre took another look at you and quickly averted his eyes. Gabriel did not look up, his disapproving gaze focused solely on Andre.

Jack sat on the floor and beckoned you over. Gabriel was on his other side, apparently in a debate with Andre. Leah sat cross-legged next to Andre, her concerned gaze flipping between Gabriel, Andre, and Chang. Chang was on the couch speaking with a brunette man you had not yet met.

You sat down beside Jack, a little taken aback by how casually he threw one arm around you, the other one holding Gabriel's hand. He offered you his beer and you took a sip, sighing.

"Lucky, I think you've met everyone except Blue." He pointed to the man on the couch.

"I don't think I actually got introduced to Andre," you said, noting that the other man's ears pricked up when you said his name, but he ignored the invitation.

"He's busy," Jack said, his smile so polite that you knew exactly what he was thinking. He didn't think you were missing much. Fair enough.

You reached over the table to shake the brunette man's hand. He was average in height, weight, and with a weak chin, though he had a firm handshake. He wore a suit and you weren't entirely sure if he was SEP. "Should I ask about the nickname?" You glanced at his eyes. They were brown. He was surprisingly normal looking. But then Chang wasn't hulking behemoth, though she had amazing muscle tone.

"Short for Blumenthal," he said, his voice reedy. "Though everyone says I'm depressing as fuck, so there's that. Can't really argue, considering the only time I see everyone together is at a goddamn funeral. It's kind of hard to be peppy when you keep burying what's left of your friends."

"Yeah, I understand that," you said, after a moment. You had marathoned thirteen funerals this week. It was pretty awful.

"He's always been a whiny bastard. Sometimes, he writes poetry about his feelings," Chang said, and you couldn't tell if she was fucking with you or not. "It's terrible."

"It's nice to see you're still illiterate, Ray." Blue gave a longsuffering sigh. "Anyway, nice to meet you Lucky. Don't feel bad about Andre. He's kind of like Ray. Real task-oriented, but critically lacking social skills. It's nothing personal; both of them are just bad at playing nice with others."

You snorted, seeing that minefield for what it was. "I'm too tired to have real feelings right now."

"That must be nice," Blue sighed, giving Jack a wan look.

"I don't think he's as morose as he acts, but after this many years, I really can't tell," Jack said.

"I don't think Morrison's as clueless as he acts, but after this many years, I guess it doesn't matter," Blue said sounding smug, though his glum expression stayed in place.

Jack didn't look offended; he just offered Blue the bag of potato chips. "Blue wasn't SEP,
but he served as our pilot for a lot of missions. Got us shot down a few times."

"Kept you in the air way more times," Blue scowled. "And there aren't a lot of us left either," he muttered. "You know, as Strike Commander, you could get better snacks," Blue said, not taking any chips. Chang however, took a handful, and no one said a thing.

"What's wrong with potato chips?" Jack asked. "They're classic! Though I guess we could shell out for some French onion dip." He looked thoughtfully at the table. "Or ranch. Ranch works too."

"...That's is Morrison in a nutshell." Blue shook his head. "It's good to see power hasn't completely gone to your head."

"I have good people around me." Jack kissed the back of your neck and you stiffened, unused to him being this demonstrative in front of strangers. Well, strangers to you. But Jack stayed relaxed, despite his obvious tension with Andre.

"Oh you want to hear about Jack's snacks?" Gabriel leaned over Jack to kiss your cheek, and you didn't miss how Leah and Blue's eyes widened briefly. Though you couldn't be sure if it was Gabriel's overt affection or the idea of Jack making snacks.

"Gabe, no-" Jack groaned.

"Oh yes, they need to hear about this," Gabriel smirked. "Your mother is going to hear about this-"

Scowling, Jack draped his arms over your shoulders and leaned against you. He didn't quite hide his face in your hair, but he grumbled softly in your ear.

"So Lucky and I are getting ready to leave for an op when Jack comes down with brown paper bags..."

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Jack lay in bed between you and Gabriel. He blew out a deep breath and shook his head. "It's so trite, Mateo's gone, but I keep expecting him to pop back up and yell "gotcha, sunshine!" And every time I realize that he won't...Well, I have to remember to breathe. You think I'd be used to burying friends by now," he said. He kissed the top of your head before tugging on Gabriel's arms, pulling him closer.

"That's not something you ever want to get used to," Gabriel said. He ran his fingers along Jack's arm.

"Yeah." Jack hugged you a little tighter. "I know. Just...I know."

"You've been awfully quiet." Gabriel looked at you.

"Just observing the super soldiers in their natural habitat surrounded by others of their kind..." Because as soon as you'd arrived, Andre had clammed up. And Gabriel had not continued discussing whatever business they were planning.

Gabriel snorted. "You're hilarious."
"I was keeping a lab journal. Day Three: They have an obsession with protein and biceps-

Jack flicked you between the eyes.

You clicked your teeth at him.

"Behave," Gabriel said. "I'm too tired to sort you two out tonight."

"You were pretty quiet," Jack said with a frown. "You didn't feel left out, did you? I know we weren't great about introducing everyone-

"I was a little slow, but this wasn't exactly a normal social occasion." You yawned. "I'm just tired. A week of funerals isn't exactly light recovery."

"Yeah." Jack exhaled. "I know. I'm looking forward to this vacation with you."

"Where are we going?" You asked rolling onto Jack's chest. "Come on, I need to pack."

Gabriel chuckled.

Jack just looked smug. "Well, I know you should bring some of that fancy lingerie you've been hiding. Other than that, everything's taken care of-

"So hiking boots? Climbing pitons? Bug spray?" You scowled as both men grinned at each other.

"I told you it would drive her nuts," Gabriel laughed.

"It's a surprise, sweetheart," Jack said. "That means, I'm not going to tell you." His tone was way too taunting. "Even if you make that cute pouty face and try to sulk under the blankets-

Groaning, you rolled off him, and tried to wiggle away as he dragged you back, hugging you tightly from behind.

"You're a jerk," you grumbled.

"I'm serious. Bring some of that pretty lingerie." His voice dropped an octave as you squirmed against him. "You won't regret it," he purred in your ear, one hand running along your hip.

"I understand you worrying about Jack overlooking something, but he has me double-checking his work and making sure our bases are covered," Gabriel said. "Relax, you little control freak."

"Pot, have you met Kettle?"

"I can appreciate surprises," he said smugly, and you vowed then to make him eat those words.

"Yeah, I'll do it," you said, studying the knife catalogue on your tablet. Shin had custom ordered your tanto from a smith in Japan. You thought about ordering the exact same model. It
would fit right in your hand, and you were used to the weight. Why change a good thing?

But that wouldn't fix everything. The new knife wouldn't be the same. You had earned your tanto, and blooded it. It wasn't just a piece of metal to you. Maybe it was all in your head, but your tanto had helped you survive a lot of things. It didn't seem quite right to assume that you could replace it so easily. And that smith now had a waitlist several months long. You put an order in anyway, because it was a solid model. But you needed something sooner.

"Really?" Tataryn perked up, setting his coffee aside. The two of you sat in the office, reviewing Blackwatch intel for anything relevant to the Mediterranean omnic issues. "I knew I could count on you!"

"I do have a little matter I need your help with," you said, not looking up from the tablet.

"Oh really? You clever vixen. You have your poor Fedya over the barrel as they say. Well, bring it on." Tataryn slapped his chest with an open palm. "I do not fear your shrewd negotiating power, or your vicious fighting skills, or even your penchant for insatiable lovemaking."

"Do you know where Gabriel is going next week?" You kept your eyes on the tablet, watching him the periphery, trying very hard not to smile.

Tataryn gave you a knowing look. "A well-earned vacation, I hear. And that is all I have heard."

"...Got a location?"

"Mmm, no." He flashed you that megawatt smile and you squinted through the brightness. "But I can make an educated guess."

"...How educated?"

"Not very," he admitted. "But if both the Strike Commander and the Blackwatch Commander are going to be offsite, they cannot wander too far. And they cannot go anywhere too public. Given your recent ordeal, I doubt they wish to visit the Mediterranean. But they will probably stay in Europe."

"Somewhere secluded, probably warm," you said, because they both knew how you hated the cold.

"They could take you to Morocco," Tataryn said. "North Africa isn't that far away."

"Portugal or Spain seem likely," you said. The Black Sea was farther off, and while Romania, Bulgaria, and other Eastern bloc countries were a possibility, you had a hard time picturing Jack choosing one of those. And he had served in Lisbon...

"Indeed," Tataryn nodded. "But like you, I am left in the dark." He shrugged. "I wish I could be more help, instead I will picture the three of you having lots of fun in tiny bathing suits."

"Really?" You rolled your eyes.

"No. I will probably be thinking of you without the bathing suits," he admitted.

You made a noise of exasperation. "All right, I do have something you can actually be helpful with."
"Oh, you finally want me to intervene with that omnic?" Tataryn beamed.

You groaned. "No, Tataryn. Tempting, but no."

"You can no longer resist the allure of my-"

"We need to place Távio. I'd like you to keep an eye out. I'm pretty ignorant of Overwatch squad composition, but you keep tabs on people-"

"You weren't going to offer him a place with you and Mihret? Or you and McCree?"

Tataryn paused. "Or are you trying to get me to take him on?"

"He needs a wider range of experiences," you said. "I'd rather he served with a competent Overwatch squad for a few months, then we can reevaluate his performance and his goals."

Tataryn stared at the wall. "Were you unhappy with how he conducted-?"

"No, I'm just thinking about his future." You shrugged. "He's still pretty raw. He needs more combat experience."

"Ah." Tataryn nodded. "I don't disagree. I will start looking." He took a breath. "I suppose I should warn you that Kseniya is not happy that I am missing her school visit. She may be...upset."

"What a surprise," you said, unable to reign in your sarcasm.

"But I have confidence in you, Lucky," Tataryn said. "You are actually quite good at reigning in misbehaving children."

"What?" You wrinkled your nose at him. "Tataryn, when have you seen me around children?"

"Well, you were a good instructor, but honestly, I've seen you handle Mihret and the Shimadas. Same thing really," he said, with a sober nod.

"What did you need me fo-oh." You entered Torby's workshop, stopping as you saw Jack and Gabriel both sitting there, looking smug. Torby gave you a flat unimpressed stare, like it was your fault his workspace had been invaded.

"The lasers aren't ready, don't even ask," he started brusquely and turned to unpack some boxes. "Now give me a moment-"

Jack sat on a crate, and patted his knee. You snorted and shook your head. No, you weren't sitting on his lap in Torby's lab. That was a terrible idea. Gabriel just laughed and scooted over, giving you space between them. You sat down and Jack placed a gloved hand on his chest, giving you a look of purely exaggerated dejection.

"Have you been goofing off all morning?" You asked, looking between both men.

"Had to take care of a few things." Gabriel hesitated. "Don't get excited, it's repaired, but not...combat-worthy. I'm sorry." He handed you your sheath back, the worn handle of your tanto
hand been rewrapped, the scratches buffed out.

"Thank you," you said, fighting the urge to snatch it out of his hands. "How'd you find the hilt and guard?"

"Jesse told me what happened before we left the cave," Gabriel said. "I dug around and it wasn't hard to find."

You bit your lip, staring at the weapon. Very carefully, you drew it from the sheath. The black blade had been scratched to hell and you blinked as you inspected the gold seams that marked where the blade had been broken.

"Genji suggested it," Gabriel said. "Kintsugi is normally done with ceramics, but I thought you might appreciate the symbolism."

Shin had mentioned kintsugi in passing. It was a Japanese art of repairing broken items with gold, to highlight the history and resilience of an object, rather than hiding the scars. The gold seams were beautiful, though they still hurt to look at. You swallowed a lump in your throat and sheathed the blade.

"It will still hold up in a pinch, but...I wouldn't go stabbing cyborgs with it," Gabriel said, his voice soft, his eyes questioning.

"Thank you," you said, hugging him. "Even if I can't use it, I'm just glad to have it back."

"We could get it reforged," Jack said. "But...it would be less work to get you an identical one from the same maker. I can-

"I already put in an order," you said. "Though it might take awhile..."

"All right, so Morrison brought me the funniest thing," Torby said, in a voice that didn't sound very amused. "A telescoping shock spear."

You had wondered what happened to that. You hadn't seen it lying around Jack's room, though you hadn't really gone searching for it.

"I don't specialize such things, but the craftsmanship was excellent. Morrison put me in touch with some weapons engineers, of extremely questionable origin, based out of China of all places...." Torby gave Jack a hard look. "And after discussing your...combat style, we forged a few prototypes."

Torby held up a six inch baton. "You are woefully underequipped to go against omnics and given all the shifty sneaking you do, your toolkit needs to be concealed. This can extend automatically or manually, though you have to shut off the safety lock if you want to use the manual setting." He flicked his wrist and the baton extended two feet. He hit another button and it began to hum. "Same tech as your EMP prostheses, but with a half a dozen charges." He shut off the pulse and retracted the baton, setting it, and a holster on the table.

You clapped politely.

Torby narrowed his eyes at you. "I'm not done."

You stopped clapping.

"You might need special shoes for this. At least till I get the trajectory fixed..." Torby
grunted. He set a blade on the table in front of you. In many respects it looked like your tanto, except for the extra thickness around the base of the blade, the heavy rubberized grip, and the extended guard. He squeezed the handle, and you blinked as electricity arced along the blade.

"Is that-?"

"Don't lick it. Don't touch it to anything electronic, unless you're trying to destroy the object. Don't let your idiot friends touch it on a bet. It will damage them."

"Is the grip safe for my pros-?"

"Of course. What kind of work do you think I do?" Torby scowled. "Try not to stab metal. The blade won't hold. So far, the polymers aren't deteriorating under the constant energy flux, but this is only a prototype. You're the first field tester-"

"He made you an electric carving knife," Gabriel said, a wicked glint in his eyes. "Should make cutting steak easier."

"If you're going to cut food or eat with it, at least turn off the current." Torby looked resigned to your questionable behaviors.

You picked up the tanto. The balance wasn't quite right and, the feel and weight were completely different from your original. It would take some getting used to. "But will it transform into a shovel?"

Torby gave you a long look, before cracking a grin. "You're an idiot." He set another carbine on the table. "Been trying to get the recoil on this right. Think it's a level you can handle comfortably."

You picked up the gun. It was heavier than your last one, but still manageable. "Does it rapid-fire rabid kittens?"

Jack coughed and Gabriel gave you a concerned look.

"...That project's on hiatus," Torby said with a straight face and Jack choked. "No, I just received quite a lot of funding specifically earmarked to modify the pulse rifle prototypes," he paused, giving both Jack and Gabriel sharp looks. "So that's an expensive piece of equipment. You should think twice about using it to block swords, or throwing it off a balcony, or forgetting it in a secret mountain Triad base-" Torby said, voice rising with each accusation.

Jack cleared his throat, turning very red. Gabriel just raised a brow, lips curved in amusement.

You stifled a snort. "I uh...I'll be careful."

"You better," he scowled. "It fires hitscan bursts, so you don't need to calculate a lead. Just point and fire."

"Oh," you said, trying to wrap your head around that bit of information. Were these time traveling bullets? Homing rounds made more sense, but you weren't sure how the tech worked.

"Not making EMP rounds for it because of all the delicate electronic parts. But the casing is hardened and I'm working on a grenade launcher attachment. For now, though, you'll have to make due firing pretty bursts of light."
"...What color?" You asked, because that was an important question.

"Seriously? Blue is the only color available right now, because of the laws of optical physics. This isn't a vanity project, Lucky. I'm not wasting resources so you can make your projectiles coordinate with your outfit."

"I'm sorry, I was just curious," you winced, shrinking in your seat. "Shooting bright lights is a bad idea on stealth missions."

"This isn't for stealth missions, Lucky. This is for when your questionable luck strikes and you need to kill big things fast. I've fitted the stock with a recoil reducer. It adds weight, but with the power on that thing, you'll need it. Your ammo is custom made, so don't try shoving just any rounds in there. You're going to want to take it down to the moving target range, because if you haven't been shooting hitscan, you have some adjustments to make."

"Thank you," you said, meaning it. "I'll go test these out right away."

The carbine did take some getting used to. The sounds were different: it clicked and had that high-pitched whine that regular guns did not. Jack and Gabriel both lingered on the range, watching you adjust your stance and sight it in. Both men made occasional observations, "you're shooting low and to the left" or "keep the stock flush against your shoulder to brace for the heavier recoil" - something you had not had to do with your last two carbines - but mostly they seemed content just to watch you work.

"Damnit, shouldn't stay," Jack said, noticing the growing crowd. "Have fun with your new toys."

"Don't sulk, Jack," Gabriel said, under his breath. "I know for a fact that you got some nice new toys too." His deep laugh let you know exactly what kind of toys Jack had bought for vacation, and your next shot went wide.

Both men smirked as they left the range, it took you a few breaths to get your heartbeat under control. Forcing yourself to ignore distractions, you focused on finishing sighting in your new gun. The recoil would make it harder to run and shoot, but you could do it. And you still had a pistol. This was for more dire situations. You'd probably get a big shoulder bruise if you weren't armored. Still, the hitscan shooting was an improvement you could get used to.

"What do you have there?" Shoal leaned against your booth, peeking in as you started packing up.

"Another Lindholm special," you said.

"Fancy." She eyed your gun speculatively. "I've seen that tech: the Strike Commander carries something similar." Unspoken was the fact that most rank and file agents would not have access to pulse rifles.

"Another experimental build," you said. "I've shot one of those big ones." You rubbed your shoulder. "The recoil would eventually dislocate something." You shrugged as you put the gun in its protective case. "You know how it is: Lindholm loans me tech. I take it out in the field. And then I get to write extensive reports on its field performance, how it compares to previous models,
"See, I stopped asking what exactly your job entailed a long time ago." She ran her fingers through her short red curls. "Like first I thought you were just another shady Blackwatch agent who happened to be good at paperwork. Which is fine, there is nothing wrong with that. But then you go around bodyguarding Morrison and using all these fancy gadgets straight out of an action movie. And then you take the romance out of it by explaining that you have to fill out post-action surveys and write polite reports for engineers."

"Well he made my prostheses," you said. "So I'm already cleared as a guinea pig."

Shoal looked at your left hand. You'd never taken off you gloves in front of her, but you knew that your students must have mentioned the outcome of the omnic sparring match. Shoal was too polite to flat out ask you about your fingers, but you could feel the curiosity radiating off her.

"So, what's up?"

"Mmm," Shoal paused. "So, I know you only kind of pay attention to rumor mill, because it is pretty ridiculous but-"

You groaned. "I'm not personally leading a strike force back to Greece to extract bloody revenge on the rogue omnis responsible. Távio already asked."

Shoal snickered. "Maeda Vargas wants to be you when he grows up. It's adorable."

You squinted at her.

"What? You're a good influence on him," Shoal sounded pleased. "Don't look so embarrassed, you big softy, you. The kid needs good role models. He lost his mothers in a fire. Lived with his grandparents till they died."

You knew this already, having actually read your students' personnel files. "So is this rumor about-?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. Though with the way he follows you around now, it might-" Shoal gave an apologetic shrug. "But that's kind of the hazard of being you."

You snorted. "Yeah."

"So apparently, you were SEP..."

You choked on your laugh. "What?"

"Well, there's a lot of speculation as to how you guys got such an elite rescue team: Commander Reyes went on the rescue mission to retrieve his favorite assistant and his protégée Agent McCree. Or the Strike Commander went on the mission to pick up his old buddy Rodriguez and maybe pay you back for all those fancy rescues you've pulled for him. Or you're secretly SEP and you're friends with both of them." Shoal looked vaguely amused. "And all those SEP people came up to you at Major Rodriguez's funeral..." She paused, looking a little uncomfortable.

"No, I wasn't sleeping with him," you said, rolling your eyes.

"I know that," Shoal said, frowning. "Rodriguez hadn't been stationed around here in years. But yeah, with your mysterious origins, dramatic exploits, and questionable name, some people are speculating that you were some kind of government experiment gone wrong. Or right."
You worked your jaw, trying to come up with an intelligent response.

"-You don't have to tell me, Lucky," Shoal said quickly. "I understand if it's classified. But I thought you should know."

"...Goddamnit," was all you could say.

Shoal laughed. "And just so you know, I don't care if you're a government secret project, or a Blackwatch assassin, or that you go around killing people while wearing nothing but a towel. You're a good agent, and you're fun to drink with. That's what counts in my book."

"Thanks," you sighed, rolling your eyes upward.

You had charge cartridges for your knife and baton. Torby had kept the recharge process simple, and you appreciated his thoughtful designs. The telescoping EMP baton was simple enough. You had the wrist flick down quickly, and it fit just fine on your belt.

The replacement knife was a different story. The electrified blade was unwieldy in your hands. Maybe you just needed time to get used to it. Maybe it was just a mental block. You were going to ask Genji to practice with you. He was fast enough to block your strikes and skilled enough to avoid getting hurt.

Genji took one look at the electric tanto and shook his head. "That won't be any good."

You shrugged, heart sinking. "Torby wants me to try it."

Genji snorted. "Lindholm should stick to turrets, power armor, and prostheses. His blades leave a lot to be desired."

"...I need something to fill that niche," you admitted. "I put in an order for a replacement tanto, but the waitlist is months."

"We will try some different things," Genji told you. "Bring that to the mats, and your original tanto. I'll meet you in twenty minutes."

You glanced at your brace.

"What Angela doesn't know won't get us in trouble," Genji said, looking very sure of himself.

You met in the Blackwatch gym, a little surprised to see Hanzo walking alongside Genji, both of them arguing in hushed voices. Genji carried a bulky canvas roll on his back. Hanzo was empty-handed, but still managed to look overburdened just by being there.

"Show him what you showed me," Genji said, setting the canvas pack down.
You drew the electrified knife from the sheath and squeezed the handle, watching sparks fly.

Hanzo's scowl deepened. "Give me that."

You worked hard not to roll your eyes as you handed Hanzo the blade.

"Balance is passable." Hanzo tapped the blade. "But this alloy is brittle. It won't hold up against bone or armor. You'll get a few uses out of it, but it's just as likely to shatter when you need it most. All for the novelty of electricity."

"Well, I do need more effective weapons against-"

"You never used your tanto against omnis," Genji said. "You're probably not going to start now."

"I do have other options in my toolkit," you said. The baton would be more effective.

Genji unrolled the pack. More than half a dozen blades lay in the multiple pockets. Genji picked the biggest - a full sized katana - and handed it to you.

You held it in one hand, weighing it carefully. It was heavy, and though you could swing it, you didn't have the skill to wield it like Genji.

"She has no swordsmanship training," Hanzo said, shaking his head.

"Is it comfortable?" Genji asked.

"Not really," you admitted.

Genji nodded, not looking surprised at all. He took the blade back. "Try this one." He handed you a lighter katana.

"Genji, she's not going to be able to use katana," Hanzo huffed.

Genji snapped something back in Japanese and Hanzo crossed his arms.

"I could get used to the weight," you said. But Hanzo was right, not that you were going to admit that out loud. You had minimal skill with a combat sword.

Genji swapped that katana for a short dagger, smaller than your tanto had been.

You shook your head. "Need something heftier."

The trial continued till Genji had you balancing two wakizashi. There was a two foot blade, and one just a few inches shorter.

"Not as good for stealth," you said.

"But short enough for you to use comfortably. You're not dueling people," Genji said, giving Hanzo a look. "You don't do fair fights."

"I'm not against carrying one on occasion, but I really preferred the tanto."

"You have more upper body strength than when you first arrived," Genji said. "You could use both. Keep your options open. That is the nature of growth."
You had the feeling that the underlying theme of this discussion had nothing to do with you. You just twirled the blade in your right arm, finding the weight and balance to be comfortable. It wasn't your tanto, but it could work at some point.

"Now pick one and go against Hanzo. He can test Lindholm's...creation. Don't worry, you're injured and probably won't hurt him."

You blinked and set down the longer blade.

Hanzo gave Genji a long, irritated look. Then let loose a stream of angry Japanese.

"Well, I guess I could do it, but I thought you were the better instructor."

Hanzo grumbled and raised the dagger.

"One third speed," Genji said.

You went slow, striking, countering, and feinting. The blade sat well in your hand, even if your fencing skills were very limited.

Hanzo grimaced with each strike, obviously disapproving of your form, the weapon in his hand, and whatever Genji was doing today.

"Faster." Genji smirked.

You sped up, Hanzo matching you easily. You stuck to basic drills, metal ringing as the blades made contact.

"How's it feel?"

"Comfortable enough."

"You could always ask Hanzo for lessons," Genji said, and you nearly dropped the blade.

"I uh...maybe?" You took a step back as Hanzo turned to glare at Genji.

"That's enough. Look at all these chips," Hanzo scowled, holding up the prototype. "I don't know what he was thinking-"

"He was trying to improve on her original. But it doesn't need it. It has served you well enough. You could branch out into using a wakizashi. But first you need to replace your tanto.

Why don't you let Hanzo see what you're used to?"

Genji certainly was chatty today. You drew the repaired blade, not missing how Hanzo's eyes widened at the gold seams.

He carefully took the blade from you, turning it over in his hands. He examined it, face stern in concentration. "I see," was all he said, and handed the blade back.

You looked at Genji.

"Who do you think would suit better?" He asked casually. "Hirakawa or Mizuno?"

"More likely Hasegawa or Yoshihara," Hanzo said.

"Kobayashi specializes in shorter blades."
Hanzo pursed his lips. "I'd have to think about it." He rose abruptly. "Tell Lindholm, this blade was subpar. I can't comment on the technology, but the blade itself won't hold up. You don't need fancy tricks. You need a dependable weapon with better temperance." He tossed his head and walked out of the gym.

You looked at Genji. "I don't want to impose-"

"Oh no, he needs a project," Genji said, carefully rolling up his blades. "And I need him out of my hair." He gave you an almost happy smile. "This is an excellent diversion. We just appealed to his personal pride and shining expertise, so now his perfectionist tendencies won't let him give this task anything but his full attention. Hanzo is one of the better resources you could turn to, and I won't let him pick anything too...extreme. I hope you don't expect results any time soon though."

"Thanks?" You said, wondering just what the hell you had unleashed.

"No, thank you," Genji said smugly, like he knew something you didn't.

You shook your head, wondering if you should just take Gabriel's K-bar.

You sat on your bed, opening the carefully big sealed padded envelope that Chang handed off before she left. Inside was an actual painting of the sketch from Christmas: Gabriel, Jack, and you sitting on the couch: you asleep on Jack's shoulder while Gabriel's arm extended around both of you. You could see the brushstrokes. It was an improved version of the digitally colored one he had sent you via email.

_We're all very glad you're OK. Really sorry about what happened. Thought I'd send this along. Hope you like it. Looking forward to seeing you next month. Maggie can't talk about anything else. I think Dad is going to be happy to see us go, just so he can get some peace and quiet._

There was another smaller envelope and you opened it to find pictures from Christmas. There weren't a lot of you, most of them were of Jack or Gabriel, and there was the ugly sweater family picture that you had managed to avoid. You studied a few of the candid shots. Jack smiling in his bright green sweater, his brow relaxed. Gabriel laughing uproariously at something someone said. Back in Indiana, they'd both been so relaxed. You hadn't realized just how rare that was back then. Lately, even when it was just the three of you together, there was always some kind of worry or strain on one of them. On you too, though you hadn't been nearly as carefree as they had been in Indiana.

You sighed, rubbing your forehead. The three of you needed this upcoming vacation. It wasn't just you. Both men were under a lot of stress. So even if Jack booked you a weird little beach shack with a leaky roof, you weren't going to complain. You were going to enjoy your time with them. You were going to make it count. And then you were going to come back refreshed, and pick a problem to fix. You rather liked the idea of it being Petras.
You sat on the transport, a little surprised by the half dozen modified fish torpedos onboard. These came armed, and not for the first time did you wonder where you were staying, and what kind of security measures were in place.

Gabriel rubbed your shoulders, and you felt your frown easing. "Don't worry, corazon. Jack won't bail on us. He's the one most excited about this trip."

"I'm sure I'd be more excited if I knew where we were going," you said. You rubbed your left arm. The splint was finally off, but it still felt weaker than it should.

Gabriel laughed. "He already messaged me that this will only take a few hours, they can't keep him, and he'll shoot his way out if he has to. We're to get checked in, get comfortable, and he'll be there with us tonight."

"Do we need to get him a second car rental?" You asked.

"Nah, we're cleared to land the Orca right outside the place."

"How about security detail and-"

"Relax, baby. It's taken care of." Gabriel stretched out in his seat, giving you an amused grin. "Unless there's a full invasion, we have five days away, and we're going to enjoy them."

"Sorry," you muttered. You leaned against Gabriel. "I don't like feeling...not useful."

"I see that," Gabriel said. "You know, your intrinsic value isn't a variable based on how much you accomplish in a recent timeframe, right?"

You shrugged. "...That's a hefty sentence with some serious jargon."

"Would you rather I say that you don't have to keep proving yourself over and over again? Because you've already done a lot and you should be proud of yourself. Jack and I are plenty impressed. Oh look, now you're embarrassed." He laughed at your expression. Worse, he wasn't wrong.

"Love you too," you muttered.

"And just because you've been on med leave, doesn't mean you haven't been doing work. Actively trying to get Maeda Vargas placed, writing Lindholm those weapons reports, and just...being there for those funerals. You've been working hard. Even if it doesn't feel like it."

You shrugged again. "Yeah, I guess."

"And you say I'm a harsh judge with impossible standards." Gabriel kissed the back of your neck.

That made you smile. "Yeah, you're right."

"What was that? Louder for the people in the back?"

You elbowed him. "Ten minutes into vacation and you're already ridiculous."

"We've all earned a break," he said, pulling his hat down over his eyes.

The trip was less than an hour. Gabriel had brought a large duffel bag, and tucked his K-bar in your extremely light pack. You appreciated the gesture.
As soon as the bay doors opened, you popped up, excited to see the sun and whatever Jack had picked out.

Gabriel put an arm around you, grinning as you descended the ramp.

The world around you was green enough, the day bright. You were in the mountains, and there was...snow on the ground. In fact, there was snow falling from the sky. You blinked, unsure if you could conceal your horror.

There was snow on the ground.

This wasn't a beach. This was...cold.

You just stared.

Gabriel patted your back, laughing when he saw your face. "Come on then." He seemed unsurprised by the climate.

You looked down at your bag, because you hadn't packed any winter coats or sweaters. Because you'd expected Praia de Tavira or Costa del Sol. Not...this.

"Come on, the inn is just up ahead. You can wear my hoodie if you want," he said, clearly amused by your distress.

Shaking your head, you trudged off the transport, giving the snow a vicious look.

Just...what exactly had Jack been thinking?

Chapter End Notes

Surprise medical bills (have to call and argue with coding at doctor's office tomorrow, because $200 for lab work that was supposed to be part of my annual but wasn't coded properly, is a fucking lot), friends who may or may not have cancer, and all the little things are kind of wearing me down. There will probably be some slight delays on updates.

Also, I'm writing smut, so that takes awhile. *facepalm* Bad timing all around.

Off to screech at the idiots. I mean, go to work.
Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

There had better be a damn good explanation for snow on your summer vacation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grim-faced and cold, you followed Gabriel across the grass to a gated complex. The Athena drones spread out, just floating around the walls. The snow wasn't heavy, it was now summer in the northern hemisphere. Just where the hell were you that it was snowing in the summer? And more importantly why?

The metal double doors were easily ten feet high, and etched with nature scenes. The gate had a flared ridged roof, looking strangely Japanese.

Shivering, you wrapped Gabriel's hoodie tighter around yourself, now trying to figure out where you were.

"Jack's going to be so sad that he missed this. Your face is hilarious." Gabriel laughed at you over his shoulder, eyes gleaming with delight.

The gates slowly opened, and you blinked, forgetting to give him a dirty look.

The tallest building was three stories, and it looked like everything had been constructed from wood and glass - giving the traditional architecture a modern upgrade. There were half a dozen buildings, all built in a distinctly Japanese style - oversized eaves, curved gables, and what looked like ceramic tiles - possibly with built-in solar panels. A bamboo clapper fountain knocked rhythmically against a stone basin in the central rock garden.

There were large wooden awnings built over pools of steaming water, bordered by aesthetically placed rocks and carefully sculpted gardens.

"...Just...where are we?" You asked, giving Gabriel a careful look.

"Iceland, home to a multitude of geothermal springs." Gabriel smirked. "Come on. Let's get our stuff inside. You can explore later. We have the whole place to ourselves."

There were small waterfalls bubbling into the steaming pools. A chiming sound echoed - water splashing artfully into a pot, ringing out almost as clear as a bell. Genji had mentioned having one once. You forgot what it was called, but he had drunkenly explained the mechanics. And you had drunkenly forgotten them.

"So this is a Japanese-themed...?"

"Onsen ryokan," Gabriel said. "A fancy one." He rolled his shoulders. Both Shin and Genji spoke fondly of the hot springs inns they'd stayed at in Japan. And while Shin's experiences hadn't been as decadent as Genji's, he had made you want to try them out, at least once.
An elderly Japanese man in a heavy quilted coat and light blue yukata came down the path and bowed in greeting.

You and Gabriel bowed back.

"Welcome! I'm glad you've arrived. I am sorry to admit that we had everything ready for your arrival, but then our mutual friend ordered a few upgrades."

"What kind of upgrades?" Gabriel asked, crossing his arms.

"Some luxury amenities that we don't normally offer," the man looked a little embarrassed. "Custom yukata, larger meal spreads, exclusive high-end spa treatments. All complimentary, of course."

"Ah, as long as it's not too much trouble," Gabriel said, relaxing a little. "I understand that our "friend" can be overwhelming at times."

"Oh no, not at all," the host said quickly, obviously unwilling to even imply anything negative about this "friend." "I just regret not being more prepared. Do not trouble yourself. I realize you must be hungry and tired from your journey. Please, may I help you carry your bags to your rooms?"

"We can manage, thank you," Gabriel said, politely.

"Then I will start on the evening meal right away. There are snacks in the house and I can make something now if-"

"We're early. You're fine," Gabriel said. "We can use the kitchen in the guesthouse too. We'll be waiting for our other friend to join us anyway."

"Ah, well, please, make yourselves comfortable. All the facilities are open for your exclusive use. Your security team has already been through."

"Thank you, Mr. Ito," Gabriel said. "Our other friend will be arriving in a few hours. There is no need to rush for the dinner."

"Of course. The security has been keyed to his biometrics. I will be staying the caretaker facilities on the side of the property. Are you sure you don't need daily tidying or laundry-"

"We will request service if it is necessary. Meals and privacy are our main concern," Gabriel said, not unkindly.

"Of course, Mr. King." The man bowed. "We are honored to have you here." He glanced at you. "You and your wife."

You blinked. "We-"

"We are honored to be here." Chuckling, Gabriel put one arm over your shoulder. "Come on dear, let's get changed."

Mouth moving, but no sound coming out, you let Gabriel drag you into a two story building. It reminded you a little of that hunting lodge, the one you and Genji had stormed in Nagano in your first meeting with Hanzo: the calligraphy on the walls, the tatami floors, wood and paper sliding shoji screens. It was laid out like a nice house - there was very large round kotatsu in the center of the room. There were also western chairs and large view screens, probably with
trillions of things to watch, none of them good. A very large bar had been built into the wall, various bottles of liquors sitting on the illuminated shelves. Both of you took off your shoes and put them on provided shelf. There were pretty indoor sandals that you slipped on.

You inspected the kitchen quickly, the refrigerator stocked with a variety of packages, all bearing a "CLEAR" seal. There were fresh fish, sealed steaks, and carefully packaged fruit. The pantry had also been "cleared" by the security team.

"Let's set our stuff down," Gabriel said and you followed him up the stairs.

An Athena drone hovered in the bedroom. It was a large space, huge flat view screen, gaming consoles, a massive futon made up like an elegant nest. Round paper lanterns hung from the ceiling. There were a few low end tables, but mostly the room had been taken up by the orgy-sized futon with thick green covers. Heavy blackout curtains hung over the windows, and while they distracted from the aesthetic, you appreciated the promise of privacy. There was a set of floor to ceiling curtains and you pushed them aside, finding a glass sliding door that opened to a balcony overlooking a fenced in rock pool, steam pouring off the surface.

"Perimeter is clear! No explosives, unauthorized weapons, toxins, or surveillance equipment detected. The staff consists of three omnics and Mr. Ito. Please enjoy your vacation!" She chirped and floated back down the stairs.

"I thought you didn't like having her around," you said after she'd gone back outside.

Gabriel shrugged. "She's...not so bad, once you make the rules clear," he said, rubbing his shoulder. "Hopefully, she doesn't blow our cover-"

"And what was that all about, "Mr. King?" You poked him in the chest.

"It's called an "alias," Mrs. King," he laughed. "If Gérard hasn't explained those concepts to you, I worry about the quality of your espionage training."

You shook your head. "That's not what I meant-"

"Well, if you'd come late, Jack and I would be Mr. & Mr. King. Or I guess if I'd been the last one, you and Jack could Mr. and Mrs. Strike. Strike Commander Strike," Gabriel laughed to himself and you rolled your eyes.

"That was a Jack joke."

"It wasn't that bad," Gabriel gave you a mock scowl. He set his bags down and looked around.

You put your bag down too. "This has to be...expensive," you said, eyeing the calligraphy scrolls and lacquered screens. "Renting out the whole facility? Who's this "friend?" And how did Jack even know-?"

Gabriel smirked. "I told you he had help. But to his credit, he figured you'd want to do some kind of hot springs tour. We both noticed how much you enjoyed the hot tub. And you did complain that you never got to soak and relax at the day spa."

You also wondered if Athena had given them some hints about the travel conversations the two of you had in the past.

"And are you sure about the discretion of this place?" Mr. Ito didn't look untrustworthy per
se, but you were Blackwatch. Being paranoid was your job.

"Apparently, he's retired On Sing."

It clicked then. Oh Feng, that spazzy little sneak. And Jack. He'd managed to hide it from you. With Gabriel and Athena's help of course. You felt yourself smiling, not caring that it was stupidly wide and ridiculous.

"-married an Icelandic man, fell in love with the geothermal springs here, and decided to open a Japanese-style ryokan for very exclusive use. On Sing gave him a generous loan, and while I know we are being undercharged for this visit, we aren't staying for free. But your Zhai Feng seemed unnaturally excited about Jack and you taking a vacation." Gabriel paused. "Athena and my team detected no surveillance equipment..."

"Feng is just..." Living vicariously? Boundlessly enthusiastic? Too rich and unpredictable for her own good? "A supportive friend," you said, choosing the diplomatic words. "Is this one of those morally questionable things? You know? Taking trips from corporate bigwigs/Triad bosses?"

"I know how it looks, but it will be very hard to prove a connection between Jack and On Sing. This place is squeaky clean. I ran the financials myself." Gabriel crossed his arms. "Why? Do you really think she'll try to leverage Jack-?"

"No," you said. "Not at all. But yeah, it does look bad."

Gabriel shrugged. "Personally, I think she owes you and Jack for haring off to Mongolia to save her ass, so I have no trouble accepting her help in setting this up as a "thank you" gift, provided that's all it is."

"So, you know the baths are all nude, right?"

"That was a selling point," Gabriel said smugly. "And they have the pretty robes you can walk around in all day. I'm ready to get changed. Starting today this is a no-pants zone." He pulled off his shirt and opened a drawer in one of the end tables, pulling out a geometric-patterned hunter green cotton yukata and silvery hanten, a half coat to wear over it. "...You know, I think your friend picked the outfits."

You opened one drawer and found a too-large silvery gray yukata with a navy blue hanten. That was definitely for Jack. So you opened the third drawer and found a black yukata patterned with violet and blue butterflies and a lilac hanten. Underneath it was a much-shorter-than-decent purple and white yukata, and you raised your brows. "I think you're right."

Gabriel was already stripping down. He pulled on the robe, tied the black belt to secure it, and slipped on the overcoat.

"Fancy," you said.

"Put yours on," Gabriel said, adjusting his clothes.

You changed quickly, though it took you a few tries to get the robe tied on shut. It probably wasn't correct, but it wasn't falling open either. The lightweight fabric was pretty and comfortable. Remembering the snow, you put on the coat too.

"There should be towels downstairs," Gabriel said, looking you over with approval. "In case you want to do some fighting-"
"You're hilarious." You admired Gabriel's frame in the pretty robes. "Genji is going to be very jealous," you chuckled.

"Don't care about that," Gabriel leaned forward and kissed you, teeth grazing your bottom lip. "How do you feel?"

"I...need to explore before I give you my opinion," you said, a little breathless.

Gabriel laughed softly. "Is that so? What do you want to explore? I thought you knew every inch of my body by now, at least the important ones. Or did you want to test out that futon?"

"I meant the resort," you said, shaking your head.

You found a large stack of massive fluffy green towels in the closet downstairs. There was a brochure on the bar and you thumbed through it, inspecting the variety of natural rock springs. There was a big open air spring. There was a large wooden pavilion built over a deeper manmade pool. There was shallower soaking pool beside it, under another pavilion. There was a sauna. You didn't need to read any more. You just needed to go get in the water.

And of course there was a small comic detailing the Japanese style of bathing: shower and scrub first, till you were clean, then go soak. It was a sensible order of operations.

Gabriel came up behind you, carrying a caddy of soaps and lotions. "Your meddling friend sent us a whole damn spa set." He didn't sound displeased though. "Want to wash up on the back porch and try out our private soaking pool?"

"...I want to check out the big ones," you said.

Gabriel laughed softly, leaning over to brush your hair aside and kiss the back of your neck. "Why don't we wait for Jack? He'll feel left out if we do all the exploring without him."

You winced, feeling a little guilty at your thoughtlessness. "Yeah, you're right." You should stick around the house in case he got here sooner rather than later. "I'm kind of hungry. I guess I'll grab us something light-

"Go wash off and soak. I'll get us something and be out there in a minute. I see how you keep eyeing that pool."

"If you're sure..." you said, already walking toward the back door, carrying the soaps and shampoos. You found three pairs of wooden sandals by the door and switched out your inside shoes.

There was wooden deck directly under the balcony and a small wooden shower stall with a stool. A fence enclosed the area behind the house, with a large wooden pavilion built over the small spring. Rocks and carefully cultivated shrubs decorated the area. Some were dusted in snow. Water bubbled up from a rock formation on the side. It was about three meters long and three meters wide, with raised flat rocks around the edges so you could set your stuff down.

The air was cold, even if the steam warmed you. You stripped down quickly, scrubbing off in the shower stall. Thankfully the water came out hot. Feng had sent some "milk-scented" shower
gel, not that it actually smelled anything like milk, and that was probably a good thing.

You left the soaps in the stall and carried your towel and robe down to the edge of the pool. Dipping a toe in the water, you found it just on the hot side of comfortable. Well, it was too cold to stand around. You got in quickly. There was shelf about two feet down that that you could sit on, but you went a little deeper, till you were submerged up to your neck. You leaned against the shelf, sighing happily as the hot water enveloped you.

"Comfortable?" Gabriel strode to edge of the water and set down two travel mugs, a plate of sliced melon, and his own towel.

"Very," you sighed. "I'll just stay here for the rest of the trip."

"Drink." He tapped a cup. "In the hot water, you'll dehydrate without even noticing."

You sipped the cool water, knowing that he remembered how you managed to make yourself sick after the spa attack. It was the little things. "It's bad manners to eat in the bath."

"Yes, but who's going to tell?" Gabriel asked, raising a brow.

"Good point."

He was still dressed, and he eyed your folded *yukata* briefly, before heading back up to the deck to rinse off.

You closed your eyes, just savoring the relaxing effect the heat had on your tense muscles. Yes, you needed a huge bathtub. Or one of these. Just soaking in this much hot water seemed unspeakably decadent.

The water rippled and you opened one eye to see Gabriel sliding into the water beside you.

"Enjoying yourself?" He picked up the plate of melon and offered you a bite. You took it, the fruit juicy and cool in your mouth. He leaned over to kiss you after, his lips sweet like the melon.

"Very much so," you sighed, resting your head against his shoulder. "Thank you."

"You looked so upset when we landed," he said, his smile easy and light. "I should have taken a picture."

You shrugged, too relaxed to care about that now. He rubbed the back of your neck and you curled up against him.

"Falling asleep already?" He asked, nipping your ear.

"It's so comfortable," you groaned. "And you won't let me drown. Besides, I know how to float."

"Come here." He put you in his lap, his arms around you. "We can't stay in here too long," he said.

"You're not the boss of me."

Gabriel chuckled. "We are off-duty. So I'm not." He didn't sound the least bit disappointed though.
Eyes falling shut, you let yourself drift.

The firm pressure on your thighs had you wiggling, but you grumbled, not opening your eyes. Something brushed against your clit and you stiffened. You tried to pull away, but you were locked in place, a familiar solid heat against your back.

"Want me to stop?" Gabriel's voice was low in your ear, one thick finger rubbing against your lower lips.

"No. But we shouldn't-" Your breath hitched and you opened your eyes, still in his lap in the soaking pool. "The caretaker-"

"He's working and this area is fenced off. Doesn't mean he won't hear you though. You'll just have to work extra hard to keep quiet," Gabriel purred in your ear. He pushed a thick finger inside you, and you bit your lip, whining softly.

"Gabriel-"

"Shh," he murmured. "When you say my name like that, it just makes me want to play rough." His other hand squeezed your breasts, and you shuddered against him, two fingers now inside you, his thumb rubbing your clit. "Haven't seen you this relaxed in awhile." He kissed the side of your neck and you arched against him. He scissored his fingers inside you, stretching you and you cried out in surprise.

"Goddamnit!"

Laughing, Gabriel withdrew his fingers. "Turn around, corazon. I want to watch you."

Shakily, you spun around, straddling his lap, his erection pressed against your stomach. "You're a bad influence."

"Yes," he agreed, hands sliding down your hips. "The worst. I need the love of a good man and a good woman to help me change my ways."

"...Well, we're both shit out of luck then," you laughed, nuzzling his cheek. "Jack's an asshole and I'm dubious on the best of days. And maybe I like how you just how you are right now."

"Good enough for me," Gabriel kissed you again.

The water made it easy to position yourself over him. Very slowly, you slid down his length, teeth clenched as you took him all the way inside you. Gabriel dragged you against him, his mouth covering yours, muffling your moans.

He rocked his hips and you clung to him, his girth leaving you deliciously full. "Look at you, all eager and needy in my lap. We don't use this position enough." He thrust slowly and you buried your face in his chest, whimpering as he stretched you out. Even when he was gentle, the intensity still left you weak.

You bit your lip. You needed something like this: a giant jacuzzi, a hot tub, a personal hot
spring. That way you could do this more.

Gabriel chuckled. "You feel so good around me. And you're trying so hard to be quiet-" He tilted your chin up, tongue slipping into your mouth as he kissed you hungrily. "Just want to see you coming around me. Then I'll take you upstairs and we can try out the bedding-"

The water lapped against your sides, steam curling off your skin as you slowly rode him. Gabriel slid smoothly in and out of you, head dipping down so he could suck on your nipples. His skin was slick and so very warm. He was in no hurry and you appreciated the languid pleasure gradually increasing with each stroke.

"More," you sighed, squeezing him tighter.

"Whatever you want." There was no sharpness in his smile, and he had none of the worry lines you were used to seeing etched on his brow, just easy smiles and tender looks. Gabriel's unguarded expression made your heart stutter.

He rubbed your clit, and you covered your mouth with one hand, a squeak escaping your lips.

"Going slow now, but later, I'm going to fuck you into those mats," he growled in your ear. "And you can scream as loud as you want then. In fact, I'll be disappointed if you don't." He began to bounce you, his strokes speeding up.

Gabriel and Jack couldn't help talking dirty. You didn't mind.

"Can't wait for Jack to get here," he purred in your ear. "He's been looking forward to this all week. Given how much you're liking this, you're going to have to think up a nice "thank you" for him. Don't worry, If you're having trouble, I'll help..."

"Gabriel, please," you panted. "Can't-"

"So close already?" He groaned, voice growing raw. "You like doing it out here that much, huh?" He rolled his hips and you dug your nails into his chest. "I know Jack likes fucking outdoors too. It's the farmboy way. Later we can both bend you over the edge of the pool. Love it when you're all slippery and relaxed. You won't have to worry about getting caught. I know you won't be so loud with my cock in your mouth-" His fingers sped up and you squealed. He kissed you quickly, cock, fingers, and tongue all pushing you closer to your release.

And the thought of Jack out here, fucking you from behind while you sucked Gabriel off, was too much. Pressed against Gabriel's body, you trembled, the orgasm pulsing through your core in slow, steady waves. Gabriel gradually stopped moving, letting you cling to him as you came.

Face tucked in the crook his neck, you breathed slowly as your heartbeat too loud in your ears. Gabriel rubbed your back, his cock still stiff inside you.

"Do you need a moment?"

"Yeah. I...melted, in a blissful way," you exhaled.

"You're very warm," he said, kissing your cheeks. "We shouldn't stay in here much longer."

"OK," you sighed, making no move to get off of him.
Shaking his head, Gabriel reached back and grabbed one of the cups. He handed it to you and you drank slowly, the cool water sweeter and more refreshing than you expected. After you set the cup down, he lifted you off his lap, kissing the tip of your nose.

"Let's go upstairs. You can rest if you need to-"

"Want to take care of you," you said.

"Then we have to get out of the water."

Giving an exaggerated and longsuffering groan, you climbed out of the water. The air was cold, and the shock of it cut through your hazy mind. But your skin still radiated heat, and the air was a brisk, energizing shot through your veins. You weren't so tired now. Quickly, you toweled yourself off before you wrapped back up in your yukata.

Gabriel climbed out, getting dressed as well. He picked up the plate and cups. You plucked a chunk of sweet fruit off the platter and offered it to him. Gabriel took it gently, giving you a crooked smile.

"Let's go upstairs," he said.

The bedroom was the target destination, but Gabriel kept trapping you against the kitchen counter, stealing kisses, and clutching you against him. You shoved him off, laughing, and he nearly dropped the plate of melon.

"I thought you said "upstairs!"

"I did. So move your sweet ass." But then he caught you around the waist, his knee sliding between your thighs.

"Can't when you're-" You squirmed as he nibbled on your shoulder. "You're doing this on purpose!"

"And?" He said, voice smooth and full of promise. "I just want to play, hermosa. You're always so serious..."

"I'm the serious one?" You shot him an incredulous look. "Look here, Mr. Surly-Face..."

"Mean nicknames? I'm wounded, chica. Aren't you having fun?" He ground against you, chest pressed firmly against your back, and you whined softly, squeezing your legs together. One hand came up and roughly fondled your breasts through the yukata. "What's the hold up? You don't want to go upstairs?" His fingers traced your lips.

You bit him, hard. Because he was being difficult. Because it was funny. Because you definitely wanted to go upstairs right now and he was delaying you both.

Gabriel grunted and released you. "You brat." His laugh was rough and cheerful. "Now you're in for it-"

You made a break for the stairs, stumbling mid-step when he caught up to you and slapped your ass. "Gabriel!"
He grabbed your ankle and you kicked his hand away as he tripped you at the top of the stairs. You climbed to your feet, giggling as he swore. You made it three steps past the top before he pounced on you, pushing you onto the futon, your legs tangled up in your long robe.

"Damnit!" You swore as he pinned you to the cushions. He lay on top of you, his chest firmly against your back.

"Now I have you right where I want you," he purred, cock pressed against your ass. "Thought you could get away, huh?"

"No, why would I want that?" you panted, grinning over your shoulder as you rubbed back against him.

"So you just like having me chase you?" Gabriel rumbled, sounding pleased. His beard rubbed against your shoulder as he kissed the side of your neck.

"Guess so." You wiggled out from under him, then rolled sideways onto your back, to avoid his grab. Snarling, Gabriel lunged and dropped back on top of you, his elbows trapping your hips, his weight on your thighs. You enjoyed his slightly frustrated look.

"Am I going to have to tie you up?" He asked, kissing your stomach.

You just laughed, propping yourself up on your elbows. "I thought you wanted to play. And we're messing up the bedding--"

Gabriel dragged you toward him, lifting your legs over his shoulders. He pushed your yukata up around your hips, and flicked his tongue against your slit.

You arched against him, eyes rolling back as his tongue slid inside you. His beard rubbed against your sensitive skin, and you squirmed, hands tangling in his hair.

"I thought we were going to take care of you next." It was a struggle to keep your voice even.

"We'll get to that soon enough," Gabriel said, nipping your inner thigh. "Feel like doing this first. Unless you don't want me to..." He looked up at you, brown eyes gleaming with amusement.

"I didn't say that."

"Good." To your surprise, he took your hands in his bigger ones, pressing them against the futon. Then he dipped his head between your thighs and began to suck on your clit. You tried to wriggle away, but he held you flat against the bed. You whimpered as he hummed around you, the vibrations shooting straight to your core.

"Want your fingers, your cock, need you inside me," you panted, already chasing your release.

"Later," he rasped, mouth slick with your juices. "Love how you taste, hermosa. Love hearing you beg for me. You're so cute right now, all warm and soft from the bath. And I haven't forgotten that you like holding hands when you come."

"Didn't think you'd be so sweet."

"I don't have to be," he said, his smile wicked.
You shivered as he sucked on your inner thigh, his tongue teasing you now, his mouth everywhere but on your clit. You strained against him, but his grip on your wrists remained firm. You stayed flat on the ground. His tongue would wiggle across your folds, and then deep inside you, and just as you started to get close, he would stop.

"Please," you said, voice cracking.

"So polite." His dark eyes gleamed with mischief. "What do you want, baby girl?"

"I want to come, you jerk. Stop teasing me."

"But I'm enjoying this. I could do it for hours," he laughed, voice low. "Besides, thought you didn't want me to be "so sweet." I'm just trying to give you what you want, you fickle thing."

"Stop teasing me, please," you panted. "Please, papi." You squeezed his fingers, whining softly as the blade of his tongue dragged against you, the pressure on your clit increasing. You squeezed your thighs around his head and he went harder, switching between firm licks, hard suction, and that infernally teasing humming.

He held you tight against the bedding, giving you no space to move. You were helpless to do anything besides receive his care. Your legs tensed, feet flexing, toes curling. He sucked harder on your clit, tongue pressed rigidly against you, working you closer and closer to another release.

You started babbling then, telling him how much you needed him, how much you loved this, how much you liked holding his damn hands. Your nerves burned, though the ache inside your core increased. The pressure on your clit intensified. Friction, warmth, and the feel of his mouth had you coming on his face. Your eyes rolled back, hips shaking, voice breaking as you cried his name. This time he didn't stop his ministrations. He just kept going, obviously hearing your pleas, and not giving a damn. The pleasurable heat sharpened into fire and you shrieked as he kept up the pressure.

You were a keening, twitching mess when he finally released you, aftershocks still running through your body.

Gabriel chuckled, lifting his head. His face was damp and he leaned forward, kissing you hard. You tasted sweet and tangy on his tongue. His loosened his grip your fingers then, taking a moment to kiss the knuckles on each hand.

"Too much," you panted and he touched his forehead to yours.

"Lies." Gabriel stroked your stomach, never breaking eye contact. His beard glistened with your juices and you swallowed roughly. "We're just getting warmed up."

"You're just insatiable. You and Jack both."

"What's wrong? Need a break?" Gabriel asked, laying on his side next to you. "Didn't realize you were so delicate. Such a frail little-"

"Shut it." Giving him a dirty look you shoved him onto his back and he grinned up at you, expression cocky.

"Oh, is that how it's going to be?"

You didn't answer, you just straddled his thighs, freeing his thick cock from the confines of the robe. It was heavy and dribbling with precum and you gave it a wet kiss, licking the head. His
skin was deliciously warm and sensitive.

"Thought you wanted me inside you," he said hoarsely, fingers gripping the blankets.

"My mouth doesn't count?" You asked, all mock innocence.

"I think we both know what the end game is. But feel free to pretend like you don't want it. Makes it all the more fun when you're begging." The bastard was shameless, and you loved it.

You responded by sucking on the tip, watching him shudder, his eyes fluttering shut as you swallowed him down, his velvety cock filling your throat. You bobbed your head, working your way to the hilt. But he remained silent, even as you scraped your teeth against the shaft, your nails digging into his hips.

"If you want to get rough, hermosa, you better remember that I give as good as I get." Impatience colored his tone.

You released his cock, giving him a hard look, one that would have had your students quaking in their boots. Instead, Gabriel's smile widened, his amusement all too clear.

"You're so pretty," he sighed, reaching forward to pat your face. "So proud and vicious. Come on baby. You don't have to prove anything to me. Just want to see you riding me. We can be as loud as we want this time. Do you like that? Hearing me come undone, corazon?"

You bit your lip, watching his chest rise and fall with shallow hard breaths. Sweat trickled down his neck. He wasn't as unaffected as he liked to act.

"What do you want?" Your voice was raw and you squeezed his cock.

"Want to be inside your silky little pussy," he groaned. "I've been patient, baby. Weren't you going to take care of me next? Haven't I been good for you?" There was an almost desperate edge to his words, and your breath hitched. Gabriel didn't usually ask like this. He just overwhelmed you with lust or a well-timed, completely sincere, emotional sucker punch.

You were already wet enough to take him. Raising your hips, you locked eyes with him, watching him grit his teeth in anticipation. Then you dropped down onto him, your hands pressed against his stomach, bracing yourself as you took him to the hilt.

"Fuck!" Gabriel's head fell backward. He arched beneath you, briefly raising his hips and you off the floor. You stiffened and he reached out, steadying you as he dropped back into the bedding.

Breathing fast, you planted your knees on the floor. He groaned, core muscles tightening as he rose a few inches off the mats, resting his weight on his elbows. You could see the smarmy remark forming on his lips.

So you began to move, not giving him the chance to speak. You rode him hard, pulling yourself halfway off his cock before taking him all back inside again. Gabriel gripped the blankets, rolling his hips as he tried to speed up. You just moved with him, only taking him at your pace.

He snarled at you, words guttural and not all in English. You weren't sure about some of those threats, but you didn't care, it was worth it to have him under you, thrashing and swearing. Teeth clenched, muscles taut, he watched you, the harsh look on his face promising savage retribution.
"I like being on top too," you moaned. "I can go as fast or slow as I want, and you just have to take it." That wasn't exactly true: you had more leverage, it was easier for you to control how much of him you let fill you. But it was an advantage, not a guarantee of success.

"Is that what you like?" Gabriel asked, voice throaty and dangerous. "Teasing me? That's a dangerous game."

"You've given me a taste for it," you said, swatting his hand away from your clit. "No, Gabriel. I'm going to outlast you this time." You squeezed your inner muscles, and he swore, fists clenching at his sides. "I'm going to ride this cock till you're coming inside me. Love how messy you get. Yeah, I like it sweet and gentle." You lifted one of his hands to your lips, kissing the scarred knuckles. "But you're right, I am proud and vicious, and you've earned this. So lie back and enjoy it."

Gabriel groaned beneath you, thrusting upward as you focused on taking his whole shaft. Your ass slapped against his thighs, the slick sounds of sex echoing through the room. You loosened his robe, raking your nails down his chest and he arched again, dark nipples hardened into stiff peaks.

"Come on, baby. I love it when you raw me. Love how you stretch me out, fuck me senseless, and just keep going. I can't wait to repay the favor. Because some time soon, Jack and I are going to ambush you again. And this time, he isn't going to distract me."

"Big talk," Gabriel gasped, his cock twitching inside you. "Looking forward to seeing you try."

You leaned forward, and bit him hard, ass bouncing as you sped up.

Strangled curses barely came out of his throat, and Gabriel wrapped one arm around your waist, hips bucking faster as he dug his heels into the bedding. You tried to push back against him, to regain control, but he held on to you, cock driving harder into your slick pussy.

"Couldn't take it any more?" You teased between rough gasps. "Need to fill me up that badly? Go on then, papi. We both know how much you like coming inside me. I like it too, how it feels, how sloppy you get me, how you and Jack both want to keep fucking me till you're oozing out of all my holes—"

With a guttural moan, he buried his face in your chest, tightening his grip on you as he sprayed his seed inside you. He held on tight, rolling his hips for a good few minutes, and breathing hard. Groaning, he dropped onto his back, one arm still curved possessively around your waist.

"You're going to pay for that," he said his voice rough from exertion.

"I know," you sighed, leaning over to kiss him. "That's a bonus." You lifted yourself off him, not missing how his eyes focused on your pussy and cum-stained thighs, a satisfied smile on his lips.

"Is that so?"

The world went sideways and suddenly you were on your stomach, ass in the air, Gabriel's hands on your hips.

"Let's see how many bonus rounds you can handle." He laughed, already twitching against your thighs. "Don't think you'll be so cocky for very long, hermosa."
You buried your face in the blankets, cursing as Gabriel's cock battered at your sensitive walls. He kept slapping your ass and you shrieked, each strike making you clench around his shaft.

You gripped the blankets, hips moving involuntarily, still trying to match his rhythm. You were in no position to keep up, but he seemed more interested in coaxing reactions out of you than reducing you to putty. And you were very well aware of how easily he could do both.

Somewhere along the line he'd stripped off the *yukata*. You were technically still wearing yours, though most of it was bunched around your hips, the belt loose, your exposed breasts pressed against the comforter.

"Wasn't planning on wrecking you on the first night, but you make it so damn hard to resist-
" His hand slid between your thighs and began to stroke circles around your clit.

"Goddamnit, Gabriel!"

"So loud too," he groaned as began to thrust harder, every other stroke going deep.

A thump caught your attention and you froze. You raised your head, eyes widening as the bedroom door slid open.

Jack stood there in jeans and a hoodie, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, his hair mussed. He took one look at you and his gaze darkened. He tossed the bag onto the ground and stalked forward, still wearing his outdoor shoes.

"*Amor,* Gabriel breathed, leaning forward to kiss the latecomer.

"Babe." Jack dropped to his knees beside you.

Gabriel sped up, groaning into Jack's mouth.

You angled your head so you could watch them, clenching as Jack gripped Gabriel's curls. When he finally came up for air, his cheeks were pink. He leaned over and cupped your chin, and kissing you hard, his teeth grazing your lips. You moaned against him, Gabriel thrusting harder inside you, determined to drive you over the edge.

Jack sank back on his heels, the bulge in his jeans very apparent. "Look at you two. You're so fucking beautiful. Best thing to walk in on." He petted your cheek. "Don't stop now."

Gabriel's fingers slipped between your thighs, and the next stroke had bruising force behind it. He pounded you into the blankets. Your back bowed, fingers clawing at the mats. You wailed, eyes locked on Jack's, his smile somewhere between dazed and enraptured.

"That's it, let's give Jack a good show, *hermosa*. Come all over my dick, so he can see just how well I've been taking care of you-"

Your muscles clamped down around Gabriel squeezing him hard, the intensity making your knees buckle. You could feel the spasms trying to drag him deeper inside you. Gabriel embraced you from behind, holding you too tightly as he filled you once more.
Panting, you sprawled boneless on the ground.

Jack stroked your hair. "Sweetheart, it's taking all my self control not to jump you right now."

"Give me a moment-" you rasped as Gabriel pulled out. "We'll take care of you next."

"No. Mr. Ito said dinner was almost ready. He's bringing it over soon." Jack rubbed your back. "Later. You need time to recover."

You lifted your head, a little worried. "Are you...feeling OK?"

Jack kissed you hard, his fingertips digging into your skin. "You have no idea how badly I want you both. But I have plans for tomorrow." His lips twitched, and hands lingering on your shoulders. "And a little anticipation will just make it sweeter."

Chapter End Notes

Smut takes forever to write, unless it writes itself. Which sometimes happens, but not usually. After vacation, we may not see smut for awhile, because writing this was hard and slowed everything down.

I have been to a few Japanese bathhouses and one medium-range hotel/bathhouse. But I was a dumb kid who didn't entirely appreciate the awesomeness of the baths and saunas. The real highlight for me was running around the hotel in a yukata playing video games with my cousins. Sure, I didn't speak a lick of Japanese, and their English and Chinese weren't very good, but we had fun. (Though I burned through 1000 yen waaaaay too quickly, because several of the games cost 100 yen each.) (To be fair, I was with extended family and made sure to take off my glasses, because I didn't really want to see any of them naked.) So, this is some of my nostalgia combined with fantasy. Sorry guys.

Playing the waiting game on the medical bills, because the US system is shit. Had my insurance and the hospital billing network on the phone at the same time, and both agents were super uncomfortable, because I made them explain some charges that apparently I shouldn't have received. But I have to call back later this week for the hospital to "inquire" about them. Because they're not going to call me back, even though they're in the wrong. (I spent Monday playing phone tag with my insurance, the hospital network billing system, the doctor's office, and the out-of-state lab itself.)

Meanwhile, I have to wait for the doctor's office to get back with me on the lab tests that were coded wrong and the ONE person (they have like a dozen people in that office at any given time, but don't ask me what they do), is out for the next two weeks. I didn't have anything especially fancy done. I had an annual, which is considered preventative care. No rare diseases. No gushing wounds. Just "hey, we need to make sure your lady parts are working how they're supposed to."

Anyway, I've come to terms with the fact I have this bill, need to take my argument up on four different fronts. And I'll probably have to pay some of it. Fine. But now I'm too pissed (and poor) to just eat the cost.
My friend is awaiting her tests and I just...yeah. She's pretty stressed.

My dogs are fine, thankfully. I can only handle so many things going wrong at once, before I start trying to time-travel-sleep through my problems. "If I sleep for 48 hours, maybe this problem will go away? No? OK, make it 72."

My cousin is still fighting the lawnmower. He took the carburetor out, cleaned it, and it worked great for an hour before it died. New spark plugs maybe? Or new carburetor? Well, don't buy the Lowe's Troy-Bilt brand of mower. This started giving us trouble under a year after I bought it.

Looking at updating every 4 days or so for awhile, because I'm still not caught up. -_- ;;

You guys are great and I hope your week is going well!
You showered quickly, and when you emerged, Jack was in the gray yukata, shoes off, and a sheepish smile on his face. Gabriel was dressed again and he handed you your slightly wrinkled yukata. You sighed and redressed yourself, not missing the way Jack's hungry gaze lingered on your body.

"I think I like this "no pants" rule," Jack said. "We should consider instituting it back at-"

"No Jack," Gabriel said, rolling his eyes. "I like watching you flail around in those tiny little exercise shorts, pretending like you're working out and not just wiggling your ass on the mats."

Jack shrugged, like he'd expected the idea to be shot down. "So Gabe tells me your initial reaction wasn't...favorable."

"...There was snow on the ground. I figured we'd be in Portugal or Spain. Maybe Morocco. Seeing snow in the summer really horrified me."

Jack laughed softly. "I'm sorry I missed it." He leaned in and kissed your nose. "But I trust you feel differently now?"

"I'm impressed," you said, running your hands down his chest, smoothing the collar of his robe. "Thank you. It was a good surprise. I'm really excited about all the hot springs."

Jack's face lit up, his smile terribly boyish. "That's good. Come on, let's go downstairs. I want to try out the kotatsu."

"It's a leg-warmer, not a blanket fort, Jack," Gabriel said.

"I know that!" Jack leaned back to kiss Gabriel. "But Lucky and I can kind of fit under there."

"There's probably not enough room for that," you said.

Jack just sighed, not bothering to hide his disappointment.
Shin, Genji, and even Hanzo had waxed poetic about washoku or traditional Japanese food and Mr. Ito's onsen offered kaiseki meals, the multicourse haute cuisine of Japan. The combinations tended to be seasonal, regional, artistic, and come in very small portions. Not ideal for hungry super soldiers.

So you were a little surprised by the number trays he and his omnic helpers carried in.

"I apologize for deviating from the traditional meals," he said, looking slightly embarrassed. "But our mutual friend insisted on providing a customized dinner menu. The kaiseki banquet is scheduled for the last day of your stay..."

You glanced at Gabriel who looked a little disappointed and Jack who just eyed the covered trays with great interest.

"She thought you should start with the nabe. It is hearty and best shared among friends." Nabe was Japanese hotpot, where the food was cooked in the middle of the table, with everyone dropping ingredients into the flavored broth. "It is a filling meal that everyone can enjoy."

Portion size was a factor. And maybe Feng was worried that washoku wouldn't be to Jack's tastes. It was a legitimate concern, though fundamentally wrong. Jack wasn't picky. He would eat anything. His preferences just skewed bland Midwestern American.

An omnic placed a large ceramic pot on a flat portable burner in the center of the table. The contents began to simmer almost immediately, and the omnics began setting trays of chopped raw vegetables, artfully arranged seafood, and thinly sliced meat on the table. Chopsticks, tongs, individual bowls, and a variety of dipping sauces came next.

You knew what to do. As the ceramic pot simmered, you began putting slices of beef and chicken into the pot. You followed up with some napa cabbage, carrots slices cut like flowers, and several varieties of mushrooms.

"Can we just dump it all in?" Jack wondered.

"No, the seafood will get overcooked," Gabriel scowled.

"Mr. King is right. Mrs. King was correct to put in the meat first. It needs to cook longer," Mr. Ito said.

Jack gave you and Gabriel a long questioning look.

"Don't worry, buddy," Gabriel laughed. "We'll handle it for you." There were several more temperature-controlled trays set on the counter.

"It looks like you have everything under control. Please let us know if you need anything else." Bowing, Mr. Ito and his staff left you to it.

"So...?" Jack raised a brow. "Want to explain the aliases?"

"That was all Gabriel," you said, fishing a piece of beef out of the soup. You tasted it, sighing at the rich flavor and silky texture.
Gabriel laughed. "She was just as shocked."

"You realize Mr. Ito used to be an On Sing spymaster, right? He's retired, not senile," Jack said, shaking his head. "He is very aware of our identities and security requirements. He's just playing along because I'm guessing Feng is being...Feng."

"I figured," Gabriel shrugged. "But he referred to Lucky as my wife, and I just ran with it."

You hurriedly shoveled some chicken into Gabriel's bowl and then dumped some more in Jack's bowl.

Jack gave you a sly look. "Embarrassed you, did he?"

You couldn't tell if Jack was talking about Ito or Gabriel. "I'm putting some prawns, salmon, and tofu in next. And the beef is really good too-"

"Yes, and it was adorable," Gabriel smirked. "I was hoping to introduce you as the other Mr. King. One husband and one wife, right? That's the normal number, right?" He dumped half a platter of beef into the pot and then added some sweet potatoes as an afterthought.

Jack laughed, leaning over to press a wet kiss to Gabriel's cheek. "You're such an ass, Gabe."

You weren't sure what to say. So you just stared at the pot, watching the broth start to simmer.

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Jack and Gabriel ate their way through all the trays. You helped, of course, but something about the cold weather really stirred their appetites. Jack even drank the last of the soup, with noodles, and then sprawled across the mats, his head in Gabriel's lap, his feet rubbing against yours under the blanket. The space under the table was comfortably warm. The heat and the food coma robbed you of any desire to move.

"For food I had to cook myself, that was really good..." Jack groaned.

Gabriel snorted. "You just fished it out of the pot, Jack. That doesn't qualify as cooking it yourself, not really."

"Well, you two cooked it. I just ate what you told me to, and hey, that was the most flavorful boiled cabbage I've ever had," Jack said, grinning up at you.

"I don't know if I can move," you said, leaning against the table. "And if you squeeze me, I will totally lose my dinner."

"Don't worry, we can sleep in tomorrow," Jack sighed, shutting his eyes. "There's a lot of premade food and cooking ingredients available for breakfast and lunch. Mr. Ito will handle our dinners. Unless you want to special order something."

"After dinner drinks?" Gabriel asked, gesturing to the bar.

"I need a moment," Jack said, patting his stomach. "But yes."
"Sure," you said. "Though I wouldn't say "no" to dessert either. Just a little bit," you said, holding your thumb and index finger an inch apart.

"Did you get enough to eat?" Jack asked, lifted his head, suddenly looking worried. "I know Gabe and me devoured most of the food, and-

"Do you really think she would quietly go hungry? You've seen her fight me for pizza and cake," Gabriel laughed, tweaking Jack's nose. "Not everyone has your metabolism, Jack."

"Just making sure," Jack said, a content smile on his face. Gabriel patted Jack's shoulder and Jack moved, letting Gabriel get up.

"What would you like to drink?" Gabriel asked.

"Something sweet," Jack said. "But not too sweet."

"...That's very helpful," Gabriel said, shaking his head. He ambled over to the bar to inspect the bottles.

"So how did you pick this place?" You reclined on the tatami, angling yourself so you could look at Jack, his calloused foot rubbed your ankles.

"You're the one who told me about Athena helping you plan vacations," Jack said, adjusting the cushion under his head. "She was a little...hesitant at first. I guess the two of you are pretty good friends."

"She didn't give me any warning about this," you said.

"I know. But later on, she was very excited about being able to help surprise you."

You blinked at that.

"She's a fun conspirator," Jack said. "I think you've been a bigger influence on her than anyone expected."

"Like I'm the only sneaky person she talks to," you said, rolling your eyes.

"Well, she gave me some ideas, but obviously we had to choose somewhere discrete, yet not too far from Zurich. I was originally going to pick an out-of-the-way beach, but on a whim, I asked Feng for suggestions."

You frowned. "You just...randomly sent her a message asking her for vacation ideas?"

"No. We talk occasionally. Sometimes she sends me these long rambling messages when she should be working." And you understood that Jack took the time to read them when he should have been working. "They go on about her day and how much she hates dealing with committees. And even though she can punch half of her human problems through walls, she knows that will just make the situation worse." Jack laughed. "I can empathize. She's asked for tips on how to stay awake during boring meetings, outside of abusing stims."

You stared at the wood-paneled ceiling. You hadn't realized that Jack and Feng were actually trying to be friends. Not that that was a bad thing. You just hadn't expected it. "I can see that."

"So then she tells me she has the perfect solution. From what Mr. Ito has relayed, this was
a retirement project for him, more of a hobby than a moneymaking venture. But then Feng got excited and...well, you know what happens when she gets excited."

"Things blow up?" You laughed softly.

"Metaphorically, yes." Jack chuckled. "Anyway, if you want to sign the "thank you" card I'm sending after we get back, well, I know she'd like that."

"Whatever. You know she's going to invite me to Shanghai, demand I review the whole vacation, and try to pry details out of me."

Gabriel returned to the table with a tray of jiggling Japanese style sponge cake, a bowl of sliced strawberries, and a bottle of champagne.

"You sap!" Jack laughed, sitting up to kiss Gabriel. "Champagne is so overrated."

Gabriel just smiled, pressing a strawberry to Jack's lips. Tongue flicking out, Jack took the berry, kissing Gabriel's fingers.

"I have an entirely sentimental fondness for it," Gabriel said, turning those liquid dark eyes on you. "The first time I kissed you, you tasted of champagne and lipstick. It's not something I can forget."

Warmth, that had nothing to do with food, crept through your belly.

"There's more to it than that," Jack said, giving Gabriel an easy smile. "The first time we had a proper date, one where we went off base, ate at a fancy restaurant, got a hotel and everything - Gabriel fed me strawberries and champagne in bed. The champagne was cheap. The strawberries were sour. But I'll never say "no" to them," Jack sighed, cupping Gabriel's face.

"You left out the part where you spilled it all over the bed," Gabriel laughed, nose to nose with Jack. "The strawberries and the entire bottle of wine. Honestly, it was the clumsiest thing I'd ever seen."

"Shut up, Gabe," Jack murmured, bridging the inches between them. He kissed Gabriel hard, fingers carding through his hair.

They were so damn beautiful and seeing them like this, happy and almost carefree, made your chest tighten. In their yukata, they cut elegant figures. You didn't miss how Gabriel's fingers gripped Jack's sleeve or how Jack's arm curved possessively around Gabriel's neck. You were still too stuffed to start cuddling comfortably, so you took over handling the dessert tray.

You dropped a few strawberries in each glass, and then poured the champagne over them. Then you sliced the white dome-shaped cake, powdered sugar clinging to the knife.

There was the rustle of fabric, and when you looked up, Gabriel had seated himself on one side of you, mere inches away, and Jack was on your other side.


"I don't know why you're surprised. She's always made that abundantly clear," Gabriel said.

"I was getting everything prepared for you," you protested. "I would have joined in the
cuddling, but I'm still really full. If you hug me, best case scenario I will belch at you. Worst case..."

Both men laughed.

"She's full and she still wants cake," Jack teased, kissing your cheek. "I told you, she knows her priorities..."

The fluffy cake was gone, and you kind of wanted more because you had not eaten it all. But now you were extremely full and moving seemed like a terrible idea.

Jack lay face up on the floor, a silly smile on his face. He rested his head in your lap, sporadically turning his head to kiss your knees.

Gabriel sat beside you, stealing kisses and finishing off the last of the champagne. You'd been at the ryokan for several hours now and the sun was still shining. You stared out the window, then at the clock. Then back outside. The clock said 2300 hours. You stared at the clock again, to check if you'd misread the time. Nope. So then you started looking for another clock that wasn't broken.

"What time is it really?"

"The clock's right, baby. Midnight sun, remember?" Gabriel said. "It's summer and we're pretty far north."

"...That explains the blackout curtains." You shook your head. "I forgot."

Jack laughed. "We can go for a walk later. Heard "night time" was a good time to see animals. They have reindeer, and foxes, and bunnies..."

"Or we can stay inside where it's warm," you said. "You know I didn't pack any cold-weather clothes, because someone wanted to be a clever sneak and wouldn't tell me what to bring."

"I did tell you: fancy lingerie," Jack said, his smile dreamy.

"We could go for a late night swim," Gabriel said, bending over to kiss Jack's forehead.

"No, you have to wait an hour after eating before you get in the pool," Jack said, his cheeks flushed.

"No, you don't," you said, rolling your eyes.

"Gabe, tell her you have to wait one hour before swimming or she'll cramp up and drown!"

"Jack, that's an old wives' tale," Gabriel sighed, shaking his head. "And anyway the soaking pools are shallow. We've done it plenty of times-"

Jack groaned. "We're enhanced, Gabe."

You snorted. "It's not going to work, Jack. You didn't drink that much. And I know you're not actually that silly."

"Damnit," Jack laughed, rolling onto his stomach, his hair mussed. "OK, you got me. But I
really want to go for a short nature walk. Please? We can warm up in the baths afterward."

"You can borrow our hoodies. We brought extra just for you," Gabriel said, pressing a kiss against your temple.

Jack stared up at you, his eyes bright and hopeful.

"A soak after a brisk walk will feel even better," Gabriel murmured in your ear.

"I'll give you a back rub afterward," Jack said.

"OK, OK," you groaned, unable to withstand their combined persuasion. "Just...give me few more minutes to digest."

You triple-layered the hoodies, jamming your gloved hands into the pockets. An armed Athena drone trailed a few yards behind you.

Though the sun was still visible, it was twilight now. Here in the mountains, the landscape was a mixture of stubborn greenery and rock formations. The snow had stopped falling, but it still clung to the stones and capped the higher reaches of the terrain.

Whistling, Jack led the way, traipsing through the valley, swinging his arms.

You followed, taking in the scenery. It was majestic, if cold. But in some ways, mostly the cold and the isolation, it reminded you of the Ninth Circle. That dampened your enjoyment.

Gabriel brought up the rear, like he expected you to try to sneak back to the inn and hide in a hot spring. Which, to be fair, you had considered doing.

"Hey, look!" Jack stopped abruptly, and you nearly ran into his back. Following his line of sight, you saw three small gray-brown foxes pouncing on something in the grass: rabbits or mice probably. They looked too small and completely the wrong color to be red foxes. "Never seen those before."

"Arctic foxes," Gabriel said.

You remembered hearing about them in Canada, but never actually catching sight of any any. Probably because they blended in with the awful amount of snow. "I thought they were fluffier and white."

"Summer coats," Gabriel said. "A lot of tundra fauna have seasonal camouflage: ermine, ptarmigans, some lemmings and hares."

"He knows things," Jack whispered in your ear. "It's very sexy."

"It is," you agreed, nodding solemnly.

"Some of us actually read books," Gabriel said, not looking impressed by your lack of animal knowledge.
"Nerd," Jack coughed.

Gabriel raised a brow. You didn't even see him move. One moment he was giving Jack a "Really, son?" look, the next he was wrestling Jack into the grass, laughing as Jack sputtered underneath him.

"Nerd, huh?" Gabriel smirked, straddling Jack's chest.

"Sexy nerd," Jack sighed, grinning up at Gabriel.

Gabriel leaned down to kiss Jack.

It lasted for half a second, and suddenly Gabriel was flat on his back, Jack in the dominant seat. Gabriel didn't protest, he just wrapped his legs around Jack's waist. Jack bent over and continued the kiss.

The commotion had scared the foxes off, which was probably for the better. At this rate, Jack might spontaneously decide that he wanted to pet them and try to catch one. And you could just picture Angela's disgruntled expression if Jack had to get a rabies vaccine on vacation...

"The grass is pretty soft," Jack said, glancing up at you.

"Surprisingly so," Gabriel said, kissing Jack's chin.

"No fucking way. It's too cold to roll around on the ground. Don't even try, Morrison." As soon as the words left your mouth, you knew you'd made a terrible mistake.

"Oh?" Jack's lips quirked upward, excitement lighting up his eyes. Because you'd just issued him a personal challenge.

"Don't you dare!" Swearing, you started running back up the hill toward the ryokan. Given your activities today, you were nowhere near your fastest. Pulse pounding, you could hear his heavy footsteps gaining on you.

You felt the air shift, and Jack tackled you, his arms wrapped around your waist. You fell forward, cursing as you landed hard, your palms and knees absorbing most of the impact.

"Gotcha!"

Growling, you kicked backward, your boots making contact with his shins.

"Ow!" Jack laughed, but didn't let go. "Gabe, help me out!"

"You better not!" You snarled, and threw an elbow backward, shifting your weight against his chest.

Jack made an "oomph" noise, and his grip on you loosened. You dug your metal fingers into his wrists, and wiggled out of his grasp. Then you kicked him off, grinning as he yelped.

"Gabe!" Jack lay on his back, holding his stomach while he laughed, eyes squeezed shut. "Gabe, help me!"

"You'll get no sympathy from me, jackass," Gabriel chuckled, crouching beside you. "You're the instigator."

"But you jumped me first!"
"And?"

You glanced down at your palms. Your gloves were muddy. But your pants were torn in the knees and both knees were scraped bloody.

Gabriel clucked his tongue. "You all right, chica?"

"Pfft, I'm fine." You dusted off your legs. "It's Jack you're going to have to rescue."

Jack was already on his feet, laughing as he ran back toward the inn. "I'm sorry, baby! I-I'm going to wait till you calm down! You're still beautiful when you're angry!"

"Get back here and say it to my face, Morrison!" You shouted back, pettiness giving you the speed boost you'd lacked earlier.

You couldn't catch him. Not now, and probably not without bait, traps, or mechanical assistance. Sulking, you rinsed off in the deck shower, scrubbing the mud off your legs.

"Do you want to come see some of the bigger pools?" Gabriel asked, leaning in the doorway, conspicuously not wearing a shirt.

You muttered something ungracious about cowardly blonde Strike Commanders.

Gabriel just laughed. "Jack wants me to parley for him."

You scowled at him. "Jack owes me a back rub, new pants, and actually a whole lot more clothes..."

"He'll deliver on the backrub immediately. He just asks, and I quote, "Not in the face and not in the dick. Please." End quote."

You smiled, in spite of yourself. "I'm too tired to try to wander off and figure out the other baths. But I'm getting in the water and yes, I would like company." Turning off the shower, you grabbed your yukata and towel, not bothering to dress as you headed toward the pool. You walked slow, hips swaying.

It was cold, but knowing that Jack and Gabriel were watching you saunter naked down the steps was a thrill in and of itself. You set your things down and slipped into the water, making a point not to look in their direction.

Laughing, Gabriel stripped down quickly and rinsed off. He didn't linger in the shower. His footsteps thudded against the deck as he made his way down to the hot spring.

You just closed your eyes, basking in the heat.

Gabriel settled in next to you, putting one arm around your shoulders. "Jack, make sure you bring cold drinks."

You opened your eyes as Jack set a tray down behind you. He was back in his robe, his hair damp and falling in his face. He gave you a wide smile.
"Is it safe?"

"I'll get you back later," you sighed. "I'm enjoying myself too much right now."

Jack did not hesitate. He practically tossed his yukata in the air and plunged into the water beside you. There was a lot more splashing than necessary. He handed you a glass of something orange, a generous dollop of vanilla ice cream floating on top.

"...What have you done?" You asked, staring at the glass.

"It said "Applesín," but it doesn't taste like apples or sin. Well, what I think sin tastes like."

You gave him a long look.


While you didn't entirely trust Jack's taste buds, it didn't sound like a bad combination. You took a sip. It was fizzier than you expected, a sweet mix of oranges and cream. "Not bad." You took another drink, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Jack cuddled up beside you, kissing your cheek. "I'm glad you like it. Not just the drink. The vacation. I think we all needed time away from work."

You set the glass on the tray and tapped your shoulders. "I'm not arguing. But I want that back rub now."

"As you wish." A pair of strong hands wrapped around your waist and you stiffened as Jack lifted you onto his lap. You perched on his thighs, relaxing as he began squeezing your shoulders. He worked his hands down your shoulder blades to your low back and you leaned forward, giving him room to maneuver.

"Is there anything you wanted to do?" You asked him, eyes shut.

"The nature-walk was nice," Jack said. "But you aren't the only one excited about the pools and saunas. Honestly, I'm just glad to get away for a few days."

"Same," Gabriel said with a yawn.

"Think I'm starting to burn out," Jack said casually.

You opened one eye, a little surprised by this candidness. "Oh?"

"Sometimes I forget why I took this job in the first place," Jack said, his voice low. "I mean, back in the day when it was just a squad against the omnic armies, it wasn't like there was much of choice. Now... It's a lot different."

"It was a calling," Gabriel said with soft certainty.

"Yeah," Jack continued to massage your taut muscles. "It wasn't a career, it was a crusade. And then things changed. Things are more stable, but also more complicated. I think...I think I'm too used to going from crisis to crisis. Everything is serious business and I feel like I have to be there, or things will go to shit. Which is partially arrogance, partially an terribly overdeveloped sense of personal responsibility."

"I think we all ended up that way," Gabriel said, reaching over you to pat Jack's back. "It
doesn't help that we are very good at this."

"I just have unfinished business," you said. "But I...like my job. Wouldn't want your jobs though. Too much responsibility."

"Being a field agent was fun," Jack said wistfully.

"Being his squad leader was not," Gabriel said dryly. "Jack wasn't so much a hothead as a valiant idiot."

"I believe it," you said, recalling the events of I Need Coffee with unhealthy clarity.

"You can't really point fingers, sweetheart," Jack said and kissed the back of your neck. "Cobblestone Dust shaved years off my life." He didn't bring up Greece, and for that you were grateful.

"You're both idiots," Gabriel said, a note of strain creeping into his voice. "Though Lucky takes less risks than you, Jack."

"But she takes bigger risks," Jack said, his fingers tightening on your shoulders briefly.

"Don't know what you mean," you said with a yawn. "We're all risking our lives when we go into the field."

Gabriel made a disapproving sound in the back of his throat.

"Guess we better make sure they're worth it," Jack said after a moment.

"Damn straight I do," you scowled. "I'm not a hero like you, Jack. All that talk about hope and the human spirit goes straight over my head. I'm out there because I have a mission to complete. Usually something small that just might help tip the scales in our favor."

Jack rested his chin on your shoulder, his hands wrapped tightly around your waist. "I don't do this because of some high-minded ideals, sweetheart. I'm here because of the people. I want a safer world for Michael and Maggie, for Jane and the kids. I want better things for Gabe and for you. And the black ops lifestyle isn't...it's not fair to either of you."

You shrugged.

"I wanted to make the world a better place. But now as I get older, I've come to realize that's an abstract metric. I know it sounds selfish, but maybe I just want to make the world a better, safer place for the people I care about. That's...easier to measure."

Jack's words came out slow and thoughtful.

"You're preaching to the choir, Jack," Gabriel said, leaning in to kiss Jack's neck. "But Lucky and I are both adults. We chose this."

"Maybe," Jack said. "Maybe you just realized that you could do the job better than most and stuck to it. You're both overly responsible like that."

You snorted. "You give me too much credit, I'm just vindictive. But you're absolutely right about Gabriel."

"You can be both vindictive and overly responsible," Jack said. "In fact, we're all pretty vindictive too. Some of us more than others." Jack patted your back.
"I have more unfinished business than you do, Jack." The words slipped out too easily, sharper than you intended.

"I know," Jack said. "But I'm giving you a backrub, so maybe you could hold off on your violent revenge for awhile, please?"

The three of you knew that wasn't what you meant, but you appreciated the redirect. You took one of his hands in yours, kissing the calloused fingers.

"How about one right here?" He pointed to his lips, making the duck face.

"Mmm, I thought you said, and I quote, "not in the face and not in the dick." End quote."

Gabriel started laughing.


"You set the terms and conditions," Gabriel said. "I face no such restrictions."

Laughing, you reached over and kissed Gabriel's cheek.

You slept till afternoon, Jack sprawled out beside you. You awoke to the a tray rattling beside your head. Opening one eye, you were unsurprised to see Gabriel in his yukata, putting another tray down above Jack's head.

Breakfast was fresh cut fruit, thick slices of rye toast topped with smoked fish, and fluffy omelettes filled with cheese and cubes of smoked lamb. There was also a large mug of strong coffee. Not traditional Japanese fare at all. Apparently, Ito stocked Icelandic food as well, not that you were complaining.

"Thank you," you said, pulling the blanket over your head, but not before you'd grabbed a slice of toast.

"You're not going to come explore with me?" Gabriel asked, sitting down beside you.

"Later," you grumbled, mouth full of bread. "I'm still tired."

"You sure?" He teased, pulling the blanket back down.

"Gabriel," you whined. "I don't want to get up-"

"Jack?"

"Wuh?" Jack mumbled, rolling over and wrapping his arms around your waist. "Mmm, is that breakfast, babe? You're the best," he sighed happily. "He's the best, isn't he sweetheart?"

Gabriel snorted. "You two are ridiculous. You don't mind if I go check out some of the facility, do you?"

"No," you yawned. "Sorry, I'll be down as soon as I can."
"Take your time," Gabriel said, leaning over and kissing your forehead. "Eat your breakfast before Jack does. I'm going to do some laps and then soak."

"OK," you said, deciding not hurry, because you'd seen Gabriel's morning exercise routine. You weren't going to be able to keep up and you didn't feel like trying.

Gabriel changed out of his yukata into exercise shorts and a hoodie. You tried not to ogle him, but the shorts clung to his thighs and you stared, just a little. Apparently, oblivious to your fascination, Gabriel left, quietly shutting the door behind him.

...No, he knew. There was no way he didn't notice. He was just being a goddamn tease. Shaking your head, you slowly ate your toast, brows going up as Jack began to nibble on your shoulder.

"Goddamnit, Jack."

"Bite," he chuckled, eyes still closed.

You offered him some berries. He licked your fingers and you rolled your eyes. "You have your own, Jack."

He just laughed and nuzzled your neck. "Yours tastes better." He stretched his arms out, then opened his eyes, smile lazy and content. "Good morning."

"Good afternoon."

"Even better," he grinned. "Sleep well?" He reached over you a snagged a berry off your tray.

"Yeah," you said, resigned to the fact Jack would be stealing bites of your food. "Taking it easy."

"That's the plan." Jack brushed his hair out of his face. "Gabriel is amazing though. Before him, I'd gotten breakfast in bed once or twice. But he does it whenever he has the chance." He sighed. "I've tried to make it for him a few times, but it's always something easy like toaster pastries or scrambled eggs and toast." Jack shook his head.

"It's food he didn't have to cook, brought to him in the comfort of his own bed."

"You're right." Jack reached over and stole chunks of melon off your plate.

"And you pick up food. It's not exactly the same as cooking, but he loves it when you bring doughnuts." You took a bite of your omelette. "If he's happy, that's what matters, yeah? Just try to mix it up more. We can't all eat the same thing every day."

"That taco truck he likes sells breakfast burritos," Jack said, after a moment. "And churros. Damn, I didn't even think about that. Thanks." He kissed your cheek. "I know you like breakfast in bed too. Mostly because you end up sleeping the longest out of all of us-"

"I'm not enhanced! I need more sleep!" You scowled.

"Usually because we've fucked you into exhaustion," he continued, looking smug. "Not that I'm complaining," Jack rubbed his nose against yours. "Just making an observation. But you do like it a lot, right?"
"I like whenever you guys bring me food. Even if it's a lettuce and cheese sandwich."

Jack groaned, flopping down beside you. "So, was Gabe your first bed and breakfast boyfriend?"

"It was Shin," you said, taking another bite of omelette.

Jack nodded, not looking surprised at all. "What kind of things did he make?"

"Sometimes it was toast or pancakes, fruit, eggs, and bacon, sometimes it was rice and fish, with miso soup, and pickled vegetables." You lay back on your pillow, recalling the first time you'd awakened alone in his bed, wondering if that was a cue for you to leave. After about five minutes of indecision, the door opened, and there he was, carrying a bag and smelling like food. He'd gotten up extra early, cooked rice, eggs, and fish, and served it with oranges and coffee.

He played it off like he was the hungry one. He felt like starting the day with a home-cooked meal, and it was no big deal. And you accepted that answer, even though it started happening more regularly, and only when you spent the night in his quarters.

"You never really talk about him," Jack said, too casually as he rested his head on your shoulder.

"It seems awkward to talk about your dead ex with your two current boyfriends," you said dryly.

"Mmm, I guess when you put it like that," Jack said. "But back in Paris, you seemed kind of happy to have an opportunity to talk about him."

You blinked, remembering sneaking off to the rooftop with Jack and eating chocolate croissants and drinking coffee. Right before a goddamn terrorist attack ruined the rest of the day.

"It doesn't bother me," Jack said. "You talking about him fondly. If you don't want to talk about him, I understand. But I don't know enough about your life before Zurich. And I'd like to."

"It bothers Gabriel," you said after a moment. "Not just when I talk about Shin, but when I talk about anyone from Black Base Delta. He's never asked me not to speak of them. But he gets that look on his face..." You sighed. "Like it hurts him to hear about any of it."

Jack nodded. "I've noticed."

You shrugged. "I talk to the shrink. Don't feel obligated to-"

He flicked you between the eyes. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. But I'd like to hear whatever you're willing to share. I don't feel obligated at all. I feel guilty though. You've met my family and now a lot of my friends from before Overwatch..." He trailed off. "I didn't ask before, not because it didn't occur to me or I didn't think it was important. I didn't ask because you always looked so unhappy. And I don't want you to feel unhappy. But I guess I forgot that it's OK if we have to talk about uncomfortable things. I'm not just here for the good food, great cuddles, and spectacular sex."

"Ah," you said, words failing. You sat up slowly, picking up the coffee and sipping it. You needed to be more awake for this conversation.

Jack sat up beside you, watching you carefully.
"I don't know very much about Captain Patel's life outside of my former squad," you said when the coffee was gone. "I heard she was married."

"Yes," Jack said. "She never had children. But she opened her home to a lot of us. Her husband isn't talking to Gabe or me now." There was deep sigh and he put an arm around your shoulder. "But I think he'd see you, if you ever wanted to go to New Orleans."

"...I'll keep that in mind," you said, filing away that tidbit of information. "I mean, you've heard about some things about my old squadmates." Especially after Candle Arc and Lao.

"I'd like to hear more," Jack said, placing his tray on his lap and offering you a bite of melon. "It doesn't have to be some kind of epic war story. Anything you want to tell me, about anyone you want to talk about. Start easy. Pick something casual."

"Nwazue didn't really like me, but she was kind of like Chang: all business with no patience for fuckups."

"I wouldn't call you a fuckup, sweetheart," Jack said firmly.

"Oh, she had my back," you added quickly, seeing the disapproval in his eyes. "But it was obvious she thought I was an idiot, and she wasn't wrong." You stared at your metal fingers. "I wish I'd gotten to know her better. She was sharp and she was from Numbani. I always wanted to ask her questions about it, but I was kind of scared to." You sighed. "I think we could have been friends though, eventually. But now...that's not possible."

"You were friends with everyone else though."

"Yeah." You nodded. "I...don't ask people a lot of questions about their backgrounds. Not because I don't care, but because I figure if they want to share, they will. And if they aren't telling me, then they have a reason. Either way, it's none of my business."

"Sometimes people are like you," Jack said dryly. "They'd like to share, but they don't want to "burden" other people."

You shrugged sheepishly.

"There's a way people get when they want talk about things, but can't. They'll bring up a topic and then drop it, one step before they actually ask permission to talk about it. Uh...almost like when someone wants to confess during an interrogation. You just have to give them the opportunity to do so. Whether it's staying quiet, or giving them some kind of reassurance so they can save face, or maybe just refraining from punching them so they can talk," Jack said so plainly that you choked on your toast.

Jack patted your back, laughing as you coughed and sputtered.

"You're right," you said, reflecting on his words.

"I know, it's strange that someone who's so bad at feelings is pretty good at reading people." He kissed your cheek. "But I have to have some skills."

You shook your head, taking another bite of omelette. "You have plenty of skills. Stop fishing for compliments."

"Tell me about Shin. About your time together. Don't leave out the bad bits. Otherwise, I'll be eternally jealous of the guy I've never met and won't ever be able to measure up to."
You smiled in spite of your discomfort, knowing Shin would have gotten a kick out of that.

"Tell me about your smuggler days. Did you deal exclusively in pants? How much Overwatch memorabilia did you transport?" Jack grinned. "Do you want to run a side business selling more personal objects? Because if so, we could probably start with Ana's hats."

"I like living," you said, shaking your head.

"Tell me about your life before," he said, voice softer, smile fading. "Who did you want to be? What did you want to do? What do you miss the most?" He took your hand in his. "Tell me whatever you want to share, and maybe some things you don't. Whatever you can. I want to know."

"That's a lot, Jack."

"There's a lot I don't know," he admitted. "But I want to."

There was a dry lump in your throat, and it wasn't from the bread. You finished your breakfast, setting aside the tray and then slipping back under the covers, your eyes focusing on the wood panels of the ceiling. "Shin hated cleaning. He was always trying to sneak his laundry in with mine. He was cheerfully and insufferably right, till he realized he was wrong, usually a day or two later. He was an unabashed showoff-" You wiped your eyes.

Jack set his tray aside and lay next to you, propped up on one arm. "Sounds difficult," he said, lips gentle against your ear. "Not familiar at all."

Chapter End Notes

Neighbors called city zoning on us because our grass IN THE BACKYARD was too high. Because the lawn mower was broken. *Facepalm* I am 90% sure who it was, though there is the 10% chance it was another neighbor's realtor. I know, first world problems, but I'm just like for fuck's sake, some of us have to work for a living. They were having cookout parties all weekend; three days in a row there were extra cars parked in front of my place because of it. My cousin got the yard taken care of, but now we're like "...it's petty revenge time." Nothing illegal, but we looking at investing in some extremely obnoxious lawn ornaments and lots of pinwheels. Anyone know where I can get spiders in bulk?

Still playing medical bill phone tag, but it's progressing slowly.

Work has me enraged. Back to job hunting. I've found anger and spite to be great motivators for getting shit done, though maybe a bad influence on life choices/creeds.

Trying to catch up on writing. It's slow, but I think if I get my life back under control, it will get better. I just need a bigger stick to hit things/people with. :D
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

Now that you have some downtime, it's time to address the elephant(s) in the relationship.

Chapter Notes

Hairypurrter did a dynamic Lucky picture!

Meggyloops did an adorable drawing of the trio and I'm still not over the cuteness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wrapped in your yukata and a coat, you left the guesthouse. Jack was going to do dishes, but he urged you to go find Gabriel. You'd stayed in bed longer than you intended.

There was a heated pool, covered by a wooden awning. You could swim laps in it. The sauna was a large wooden building, and you looked forward to trying that out too. Eventually, you found Gabriel sitting in a smaller pool, the size of the one behind the guesthouse, his robe folded on the towel.

"Took you long enough," he said, giving you a once over. "Where's Jack?"

"Doing dishes," you said. "He sent me ahead. We felt bad that we'd left you alone for so long."

Gabriel just laughed, stretching out in the water. "It didn't take you that long to eat, did it?"

"Jack wanted to talk," you said, crossing your arms as the wind picked up.

"Come on in," Gabriel said, his smile wide. "We can talk in here too."

"You just want to see me naked," you said, shaking your head, already taking off the coat.

"That's not all I want," Gabriel said with a sharp grin. "So what were the two of you talking about?"

"My old squad," you said, shivering as you set your robe atop your towel. "Mostly Shin. Some-" You froze as you slid into the water. Not quite literally, but close enough. Hyperventilating, you glared at Gabriel, your eyes wide, your muscles locking up. It felt like needles digging into every inch of your skin. Your breaths came in short panicked bursts. He had been sitting in ice cold water.

Flailing, you scrambled out of the pool grabbing your towel and robe. What the hell? Who sat around in freezing water? Why?
Gabriel laughed uproariously, head thrown back, hands slapping the water with great unruly splashing.

Your teeth were chattering so badly, you couldn't even yell at him. "H-h-hate you!" You tried to wrap yourself up, but your hands shook too hard and the cold wind wasn't helping.

Still chuckling, Gabriel rose, icy water pouring off his body. He toweled off and slung his robe over his shoulder, not bothering to get dressed. Picking you up, he held you against his shockingly warm chest. "Having trouble?"

"That was mean!" You hissed as he kissed your cheek.

"It was hilarious," he purred. "Don't worry, hermosa. I can think of several ways to warm you up."

"Sauna," you snarled. "I want to go to the sauna and we're not having sex in there. In fact, we may never have sex again!"

Gabriel just laughed harder, but he carried you into the sauna.

You were still sulking when Jack arrived, carrying water bottles and his towel. He looked between you and Gabriel, expression questioning. There were two tiers of wooden benches and you sat in the corner farthest from Gabriel. He stayed by the charcoal brazier, pouring water over the coals. There was some kind of fragrance in the water, a mix of citrus and astringent herbs.

"What happened?"

"I invited her into the water," Gabriel smirked. "And now she's out of sorts."

"It was freezing cold," you snapped.

"I didn't make you get in," he said, still unrepentant. "Not my fault you didn't ask. Anyway, your face was priceless."

Jack laughed, leaning over to kiss Gabriel. "Thank you for breakfast. Sorry we took so long." He sat down beside Gabriel and patted the spot beside him. "Come over here, sweetheart."

Sighing, you settled for sitting in the row above him, giving the back of Gabriel's head dirty looks.

Jack leaned back, his head against your knees. "Want me to warm you up?"

"No sex in the sauna," you said.

"Really? Is that where your mind goes?" Jack just smiled. "I was just going to rub your back."

That was an offer you couldn't refuse. You laid down on your stomach, the warm wood comfortable against your bare skin. Jack turned around, his hands already running down your spine.
"Lucky said you were talking about Agent Sato," Gabriel said.

"Unsurprisingly, she has good taste in men," Jack said brightly. "I learned a lot. I know she doesn't usually talk about Black Base Delta with you, because she knows it upsets you. I think you told me something nearly identical."

You froze. Jack was a meddling blabbermouth. You narrowed your eyes at him.

"Jack, you weren't supposed to-"

"I wouldn't have said anything sweetheart, except you two are both reading the situation wrong," Jack said, unapologetically.

"Were you...holding back because you thought it bothered me?" Gabriel asked, hunched over, the humor in his voice gone.

"...Yeah," you said. "I mean, I wasn't ready to say much about Shin till...recently. Since your hallucination in the cave, that might have been some kind of real. "But whenever I bring up Captain Patel-" He flinched and you sighed. "You react like that."

"It's not you," he said hoarsely. "And you should to talk about them." Gabriel turned around to face you, his eyes dark and heavy with emotion. "...I have my own unresolved issues about what happened back there." He leaned against the bench, his face level with yours. "But I didn't mean to make you think you couldn't talk about your people with me."

"They were my people too. Aishani and your Lao included."

The addition of Lao surprised you, but you tried not to show it.

"Was trying to avoid hurting you," you mumbled, because it sounded ridiculous to your ears. But it was the truth. "But I guess just sitting silently on your grief instead of talking about it is bad for you too. Fuck, I should've realized..." And you were uniquely situated to talk to Gabriel about the events at the Ninth Circle. Even if he didn't want to talk about them, it would have been good for him to get some of the unresolved trauma off his chest. You shook your head, disappointed at your own shortsightedness. "Sorry."

There was odd moment of silence as Gabriel's brow furrowed. "Corazon, there's nothing for you to apologize for. If anything, I should have...been more open. It would have helped us both." He drew in a shaky breath. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that to you."

Maybe you had both been projecting your own discomfort on the other. You weren't sure. You had only seen what you expected to see, and Jack of all people had to be the insightful one. That wasn't exactly a good sign.

Gabriel stroked your hair with his free hand, his palms damp from the humidity. "So you were trying to protect my delicate feelings?"

You frowned at him. "Don't laugh."

"I'm not. It's not something I'm used to hearing. The Blackwatch Commander is a hardass strategist who doesn't have time for weakness and most people certainly don't consider his feelings." Gabriel kissed your cheek. "So thank you."

You blew out a frustrated breath. "You're ridiculous."

"Yes, we both are. Because it seems like Jack was the emotionally savvy one in this case."
Gabriel’s gaze slid to the man beside him. The reddish-pink man looked too pleased, even as he sweated bullets.

"Shut up," Jack said, good-naturedly, smacking Gabriel’s arm. "It's not my fault you're bad at communication-"

"I'm bad at communication?" Gabriel scowled. "Who was the one-?"

"Hey, you should be thanking me!" Jack laughed, pushing forward to kiss Gabriel.

"Thank you, amor," Gabriel murmured, when he broke away from Jack. "Your blush is very cute."

"It's the heat," Jack said, not looking displeased. "I look like a lobster."

"A sexy lobster." Gabriel winked, then turned back to you. "Better communication. That’s something we can all work on."

"Yeah, all right." You drew in a deep breath, wondering if that was the invitation you'd been waiting for. It really was past time to pin him down and make him answer your questions. "To celebrate this newfound openness, I have questions. Lots of them."

"I am obviously over six feet tall, without the boots, no matter what my paperwork says," Gabriel said, giving Jack a dirty look. "I grew a little after SEP, I swear."

You couldn’t quite smile, not with what you had to ask. "Gabriel, I want to know the truth. How bad it your condition? What range of symptoms are we looking at? I know you've been collecting geneticists, but you haven't-"

Gabriel's eyes widened briefly, then he kissed your knee. "I don't have a lot of answers yet. I'm not secretly dying, if that's what you're worried about."

You crossed your arms. "Tell me more."

"The complications are increasing. The hyperthermia is getting worse. I'm having to be more careful about my mission selection." He ground his teeth together, not looking at you. "Under normal circumstances, my body can regulate itself. Environmental conditions can exacerbate it, but it's my metabolic production that's excessive. I'm fine in the sauna as long as I take it easy. However, exertion-based overheating is just a symptom. There are some instabilities on a genetic level, and that's the unintended side effect of SEP."

You took a moment to digest it all. "You mean, you don't know if things could get worse?"

"They could and likely will. I don't know if it will go beyond hyperthermia, but that's enough on it's own." He shook his head. "Yes, I've commissioned several geneticists to look at it. Chang has a less severe version of the issue and her contacts are sharing data with mine. Andre has people looking into it too. I'm not sitting by and doing nothing. There's just nothing conclusive to share yet."

You looked at Jack, who watched Gabriel with a mournful look on his face. None of this came as a surprise to him, you realized. Of course, Jack knew; he was SEP too. But Gabriel's condition hadn't exactly been his secret to share. It still stung that they had kept everything quiet from you.

"Didn't say much more because I didn't want you to worry," Gabriel said, recognizing the
look on your face. "I know, that's not reasonable. But I don't have any answers yet."

"Have you talked to Feng? Crazy AI auntie was a world renowned geneticist. At the very least-"

"I think we've involved enough people," Gabriel said dryly.

"But-"

"Maybe later," Gabriel said firmly. "Weren't you worried about how it'll look if our close connection to On Sing comes out?"

"That's not as important as you-"

"Maybe later," he repeated. "That's a lot of leverage, corazon. I'm still not sold on their trustworthiness and things aren't that dire yet."

Jack said nothing, and you wondered if they'd already had this argument.

"Anything else, besides the overheating?" You asked. "You mentioned other instabilities..."

"I'm sterile now," Gabriel said, after a moment. He looked away from you.

"Oh," you said, brain trying to catch up. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "I found out after our trip to London. Never got around to telling you. I'm sorry, I should have. I was...working through it. And then everything went to Hell."

You shrugged. "I understand."

The three of you sat there, you trying to process everything. You had actively avoided the idea of children, but you knew Gabriel wanted them. And you knew that this had to hurt him. So you focused on his pain instead of your discomfort with the nebulous idea of family and childbirth. That's what you needed to deal with now. You hugged him from behind.

"Tell me what you're thinking," Gabriel said, gruffly. "I...didn't want to put any pressure on you about the future but, I guess now that we're talking about everything..."

"Gabriel Reyes, if you think I'd ditch you because you're going through health problems-"

"I know that," he said, sounding amused. "I meant...children. We've always glossed over the topic." And right then, you realized that he and Jack must have agreed not to push you on the subject. You weren't sure how you felt about that, maybe a little outraged that they conspired to keep things from you, maybe a little grateful that they'd been sensitive enough to delay this discussion till you were somewhat ready for it.

You stared at the wall. "I don't know if I'm responsible enough to handle a dog, let alone another human. But I know you and Jack want children. They're not a deal breaker either way."

You rubbed the back of your neck, the heat becoming prickly on your bare skin. Or maybe that was just nerves. You were nowhere near ready, not with Shit Spiders, Petras, and Zenyatta all hanging over your head.

Jack opened a bottle of water and handed it to you. "There's nothing wrong with adoption. We have a few more options when we get to that point."

You blinked, unable to pinpoint when that point would be. "Umm..."
"No pressure, sweetheart," Jack said quickly.

"Are you...?" You started to ask, then cut yourself off, because maybe Jack didn't want to talk about it either.

"Low sperm count," he admitted. "But not impossible. And you don't have to be involved, if you don't want to be. Gabe and I have already talked about surrogates and in vitro fertilization. If you wanted to donate an egg or even do more than that, that's entirely up to you. You're not a broodmare. It's not fair to expect that of you, and we don't. Honest."

"She'd be a nightmare, honestly," Gabriel muttered, a small smile on his face.

You drained the water bottle and let that comment go, mostly because you did not want to think about the mechanics and helplessness of pregnancy. You'd spent your life being very careful. You didn't have the time or resources to raise a child right, not on your own anyway. And whether or not you had the inclination, well there were more pressing matters.

"I was kidding, sort of," Gabriel said, rubbing your cheek.

"You're not wrong," you said. "That's not a position I want to be in any time soon. Things are too messy right now."

"Yeah," Gabriel said, kissing your face. "I get that."

"We'll get a dog first," Jack said. "What kind of dog do you want?"

"A well-mannered one, like Bandit," you said. glancing at Gabriel.

Gabriel snorted. "You can stop soft-selling me the dog. I know which way the wind's blowing. At this point I wouldn't dare to rehome that beast. We'd have an insurrection on our hands. Genji was in the office the other day, suggesting we get him certified as a therapy dog. Jack's been spending more time at the range, coincidentally when Jesse and the mutt are there. Even Vo likes him, and she's terrified of anything vaguely canine."

"Jesse sent me a picture of him in a bandana with a little cowboy hat," you admitted. "He matches Jesse. It's really cute. Amélie got it for him."

Jack flashed you a pained look. "That's cruel."

"Bandit seemed to like it," you said with a shrug.

"Maybe a cat would be easier," Gabriel said, after a moment. "They're more independent."

You pictured Gabriel in bed with a kitten rolling around on his bare chest and you had to cover your mouth. What if it was two kittens, one in each arm? Oh God...

"It would have to live with one of you. I barely have room for my plants--"

"Which are still alive, despite your fears," Gabriel pointed out.

You weren't sure how to respond to that, so you just shrugged. "Dumb luck."

"You're not giving yourself enough credit," Gabriel said. "When you weren't sure what to do, you asked, and you did research. That's how you handle new situations. You're not meant to know everything right off the bat."
"That's what I did with your orchid," Jack said proudly.

"Exactly," Gabriel said, looking so very pleased. Maybe he'd been skeptical of Jack's ability to take care of something with his Strike Commander schedule. Granted a plant was very different from an animal and an animal was very different from a child.

"One step at a time," Jack said, kissing you, then Gabriel. "We can make these decisions together. As long as we're talking about the issues and not pretending they don't exist."

Gabriel sighed. "I love you both. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you sooner, and that I can't guarantee you-.

"We have no guarantees," you said, softly. And there's nothing to apologize for." You cupped his chin. "Except for tricking me into the ice bath. You should be very sorry about that."

Gabriel just laughed, not sounding very sorry at all.

You'd finished off the water bottles Jack brought into the sauna. But your muscles still felt like jelly and you wobbled when you as you walked back to the guesthouse.

"We need to rehydrate," Gabriel said, placing a steadying hand on your shoulder.

"And nap," you sighed. The heat had left you drained. "I definitely need another nap."

"You just got up," Gabriel said, a little disapproving. Maybe you were ruining one of his clever plans.

"Yeah, but we can all lay there together, drinking water, and cuddling." Jack nudged Gabriel with his hip. "How decadent is that? Spending the day in bed?"

"Wasn't there ice cream in the freezer?" You asked, leaning against Gabriel. "We can cuddle up, eat ice cream, and watch a movie..."

"I get to pick the movie," Gabriel said gruffly, his frown especially pronounced. "Especially if you're planning on falling asleep on me."

Gabriel sat between you and Jack, his robe loose and sliding down his shoulders as he settled in on the futon. You fluffed your pillow and placed it against his lap, your hands sliding underneath to squeeze his thighs.

Jack had his arm around Gabriel's shoulders, one hand gently massaging his scalp through the curls.

A big budget modern adaption of Hamlet, complete with omnic thespians and elaborate
costumes, played on the screen. It kept the original script, though the setting was contemporary, and Hamlet himself was an omnic.

You sleepily nuzzled Gabriel's stomach and closed your eyes, one arm thrown across his waist. Dozing lightly, you could still hear Jack and Gabriel talking, but you had no idea what they were saying. Their voices were soothing, and you sighed happily as Gabriel's hand rested on your head.

"If you don't wake up soon, you won't get any ice cream." Jack's voice cut through your warm cocoon of sleep.

Yawning, you opened your eyes. "You weren't going to save any for me?"

"We did, but it's starting to melt. The movie's over," Gabriel said, his hand now rubbing circles on your back.

"Oh." You sat up slowly, grinning as Jack fed you a spoonful of salted caramel ice cream. "Thank you."

Jack leaned in to kiss you, his lips icy and sweet. He lingered there, propped up on one elbow. "Feeling better?" He offered you more ice cream.

"Yeah."

Gabriel tugged on a lock of your hair and you tilted your head back, accepting a warmer kiss from him.

"Gabe and I were talking," Jack said, giving you another bite. You held your hand out for the spoon, but Jack ignored it, instead scooping more ice cream for you. "How many kids do you want?"

You choked on your ice cream, coughing violently as Gabriel patted your back.

Jack, the bastard, just laughed. "I think somewhere between two to four at a time is reasonable. But-"

"At a time?" You croaked. "Like...twins and triplets?"

"That would be really efficient," Jack said thoughtfully. "But no, I mean, Gabe's been talking about a lot of war orphans. We could adopt later in life. Too few, and they'd be spoiled. Too many, and they wouldn't get enough attention."

You glanced up at Gabriel, hoping your alarm didn't show.

He was giving Jack a tolerant smile. "Stop teasing her, Jack."

"I'm completely serious. Four was pushing it for my parents, but with the three of us-"

You snatched the spoon and the ice cream out of his hands. "I'm not all awake, Jack. You can't just hit me with that right off the bat."

"OK, how many dogs do you want? And cats? Maybe goats?" Jack leaned forward, his eyes bright. "We don't have to start with humans. Pets will be great practice."

"Gabriel!" You hissed, pure panic inching its way through your voice.
"Pets would be a good place to start," Gabriel said, his grin all too wicked. "We could get those little slings and carry them around the office. Amélie bought one for Jesse, and he's been walking around with that dog strapped to his chest like a bandolier."

You took a moment to process that. "Pics or it didn't happen."

Gabriel obligingly got out his phone and pulled up a picture of Jesse smiling too widely at the camera, his hands on his hips, Bandit strapped to his chest like a baby. There was something extremely disingenuous about Jesse's smile. You chalked it up to him finding the concept ridiculous, but being too scared of Amélie to say no. Bandit had a big doggy grin on his face, tongue hanging out as he stared up at Jesse adoringly. It was cute, if disturbing.

"...Huh," was all you could muster.

Jack snickered, enjoying this a lot more than you expected.

"We leave for two days and...that happens," you said.

"The kid'll have to learn to fend for himself some day," Gabriel laughed, not sounding the least bit sympathetic. "Having a dog is teaching him responsibility." He made it three seconds before doubling over with laughter.

"We should start with one pet," you said, after the uproar had died down. "Maybe something easy, like a rock."

Jack shook his head. "We don't have to do anything right away, sweetheart. I just wanted to know what you thought. Sorry. I know I sprung it on you, but since we're now talking about this kind of stuff... I guess I got carried away." He rested his head on Gabriel's shoulder, his gaze distant, his smile content.

"...No, I guess it's better we start talking about things," you said, unable to deny the warmth in your belly. "But I really do want to start slow. One pet. We discuss it ahead of time. No surprise kittens, or puppies, or baby giraffes..."

"You want a baby giraffe?" Jack asked, his expression thoughtful.

"No," you said firmly. "I was just making an example. Because our lives are weird and who knows what you'll bring home?"

"No hamsters," Jack muttered. "Never again."

Gabriel rubbed your shoulders. "Parrots?"

"They are extremely needy and neurotic," you said. "Way too high maintenance for our lifestyle."

"How do you know?" Jack asked, tone curious.

"Occasionally smuggled exotics for the black market pet trade," you mumbled. "The parrot was cool, but really difficult. Needed lots of attention in transit, and he acted out loudly if he didn't get it."

"Like a real child," Gabriel said, thoughtfully.

"Did you do that often?" Jack asked. "Smuggling animals?"
"...No, not worth the extra work. On top of taking care of them, some of the rarer creatures were fragile and the liability wasn't great. Inevitably, some animals died in transit. That could get messy." And maybe once you'd gotten a little attached to the smart, beautiful, and extremely expensive bird that was going to decorate some arms dealer's aviary. Handing him over had been hard. Listening to his outraged screeching of, "But I'm a good boy!" over and over as you left had hurt more than you expected.

You looked up, realizing that both Jack and Gabriel had gone quiet. They were both watching you. Concern lined Jack's face, and Gabriel rubbed your shoulders, waiting for you to speak.

"Most of the jobs weren't terrible," you said. "But I didn't like transporting anything with...feelings." You shrugged, knowing you felt less guilt over the exotic fish and reptiles than you did over birds and mammals. "Not my...finest moments."

"Anything you don't want?" Jack asked after a moment.

You almost said "children," but bit your tongue and shrugged. "I guess it's all circumstantial. We can talk about it later."

Mr. Ito had also set up an iron griddle in the center of the table and provided more thin sliced meats, vegetables, and seafood for you to cook while you chatted and ate. Some of the meats came marinated, and there were dipping sauces as well. You didn't mind teppanyaki; it ensured Gabriel and Jack got enough food. But Gabriel looked like he wanted something slightly fancier. This time Mr. Ito stayed, with an omnic who went by "Chef Astro," and they rolled sushi while explaining which fish were in season and what flavor combinations would be ideal.

It was strange to hear an omnic waxing poetic about the fantastic oiliness of winter salmon, the sweetness of young shrimp scooped fresh from their spawning ground, and the foolishness of adding wasabi to your soy sauce because it diminished the spiciness. Did they have taste buds or were there mods for that? You didn't have a clue. But together, both cooks made it work. Mr. Ito would talk about the tradition, while Chef Astro explained the science behind the method.

Gabriel ate the nigiri with his fingers, at Chef Astro's behest. Apparently, loosely-packed nigiri was better than firmly-packed nigiri, and using chopsticks was actually less ideal. Jack just kept pouring meat and sauce on the griddle, and eating it over rice with a raw egg.

You ate from both selections, going between delicate thin-sliced flounder sashimi and robust grilled mushrooms, rich sea urchin nigiri, and seared wagyu beef, marinated mackerel handrolls, and charred bias-cut leeks.

Mr. Ito and Chef Astro happily talked about washoku and Japanese cuisine, and were even more thrilled when Gabriel asked questions about ingredient sourcing, culinary training, and evolving traditions. You chimed in every now and then, but were mostly content to eat and listen. Jack focused mostly on eating, though he did make sure to compliment the chefs. He occasionally tossed whole pieces of sushi into his mouth while he waited for the food on the griddle to finish cooking.

It was odd to be so relaxed around strangers, but then they were enthusiastic cooks and you
were hungry diners. It was a universal understanding. There was no mention of On Sing or Overwatch at the dinner table. And you were grateful that the illusion held.

After Mr. Ito and Chef Astro left, you sipped tea and nibbled on grilled peaches. Gabriel had slathered his with ice cream, but Jack had slipped outside, claiming he'd be back soon.

"Are you all right with this?" Gabriel asked, blotting at his mouth with a napkin.

"The food? Hell yeah," you said, licking your lips. "Or did you mean the vacation? Because I should praise Jack more for doing such a good job. I mean, I know he had help, but there's nothing wrong with that."

"...Not what I meant," Gabriel said, leaning over to wipe the corner of your mouth.

"Well, I'm not happy about your condition, but-"

"The talk of pets and children."

You shoved what was left of your peach in your mouth, your smile warping from the fruit bulge and maybe the topic. Chewing slowly, you watched Gabriel's eyebrows rise, knowing your tactic hadn't exactly distracted him. Which was fine, you just had to buy a little time to think of an appropriate response.

"It's strange," you said, after you'd swallowed your food. "I think it will take some getting used to. I've considered getting a pet before, but the time hasn't been right." You shrugged. "Anything else requires a lot more thought and preparation." You paused. "As long as we're not picking out nursery colors, or tiny outfits, or elite preschools, I think I'm OK. Unless you're trying to warn me that Jack is baby-crazy. He's not baby-crazy, is he?" You paused, a terrible thought dawning on you. "Or are you baby-crazy? I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. There's nothing wrong with liking babies." Except for the fact they were awful. "Liking babies" was akin to liking parasitic larva or eldritch slug-beasts. But you were wise enough not to say that, even without food in your mouth.

Gabriel just smiled, shaking his head. "No. No one's in a hurry for babies. We remember how much fun Ana had with Fareeha. Wilhelm, Jack, and I eventually had to take a few feeding shifts just to make sure Ana got some sleep. She was...exceptionally dangerous at that time." He stared at his plate for a moment. "Lindholm was shockingly competent too. I didn't expect him to like children."

"How many does he have now?"

"Too many," Gabriel said with a straight face.

"You have no idea, do you?"

Gabriel laughed, not denying your statement.

"Hey, Lucky, get changed into...exercise clothes?" Jack peeked his head in the door, grinning at you.
"...You didn't tell me to bring any," you said, watching his face fall. Then it lit up again. "I'm not going naked." He drooped again. "But I brought some sweats, despite your lack of warning. Give me a moment. I'm still digesting."

Grinning, Jack came inside, making sure to take off his sandals. There wasn't any snow on his yukata, which was fortunate. Because you did not want to be outside when it was snowing.

Stretching, you adjusted your robe with a sigh, and went back upstairs to change and put your hair back. If it was anything like the nature walk last night, you needed to stretch too. When you came downstairs, the house was empty. You put on your boots and went outside, wondering what kind of shenanigans those two were up to. You didn't have to go far. You caught sight of Jack and Gabriel crouched beside the heated pool under the wood awning. Unable to tell what they were doing, you jogged over. Jack had changed into his blue sweatpants, no shirt.

You knew it was pretty late, because the sun had begun to set, though you could still see the grounds clearly. The other night you'd failed to notice the long strings of round solar lanterns hanging off the eaves. Probably because you'd been focused on the baths and catching Jack.

Jack held a knife in his hand, applying lipstick - not yours - to the blade. Gabriel was doing the same.

Your pulse quickened. It was then you noticed the heavy mats laid down beside the pool. Steam rose off the water, and the surrounding air wasn't quite so cold.

Jack began to rise, tossing you the knife. You caught it in your left hand, relieved to see that it was wood, like you initially suspected.

Shaking his head, Gabriel handed Jack the other "knife." He still wore his yukata. Taking off his shoes, he rolled up the hem of his yukata and sat by the pool, legs dangling in the hot water.

"I was hoping you'd be up for some sparring," Jack said, eye bright. "Mr. Ito keeps mats on hand for yoga practitioners and martial artists." He rolled his shoulders, his smile sharp. He was barefoot on the mats. You bent over and unlaced your boots.

"What are the stakes?" You asked, even though you knew exactly where this was going.

"I want to change the rules, make it a little easier for you," Jack said, smiling with too many teeth and you didn't suppress your answering scowl.

"How generous of you," you said, rolling your eyes.

"I know, isn't it?" The bastard was patronizing you on purpose, trying to get your blood up. Jack was good at pushing buttons, you knew that. Worse, it still worked, despite your awareness of what he was doing and his end goal.

Gabriel chuckled, obviously enjoying the show.

"The first to score three hits, with the knife, wins. You don't have to worry about arguing deathblows. Gabe will ref."

"I don't mind the deathblow rule," you said, not actually caring about the rule itself. It was the condescending tone that had you gritting your teeth. "But if you're scared..."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "I just don't want to hurt your pride, baby. I'm quite a bit faster than
"Not that much faster," Gabriel said, sounding amused. "You can take him, *hermosa.*"

"Well, I was planning to go easy on you..." Jack's insufferable smirk widened.

"That's nice," you said, yawning. "But you didn't answer my question. What do I get out of this if I win?"

"Don't think you'll need to worry about that, sweetheart," Jack purred. "But if you do, I'm obediently yours for the rest of the night."

Your sucked in a sharp breath, picturing a defiant Jack on his knees, doing...well, whatever you wanted. "And if you manage to win?" You continued, trying to sound bored.

Jack gave a throaty chuckle, his eyes flinty. "Same terms, sweetheart. Though I know better than to expect obedience from you. That's fine. You can act out and resist all you want. I'll have you begging for mercy by the end of the night."

Your muscles tensed and heat spread through your core as you met Jack's cocksure gaze.

"Don't worry, you have the next few days to recover." He twirled the knife in his hands. "And you'll need them."

"Your victory speech is premature. I hope that's not a trend tonight." You smiled coolly at Jack.

"You two are adorable," Gabriel called. "And for the record, win or lose, I love you both, and I will most definitely enjoy wrecking the loser."

Jack gave Gabriel a cocky wink. "I can do this with my eyes closed."

You rolled your eyes at his bravado. "Really, Jack?"

"That's "sir" to you, sweetheart. You might as well get used to saying it." He dropped into a defensive stance, knife pointed at your chest.

You stepped onto the mats. Jack's sweats did nothing to hide the fact his legs were tensed to pounce. You began to circle him, forcing him to shift his position.

While you were assessing his stance, he lunged, and you swung to the side, going low and under his arm. As you passed through, you dragged the knife in an upward arc, the wooden blade leaving a long smear of lipstick up along his ribcage. His free hand slipped down to the "wound" and he laughed when it came away red.


"I'm not the one who's going to be sloppy by the end of this," Jack growled, turning his hard gaze on you. He charged, and you dodged backward, trying to block his flurry of strikes. He was fast, and determined, closing the distance within seconds. You batted his knife hand away, swearing as the wooden blade poked your palm.

"Gotcha," Jack said as he met your eyes, his smile crooked. "Want me to kiss it better?"
Snarling, you countered, your blade missing his chest by millimeters. He danced backward, laughing in delight as you went on the offensive. He sidestepped your blows, turning sideways and parrying with frightful ease. He hit a rhythm, dodging, parrying, then countering. The wooden blade came within a hairsbreadth of your nose before you realized what you were doing.

You drew back, realizing how foolish it was to let him lure you into range.

"What's wrong, baby?" Sweat dripped down Jack's brow. "Scared?"

"Nah, just thinking how good you're going to look on your knees," you said, keeping an eye on his foot placement.

Jack sprung forward, his smile predatory. You threw yourself into a roll past his unarmed side. Force cut through the air above your head, and you used the momentum to carry you to the edge of the mats, and onto your feet. You spun quickly and slid sideways as Jack lunged at you, overextended. You knocked his knife hand backward and slid into his space, drawing a line across his bare chest.

Laughing, you twisted out of range, barely avoiding his grasping hands.

"Such a tease," Jack murmured, face flushed with pleasure. "I'm going to enjoy paying you back for all the attitude."

"I'm going to enjoy reducing you to a babbling wreck," you told him. "Because, Commander, I have to say, you look so pretty bent over a desk getting your ass filled."

Jack stiffened, his eyes widening briefly, and then he fucking blurred. You didn't have time to brace yourself. Suddenly, your feet were in the air and you landed flat on your back, the air knocked out of your lungs. Jack kicked the practice blade out of your hand and knelt beside you. You lay parallel to the pool, Gabriel's shadow in your periphery.

"Two," he murmured, tracing the blade along your collar bone. Brows furrowed, he then dragged the wood along your lips. You jerked backward, the edge furrowing along your flesh. "Three," he sighed. Then he tossed the knife to the side and leaned forward to kiss you.

"Bad form, Jack," you snapped, and kicked him backward, outraged that he'd tagged you twice in one go. That was insultingly cheap. Jack staggered, managing to catch himself and rise, as you bought yourself time to climb to your feet.

He went left, his back to the pool and you adjusted your course, knowing the angles were right. You closed the distance and dropped, swinging your leg to sweep him. Jack laughed, simply lifting one foot to dodge. He winked at you, obviously amused by your "miss," but you slid forward, driving your foot into his weight bearing leg. He teetered for a moment, and you followed it up with a second strike to the same leg.

Swearing, Jack fell backward into the pool with a massive splash.

"That was naughty," Gabriel laughed, rising to his feet. "And after he got his three hits."

"Oh come on, the third one was a cheap shot," you panted, wiping your mouth.

"Not going to argue that, but are you sure you should be hanging around?" Gabriel asked mildly. "Because when he catches you..."

Sputtering, Jack surfaced, his hair plastered to his face. He wiped it out of his eyes, glaring
"Baby," Jack growled. "You are going to pay for that-" He pulled himself out of the pool, rivulets of water pouring down his bare chest, and he did not look happy.

"Better run," Gabriel laughed, and you understood then that he would not be any help.

Backing up, you took off sprinting across the courtyard, not entirely sure where you could go. If you climbed the roof maybe-

"Too slow." Jack's breath was hot on your ear, and his arms clamped around your waist, fingers digging in like a steel trap. Suddenly you were airborne, and you swore as Jack slung you over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. You smacked his back, your clothes already damp from contact.

"Put me down, dammit!" You wiggled, trying to slide forward, but he had an iron grip on your knees.

A sharp slap to your ass had you squirming for different reasons. "Keep pushing me, baby: see what it gets you," he rasped. "Now behave. You're in enough trouble as it is."

"Fuck you, Jack!" You snapped, but stopped struggling. Instead you glared at Gabriel as he approached.

"Maybe it's time to start apologizing," Gabriel grinned. "Or groveling."

"Fuck you too, papi."

Gabriel just laughed. "Oh this is going to be fun."

Chapter End Notes

Had some bad writing days, but I think I'm getting back in the groove of things. Just needed some extra time to recharge and plot the final arc in more detail. I broke 600k words in the rough drafts finally. I'm thinking the final product will be close to 700k. Yeesh.

This chapter originally had more Jack, in honor of being 76, but it got shuffled to 77. I hope one day you'll be able to forgive me.

Back to job hunting. I'm terrible at it.

Trying to be social and get more stuff done for my own sake. Bleargh.
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

It's been a long time coming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack carried you up the stairs, not bothering to take off his shoes or his wet clothes. You glowered at Gabriel, the whole trip up. He just shook his head at you, a sharp edge in his smile, excitement in his eyes.

"Your exit routes need work, hermosa," he laughed.

"Don't encourage her, Gabe," Jack grumbled and then he unceremoniously dumped you on the futon. You scrambled backward, propping yourself up on your elbows.

He dripped all over the floor, his chest and face flushed from the chase. He was breathing too hard and there was a harsh cast to his face, all frustration and heat. He took a step forward, forearms tensing as he reached for you, then he stopped, drawing his hand back. "I'm going to the bathroom to change," he said slowly, his voice an octave lower than usual. You recognized that wildness in his eyes: Jack's control was slipping. "And if you're still here when I get back, I'm going to pound the insolence out of you with my dick. If you're not, then Gabe and I can work this off." Abruptly, he turned a shut himself in the bathroom.

You glanced over at Gabriel, who was watching you with a lazy smile.

"Now you've done it," Gabriel stretched his arms over his head, robe falling open. "So what's it going to be? Think you can handle him like this? Or do you need to sit this round out?"

He was goading you, of course. They didn't really think you'd back down now, did they? You didn't have work or any other obligations for the next few days. You could afford to play their kinky games. Shooting him a dirty look, you peeled off the sweats, debating on leaving on Gabriel's hoodie, just so Jack could destroy it.

"I bet if you change into some of that cute lingerie you brought, it'll put him in a better mood," Gabriel said, sitting cross-legged on the edge of the futon. Even with the robe, it wasn't hard to see just how aroused he was.

"I'll...need a moment," you said, looking at the bathroom door.

"I can distract him for a few minutes," Gabriel said, climbing to his feet. "I think he'd enjoy something red or black. I know I would." Winking at you, he went into the bathroom, the door shutting with a neat click.

Jack had looked...feral. You shivered, peeling off the damp hoodie. You weren't certain what you were getting into, but there was no doubt that you wanted to stick around and find out.

Quickly, you rummaged through your bags, digging out the black leather underbust corset.
It left your breasts exposed, but pushed them up for better display. And it was sturdy, fastening closed with metal grommets and thick laces. The garment might not be super-soldier proof, but it would not tear like lace, and you suspected Jack wouldn't destroy it, if only because it wouldn't be in his way. There were garter straps for stockings, and you put those on too, even though you knew they wouldn't make it through the night. You didn't bother with panties. Those would be the very first thing Jack ripped off. But you gave yourself a onceover in the mirror, admiring the way the corset flattered your figure.

You took a moment to arrange your hair, even though you knew all this primping was in vain. You might look nice for a hot second, but Jack was going to ruin that fast.

The bathroom door opened, and you blinked as Gabriel stumbled out laughing, his robe in disarray. Jack followed, hair still damp, clothes gone. He grasped Gabriel's shoulders, spun him around, and kissed him hard. Gabriel nipped Jack's lower lip, hands roaming the other man's bare torso.

You sat back against a pillow, one hand slipping between your legs while you watched them.

Jack shoved Gabriel against the wall, mouth already traveling down the column of his neck, hands fumbling with the thick cloth belt. Gabriel pulled away, tapping Jack's nose and pointing to you. Jack hesitated, because he obviously wasn't done with Gabriel, but he turned around, eyes widening as he saw you.

He released Gabriel, stalking over to you, jaw clenching and unclenching, like he couldn't choose what words to say.

You rose slowly, making sure to lick your slick fingers. The flush of Jack's cheeks deepened, and he reached for you, one hand locking around your arm as he pulled you against him.

"Status?" His voice was husky, though his expression was now neutral. Pure Strike Commander professionalism masked whatever internal struggle he was having. Was it that he couldn't decide who to jump first? Or had your lingerie choices short-circuited his brain?

"Green."

"Gabe said you needed a minute." Jack's voice was rough, like he really thought you were going to chicken out.

"You don't scare me, Jack," you said, leaning in to suck on a nipple, your teeth grazing the sensitive bud.

He fisted a handful of your hair, pulling you off of him. "No, you aren't calling the shots tonight, sweetheart. Get on your knees."

You complied, if only because he had a solid grip on you. You glanced up at him, flashing your cockiest I-don't-give-a-damn-about-your-authority Blackwatch agent smirk. He stepped to the side, and pushed on your shoulders, forcing you onto all fours.

"Hold that position," he said gruffly, hand trailing down your spine and stopping to cup your bare ass. "Gabe, get my bag."

You tried to see what Gabriel was doing, but Jack crouched in front of you, holding your chin. "Eyes forward." He pushed your hair out of your face, hands deceptively gentle.
Gabriel handed Jack a messenger bag, and Jack opened it up, pulling out a familiar leather collar. He fastened it around your neck, apparently remembering exactly how to fit it. He gave the leash a little tug, smirking as you jumped. He moved behind you, taking a moment to fish through his bag of tricks.

"These match," he said to himself. "They'll look nice."

Gabriel chuckled.

Jack patted your ass. "Lay flat," he ordered, moving a pillow under your head.

You shivered, skin warming at his touch, and lowered yourself onto the blankets.

"Hand behind your back." Jack wrapped a padded leather cuff around each wrist. The chain in the middle had enough slack so that you could rest your arms comfortably against your low back.

"You really do like tying me up," you said. "Don't know if the world's really prepared for how kinky you are, sir."

"Keep it up and you get the gag, baby," he said coolly.

"Thought you liked banter," you said, smiling into the pillow.

"It's for your own good. You're already in enough trouble. Wouldn't want you to bite off more than you can chew."

"Come closer sir, I'll show you much biting I can do."

Jack's hand came down sharply on your ass and you yelped at the sudden sting, your inner muscles clenching too tightly from the impact.

"You really do make some poor decisions, baby. Here you are, little better than naked, tied up, and you're still running your mouth testing my very limited supply of patience."

"It's pretty hot, isn't it?" You bit your lip.

"I think we're going to have to work on your definition of hot," Jack said, sounding mildly aggravated. "See, I think it's hot listening to you pant and scream while I'm balls deep inside you and fucking your needy little holes. But it's also pretty "hot" to watch you straining and drooling around a gag, trying desperately to beg me for something with those pretty eyes, while I'm fucking your needy little holes. Hell, it's still pretty hot even if I'm just watching Gabe hold you down so he can rail your needy little holes."

You sensed a theme there, and you could feel your slickness coating your thighs at his words. Maybe he had a point. You liked pushing Jack's buttons a lot. But you needed to keep an endgame in mind. It was just really difficult to strategize when Jack had you tied up and was oh so casually discussing rough sex.

Chuckling to himself, Jack lifted your legs, securing another set of leather cuffs around each ankle.

"Is that necessary?" You glanced at him over your shoulder.

"No, but you deserve it. Kicking me into the pool wasn't a smart move, sweetheart." He
pushed your heels toward your ass, spreading your thighs wide.

"You earned it," you said.

"One more smart comment before I'm done, and you're getting the gag. Now don't let go," he ordered, pushing the connecting chain into your hands.

You fumbled with it at first, but you let your legs dangle over your the backs of your thighs while your metal fingers held the chain in place. It was a looser version of a hogtie and you took a few breaths, getting used to the angle of the stretch. You would start to ache eventually, but you could hold this position for a little while.

"Comfortable?" Jack stroked your back, blunt nails edging along your spine.

"I can handle it."

Gabriel knelt in front of you, robe half off as he stroked himself. "Let's give you something useful to do with that mouth." He pressed his thick head to your lips and you opened your mouth, tongue flicking out to lick the velvety skin. Gabriel slowly thrust into your mouth, giving you time to adjust to his girth.

A familiar cool sensation lit up your nerves as Jack's fingers trailed along your ass, and you moaned softly as his fingers began to stretch out your back hole. The cool lube soothed the burn of the intrusion and soon enough he was pressing a thick plug against your ass. You whimpered around Gabriel's cock as he slowly pushed it inside.

"You ought to see this greedy little ass of yours swallowing it up," he murmured in your ear. "You just can't get enough, can you?"

"That's it, hermosa," Gabriel stroked your hair. "You just keep those pretty lips wrapped around my dick. It's the easiest way to keep yourself out of trouble."

You glared at him, cheeks hollowing as he pushed himself in to the hilt. You gagged as he hit the back of your throat.

"Relax," he said. "You're better off swallowing those words alongside my cock."

"It's a miracle, Gabe. You've finally gotten her to stop running her mouth." Both men laughed, way too amused by their stupid jokes.

You were going to make them both pay. It probably would not be tonight. Or even tomorrow night. But you were going to get them both back.

"Tap if you're having trouble," Gabriel said, hips moving slowly.

You bobbed your head in response.

"I've been thinking about this for awhile," Jack confessed. "I know I've been promising payback for all the sneaky little tricks you've played. And I know you probably expected me to forget about your misbehavior. But don't worry, I haven't."

The plug started to buzz and you groaned softly around Gabriel's shaft. He was letting you set the pace, but he wasn't pulling out and giving you any chance at speech. You squirmed in your bonds, the vibrations gradually growing stronger.
"It's amazing that you have on all this fabric, and it covers absolutely nothing," Jack groaned, his rigid cock pressed firmly against your ass.

You tried to push your hips back, managing a tiny wiggle.

Jack just laughed at your efforts.

"Do you want something, baby? That's too bad. Why don't you show me that you can behave?" He squeezed your ass, and you shuddered. The toy hummed away at your walls and you sucked harder on Gabriel's cock, unable to channel your tension into anything else. You had little reach and all you could do was take him at his own pace.

Gabriel, sensing your impatience, began to speed up. His thrusts grew rougher and you choked a few times, but stubbornly kept sucking, and he rewarded you with a husky moan, his fingers tangling in your hair.

"You're much better behaved with a cock in your mouth," Jack said.

Gabriel's strokes grew faster, filling your throat. You split your concentration between breathing and trying to relax enough to take him.

"It's pretty hot, isn't it? Trying to swallow Gabe whole. Being tied down and used. Getting teased like this. I can feel you shaking." Jack trailed kisses along your spine. "And I haven't even touched your greedy little pussy yet. Go on, Gabe. She's won't break. You can go harder. She loves this."

Gabriel cupped your chin, tilting your head up. You could feel the heat rising in your cheeks. You actively drooled around his cock, trying desperately to swallow him down. His dark eyes locked on yours and he pushed harder, obviously enjoying having you at his mercy. His strokes grew rougher.

"That's it, **hermosa.** It's all right if you can't swallow it all. I like seeing my seed smeared on your pretty face-" His voice dropped to a growl and a hot flood of semen hit the back of your throat, his heavy cock twitching in your mouth. You swallowed rapidly, knowing you wouldn't be able to get it all.

He began to pull out, his shaft coated in saliva and cum. You swirled your tongue around it cleaning him up. Gabriel leaned over to wipe your swollen lips. "Good girl," he said and you shivered as he kissed you hungrily.

Your eyes widened as Jack began to pull the plug out, vibrations dragging along your walls as he tugged. You shuddered as he ever so slowly removed the thick toy before he shut it off. The pressure on your nerves started as tickling, but grew more insistent. There was a soft pop as the plug came free. You couldn't quite turn your head to see what he was doing, but then you felt more lube getting pushed into your stretched out hole.

"Aren't you going to-?"

"No sweetheart, I'm going to fuck this cute little ass till you can't take it," he said cheerfully. "Remember that time you begged Gabe to wreck me? Or maybe that time you thought you were being clever in my office with your vibrating fingers?" His breath caught at the mention of it. "Or even how cheeky you were that night in Gabe's office? Because I certainly do."

You gave a strangled cry as he rubbed his cockhead against your ass and began to push, his head splitting you wide. Panting you squirmed and clenched, your fingers tightening around the
Jack gripped your ankles, rolling his hips till his thighs were pressed against your ass. You buried your face in the pillow, straining to accept him. The pressure made you clench your vaginal muscles even tighter, and you were very conscious of just how empty your other hole was.

"Papi," you said, voice weak.

"Yes, baby girl?" His voice practically dripped with amusement and you lifted your head, staring at him pleadingly.

"Need...need you too."

"You want to slurp on my cock some more, baby?" His eyes twinkled. The bastard knew what you wanted.

"No," you moaned. "Need you in my pussy. Want you both to-"

Jack drew back, shaft sliding smoothly out and then drove it back in.

The force of the stroke made you squeal and left you reeling. You bit your lip, breathing hard.

"Is that all you want, baby?" Jack laughed. "You want someone to touch that naughty little pussy? That's just too bad. I don't think you deserve it at all."

"J-Jack-" you whined.

"Can't even address me properly," he said with mock consternation. "Where was all that defiance you were showing earlier? You sure talked a big game, but once you get a cock inside you-"

"Fuck you, Jack," you snapped in frustration. "Just you wait."

He only laughed at your response. "That's it, baby. Don't start begging yet. I'm going to enjoy fucking the fight out of you. Because I promise, sweetheart, you'll be crying mercy long before I'm ready to give it to you."

Sweaty and sore, you lay face down in the blankets, cursing Jack and Gabriel. Contrary to your expectations, Jack wasn't rough with you. He took his time, drilling you deep and slow, adding generous amounts of lube when you felt dry, but purposefully ignoring your clit. Your thighs and the blankets under you were soaked, and when you tried to rub yourself against the bedding, Jack lifted you by the waist, preventing you from getting any stimulation.

You clenched around him with each thrust, breathing shakily as he squeezed your breasts and kissed your neck.

Gabriel just sat there stroking his cock, looking far too pleased by the show.

"You could always use your safe word," Jack said in your ear, fingers twisting your nipples. "I'd stop this right away."
You were tempted, so very tempted right now. Your pussy ached from neglect, and every time Gabriel flashed you a cocky smirk, you wanted to leap up and punch him, or jump him, or both. Definitely both.

"Of course," Jack continued. "You'd have to take care of yourself then. You're always going on about how your hands work just fine, all the fun toys you have. So I guess you could just lie here and do that too-"

"Fuck you, Jack," you snarled, your voice considerably weaker.

"That's what I'm doing," he laughed, giving the leash a little yank. "I wonder how much longer you're going to be able to hold out. Because I'm close. You look so delicious, writhing and trembling underneath me. Your ass is taking me so well. Going to come deep inside you." He nuzzled the back of your neck. "You'll be scraping my cum out for days."

You whimpered softly as he began to stroke your inner thighs, his fingers ghosting along your folds. The feel of a thick cock in your ass was amazing, but it still wasn't enough and you whipped your head from side to side, trying to contain your growing frustration.

The need was beginning to verge on pain, and you clamped your eyes shut, teeth clenched as Jack sped up, his balls slapping against your pussy lips. You tried to rock your hips, to get just a little more sensation. But Jack tightened his grip on your waist and you struggled against him, trying in vain to move. Sweat beaded on your upper lip and buried your face in the pillow.

From this angle you could feel just how deep in your belly Jack was. He stretched you with each thrust. And it still wasn't enough.

"That's it sweetheart. You just lie there and take it," Jack murmured, fingers digging into your hips.

You swore into the pillow, grinding your teeth as Jack tensed, and gave two hard thrusts before he came with a loud groan. The wet heat of his release did nothing to sate your burning nerves.

"Love how tight your sweet little ass it. Juicy too," he laughed, hand coming down hard on your butt and you shrieked into the bedding, the angle just right to make your pelvic muscles contract.

"She liked that," Gabriel murmured.

Jack bent over to kiss the base of your neck. "Is that so? You like being spanked?"

"You're the worst," you growled, voice strained.

Laughing, Jack nipped your shoulder. "Don't worry sweetheart, I can keep going. I can do this all night long. The question is how much more can you take?"

Your breath hitched as he pinched your nipples, the heat between your legs flaring. Everywhere he touched, you felt it between your thighs. A flicker of pleasure, but nowhere enough. Eyes squeezed shut, you nearly choked as his cock stirred inside you, and he began to rock his hips once more. It was the same thought bouncing around your fraying mind. So close, but not enough. Not nearly enough.
Your breaths came in hard sobs. The pillow was damp with your sweat and other fluids. That sunshine bastard had come twice now, and still he maintained a torturously lazy pace, his hands roaming your body, keeping you on a knife's edge. The soft pleasure had begun to sharpen inside you, tearing at you and lashing out for release. Each thrust stoked that feverish need, and you writhed beneath him, teeth clamped as you tried to silence yourself.

"You're beautiful like this." Jack kneaded your ass and you nearly bit your tongue off. "So desperate for us."

You bit the pillow, trying to muffle your frustration.

"Aw, come on sweetheart. If you ask nicely, I might give you what you want." His fingers brushed lightly against your lower lips and you bucked your hips, practically melting into his touch.

"He can do this for hours, hermosa," Gabriel murmured, patting your head. "And he's fine leaving you like this."

Hours? You shuddered, vision blurring. You couldn't do this for hours. "No, sir, I can't...I can't take much more," your voice broke. "I need to come, sir. Please let me come, please sir."

"That was very sweet," Jack said soothingly. "Good progress, but not quite what I wanted. You're going to have to do better than that."

Nerves aflame, you cried out in frustration. All you could focus on was the throbbing between your thighs, the tension twisting tighter and tighter with no relief. Everything he did made it worse, and being trapped in this state grew more agonizing by the second.

"I don't...I don't know what you want," you shook, muscles locking up. "Jack, I don't know...please."

"Mmm, you don't remember?" His laugh was soft and wicked.

"Mercy," you panted, lifting your head. "Please, sir, I can't-"

"Closer, but not quite." He gave a light slap across your ass and you dropped on your face, thighs quivering. "This is payback, remember? You earned every minute of this treatment. Now if you want me to let you come, maybe you should apologize for pushing me into the pool."

That petty, vicious, beautiful son of a bitch. You weren't sure who was being more unreasonable right now, but you were fine faulting Jack. So you bit the pillow, knowing you couldn't trust yourself to speak sweetly.

"Nothing to say?" He murmured, cock plowing deeper into your ass.

"Goddamnit." Your voice was a harsh whisper and you squeezed your eyes shut, too proud to give him the satisfaction. Except in this case, it went both ways.

"I think I'm being pretty reasonable," Jack said. "I'm not even asking for you to apologize for all those times you were blatantly insubordinate. But every time I think of your smarmy little smirk or sharp little one-liner, it just makes me want to prolong this." He laughed softly.

"You cheated," you said, and even as the words left your lips, you knew how pathetic you
"A cheap shot isn't cheating, baby. And anyway, are you really in a position to argue with me?" Jack didn't sound the least bit annoyed. In fact, he sounded excited, like he was enjoying the idea of seeing how long he could drag this out.

Sniffling, you clenched your teeth. Jack rolled his hips and your whole body spasmed, the force of it squeezing tears from your eyes. You lay there, shaking.

"I'm sorry," you muttered ungraciously.

"Mmm, what was that?" Jack laughed. "Once more, with feeling."

You couldn't even focus on revenge. Shoulders drooping, you bit back a moan. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm sorry I pushed you in the pool." Each word felt like pulling teeth and you gripped your bonds tighter.

"What do you think, Gabe? Sound genuine to you?"

"She could do better," Gabriel said, voice husky. "But you have been edging her for quite awhile. Don't know how much coherence or civility is left in her."

"I'm really fucking sorry," you wailed. "Now please, please stop teasing me. I need to come so badly I can't think straight. It fucking hurts and I can't take it any more. Now show some goddamn mercy, you bastard." Then you dropped back into the bedding, sobbing in frustration.

"...Points for honesty," Gabriel said, after a moment.

Jack just gave a hum of pleasure. "Poor baby. You've almost persuaded me. What do you need?"

"Need you both," you whispered, voice raw. "Need to come. Can't take any more of your goddamn teasing. You've made me scream. You've made me beg. You've made me apologize. You fucking win, sir."

"You certainly made that harder than it had to be," Jack said, swallowing audibly.

You just snarled, his name a curse on your lips.

Jack didn't deign to respond, his demeanor cool. But you weren't fooled. Even in your shaken state, you heard his pleased exhalation at you confession. More importantly, you could feel him twitching inside you.

"Goddamnit, Jack-"

"All right, sweetheart. I'm convinced. Give me one moment to get cleaned up and then I'll give you what you want. Now, what do you say?"

Your pulse quickened. "Thank you, sir," you panted, eyes still squeezed shut.

Ever so slowly Jack pulled out. "Be back in a moment."

"I'll take off the ankle cuffs," Gabriel said as he moved behind you, his warm hands massaging your stiff thighs. You gave a groan of relief after he released your legs and lowered them gently. "Such a stubborn thing."
"Fuck you," you exhaled, no venom or heat in the words. You were too worn down.

You flinched as he spread your ass cheeks. "Jack really worked you over," he said. You were too tired to be embarrassed. "Still want us both?"

"Yes," you sighed. "Just too dry-"

Gabriel poured more lube inside you, and then began to inch his thick cock into your stretched hole. You gave a whine of frustration, wishing he'd give your clit more attention. But then he was in, and your ass was full again, and the strain on your legs had eased. He pulled you into his lap, a contented sigh on his lips. Your eyes fluttered shut as he stroked your hips, his hands hot on your sweaty skin.

Jack knelt between your legs, his cock rubbing against your slit.

A moan escaped your lips.

"Look at me."

You opened your eyes, meeting Jack's insufferably satisfied gaze. His cheeks were flushed, his smile triumphant. He leaned in, kissing you hungrily.

"You held out so long, you ornery little shit. God, I love you." Then he thrust inside you, his cock filling your slick pussy with one hard stroke.

You howled into his mouth, shrieking as he began to pound you, his fingers already rubbing against your swollen clit. He filled you perfectly, his shaft dragging against your walls, his head stroking your g-spot. And while his touch softened the ache inside you, it did nothing to cool the heat building in your core. Your nerves burned and that was exactly what you needed. Three thrusts, and you dissolved around him, wailing at the intensity of your overdue release. Your body spasmed, and you collapsed between your lovers, muscles contracting so hard that you lost control of your limbs. And through it all, Jack watched you, eyes shining and bright, a content smile on his face, his blonde hair sticking to his forehead.

You lay there shaking between them, breaths coming in hard gasps, as you rode out the long-delayed orgasm.

Gently, Jack nuzzled your throat. "Ready, Gabe?"

You blinked, mind hazy.

"Been ready," Gabriel murmured, reaching over you to clasp Jack's forehead to his. The men kissed over your shoulder.

The buzzing started up then, and you squealed, body still too sensitive to pinpoint where exactly this new layer of sensation was coming from. You looked down, the blue silicone ring around the base of Jack's cock had a small vibrator attached.

"Like it?" Jack murmured, kissing your forehead. "You're the one who inspired me to get one."

"Jack, I just... I can't-"

"But you begged so hard for us to let you come," Gabriel said in your ear, his hands cupping your breasts.
"We're just giving you what you want," Jack said happily, and they both began to move, stretching you in synchronization.

The second orgasm came on the tail of the first, the heavy vibrations on your clit dragging you back under. Even when your lovers were gentle, it still felt like they could tear you apart, and now they were enthusiastically taking you, their thick cocks hollowing you out. You dimly realized then that they weren't just going to get you off and stop. No, Gabriel was nowhere near satisfied. As for Jack, he was getting all his accrued pettiness and frustration out in one go.

Jack left bite marks along your chest, alternating between sucking your nipples and kissing your face. Gabriel nibbled on your ears and neck, his hands traveling between your breasts and your thighs, teasing, pinching, and stroking.

And that goddamn vibrator kept brushing against your clit, humming away at your overworked nerves.

"Can't-" you panted, as Gabriel gently turned your head to the side so he could kiss you.

"You can," Gabriel said firmly after he released you.

Jack tugged on the leash and you looked up, unprepared for how damn happy he looked. "Gabe's right, baby," he said with a laugh. "You have to try."

You didn't have breath to curse his trite pep talks.

"You're so pretty like this, all desperate and sensitive." Jack rolled his hips and you squealed. He tugged the leash dragging you closer. "You're ours, sweetheart. And we're going to make sure you don't forget it." Jack held you against him, letting Gabriel thrust extra deep, pushing you flush against the toy. That sent you over the edge yet again, and you screamed till your throat was raw. But neither man relented, Jack's tip bumping your cervix while Gabriel kept stretching your ass. The pendulum had swung to the opposite side of the spectrum, and it was too much now. Far too much. You babbled and begged, tears in your eyes, body soaked in sweat and other fluids.

You didn't have the strength to thrash around any more, and trapped between their bodies, you had nowhere to escape to anyway. Your breaths came in sharp hiccups while you slumped limp against Jack's chest, letting him hold you up.

And still they kept going, not giving you any quarter. Jack held your thighs apart, and your arms remained bound behind your back. They teased you, praised you, and promised more filthy things, until Jack's words devolved into grunts and curses while Gabriel lapsed into long strings of Spanish.

In your haze, you felt them spill themselves inside you, but they didn't stop and you gave up counting or trying to keep score. Goddamn super soldier stamina. It wasn't till you'd gone quiet, too exhausted to do anything besides twitch from the nervous stimulation, that they finally let you rest. You were a mess of cum, lube, and sweat. Your arms ached from being in the same position for so long. Karma, you realized, head muzzy as you slumped against Gabriel's chest.

After that, the world went mercifully still.
You were very warm, extremely thirsty, and extra sticky, but you were too damn tired to care. Calloused hands rubbed your back and you groaned into Jack's chest.

"You need to drink something," Gabriel's voice cut through your stupor.

"You're not the boss of me," you rasped, words slurring together. Your tongue was too thick and stuck to the roof of your mouth.

He just snorted and pressed a water bottle to your lips. You drank involuntarily, the liquid soothing your throat. Gradually, you opened your eyes, and took the bottle in your hands, emptying it.

"Need to clean up," you said, feeling slightly better.

"Yeah, we really messed you up," Jack said, not the least bit remorseful. You lay sprawled across his chest, your body aching.

"Think you can manage a shower?" Gabriel sat beside you, offering you another bottle of water. You finished that one off too, your head feeling less swimmy.

Your corset was intact, though it would need a thorough cleaning. And you were still wearing the collar. Shaking your head, you fumbled with the buckles. Jack very gently helped you finish taking off your accessories.

"Can't feel my legs." You drooped against him, unable to bite back your groan as Gabriel massaged your thighs. Motions stiff, you rolled off Jack, managing to sit up. You felt like you'd been in a particularly fun barroom brawl, and while you hurt, hours later you were still punch drunk.

"I got you," Jack said, kissing the back of your neck. He lifted you carefully. "Shower and we can go back to sleep. Tomorrow we can take it easy again."


Jack set you down on the shower floor and turned on the water. It was deliciously warm and soothing. "After all that, you're still feeling insubordinate. It's adorable."

You were too tired to argue properly, so you just stuck out your tongue, hoping your disgruntled expression clearly conveyed your thoughts. "Mlem."

Jack shook his head, water dripping down his face. "Are you thirsty?"

Rolling your eyes, you reached for the washcloth, but Jack pushed your hand to the side.

"Let me," he said, smile remaining unshakeable. Carefully, he soaped you down, hands gentle as he rubbed your wrists and ankles. He frowned at a few bruises, and started to take inventory, but you put your hand over his, and mimed scrubbing motions.

"Don't care," you said.

"Should've been more careful."

"Yeah, I won't be sitting right for days."

"That part's karma," Jack said. He kissed your nose. "Thank you for indulging me. I think
you had fun too, right?"

You just nodded wearily, too tired to have a real conversation. But you needed the shower. And Jack knew how to take care of you. You watched the water swirl around the drain, resting against Jack while he finished cleaning you up.

After he turned the water off and got out of the shower, you considered flopping down against the still-warm ceramic tub. But he was back in seconds, rubbing you down with a towel, and fluffing your hair. You would look ridiculous tomorrow, but you were too exhausted to care right now.

When he carried you out to the bedroom, the futon had been rotated and the bedding changed. Gabriel flicked on the emitter and Jack set you down in the middle. Gabriel gave you a quick kiss and headed into the bathroom.

You stretched out and sunk into your pillow, eyes heavy and limbs leaden. You were almost asleep when Jack bedded down beside you, pulling the heavy comforter over you both.

"Love you," Jack said in your ear.

"You better," you mumbled.

Gabriel emerged from the bathroom, toweling off his hair. "You're still awake?"

You just grumbled under your breath.

Gabriel just laughed. "Jack, I think you somehow made her even worse."

"She's so cute when she's awful," Jack said. "Makes me want to wreck her all over again."

You had absolutely nothing to say to that.

"You all right, corazon?" Gabriel slid under the blankets beside you.

"Tired."

"Can I get you anything?" Jack asked, his voice fading out as you nodded off, no longer able to keep your eyes open.

You woke up at a strange angle, your neck aching. You reached out, feeling the warm bare skin underneath your head. Ridged muscles tensed under your fingertips. "This is terrible pillow," you muttered mostly for someone else's benefit. "Too hard and bumpy, and it feels like a...washboard?"

"You're not funny," Jack snorted and smacked you in the head with a pillow.

You squawked, throwing up your arms to cover your head.

"Up," Jack said, and slid the pillow under your neck.

You had somehow ended up resting your head on his stomach. Which was much more
comfortable with an actual pillow cushioning you. Your legs were tangled with Gabriel's and he lay angled on his side, one arm around your waist.

"It was Gabe," Jack said as you lifted your head, trying to figure out how you got in this position. "You were far too exhausted to move around so much in your sleep."

"That's nice, but I'm hungry," you said, trying to wiggle free.

"But you were so tired," Gabriel murmured faintly. "Go back to sleep."

"Hungry," you said, prying his arm off your waist. Grinning, you crawled out of the blankets and wobbled to your feet. Oh, that was a bad idea. You ached, working emitter or not. You winced, dropping back down.

"Tsk, sore?" Jack asked, sitting up.

"Yeah," you glanced at the emitter, wondering if it had betrayed you. Then you recalled just how intense last night had been. There was only so much modern science could achieve. Though you considered, very briefly, asking Angela how to reduce soreness in...certain areas. Then you pictured her weary yet murderous expression. Nope, never mind.

Yawning, Jack rose and rummaged through a drawer, retrieving your yukata. He helped you put it on, not tying the sash very securely, and then dressed himself, before crouching down in front of you, like he was trying to coax you into a game of leapfrog.

"Arms around my neck," Jack said, smiling at you over his shoulder.

"Really?"

"You don't want a piggyback ride out to the pool? That way you can soak your sore muscles and I'll make you breakfast while you wait."

It took you half a second to consider the offer. The first part sounded amazing. The latter part got you thinking. There was plenty of fresh fruit in the fridge and Jack could actually make decent bacon, and you probably wouldn't die. "OK."

Jack lifted you with ease and your forearm tensed briefly as you clung to him. Jack moved smoothly, careful not to jostle you, his arms carefully supporting your legs. You kissed the back of his neck then began to gnaw on his shoulder, causing him to yelp.

"Hey!"

"Hungry."

Jack swatted you lightly. "I still have the gag and I will use it."

You grumbled, but stopped biting.

"You coming Gabe?" He asked, looking back over his shoulder.

Gabriel was upright, watching you with heavy-lidded eyes. "How are you both so damn cute?"

You sighed, resting your face on Jack's shoulder. "It's Jack's not-so-secret weapon."

"None of you can resist me," Jack said with a cheerful nod.
"No, I guess not." Gabriel stretched and pushed aside the blankets. "I'll be down in a second. You two go soak. I'll handle breakfast."

"But you did it yesterday-" Jack began.

"And it was delicious. You can feed us tomorrow." And you considered then that maybe you should get up early tomorrow and handle the food. Gabriel began to dress, but kept shooting you and Jack little smiles.

"Are you sure?"

"I think you owe Lucky more aftercare. That third strike last night was a pretty cheap shot, Jack. It wouldn't have flown in the ring."

"Ha!" You shouted in his ear. "Told you!"

"But it wasn't cheating," Jack said, wincing and rubbing his ear.

"Oh, sorry about that."

Jack laughed it off, shaking his head. "You're not that loud. Even when you were screaming for us last night-"

"I take it all back," you growled. "I'm not sorry."

"Me neither," Jack said, and sauntered out of the room. You tightened your grip around his neck, even though it didn't seem like your weight affected him. Just wait till you got back in the water: you'd show him...

"Don't drown him! Or you only get plain oatmeal for breakfast!" Gabriel called out, because that man knew exactly how your thought process worked.

Chapter End Notes

Been catching up slowly on the fic. Job hunt goes slowly. I move slowly. Bleagh, really dreading going back to work.

Hope everyone else had a good week!
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

It's always something.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You took it easy, soaking in the pool while Jack rubbed your sore legs. When you got back to base you were going to start pricing giant hot tubs. Maybe you could get them to install a whirlpool bath in the gym. Of course, Jack would try to get you to sneak in there after hours for sex, but right now that didn't sound like such a bad idea...

Mostly because Jack and Gabriel had fucked your brains out last night and you were apparently still kind of a witless moron meandering through a cheerful cloud of bad ideas. It was strange to reflect on your intimacy. They'd ruined you. Those bastards had spoiled you with mind-blowing kinky sex and then copious amounts of aftercare. There was no way you could go back to how things were before. Just like there was no way you ever wanted to admit that to anyone, let alone them.

"Am I hurting you?" Jack asked, hands hesitating over your calves.

"No." You blinked, a little surprised by his worried expression.

"You're grimacing," he said, kissing your shoulder.


Jack leaned over, fingers massaging your hips. "Tell me."

You huffed. "It's nothing."

"Really?" Jack poked you in the nose, laughing as you snapped your teeth at him. "If something's bothering you..."

"It's really minor."

"Tell me," Jack wheedled, nibbling on your ear.

You groaned. "I'm really happy and I'm not used to it, so I sort of don't know how to handle it. Like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. There are so many things that could go wrong and external factors aside, I'm still worried about screwing this up all on my own." And you blurted it all out like a preschooler, sharing a lot more than you intended, because that's what he asked for.

Jack leaned against the wall of the pool, one arm dragging you closer. "We both know I can't promise the world isn't out to get us. But me and Gabe have weathered it this long, and we've all faced worse odds. You know we can be bumbling idiots. But even though we've all fucked up before, we've learned from our mistakes. That's the important part. That, and I really want to be here or anywhere with you and Gabe." He kissed the side of your head. "And I'll do anything to
make it happen. Even "accidentally" dumping my coffee on the Belgian ambassador's bespoke linen trousers. They were white. *Were.*

You snorted. "Did you really?"

"He's the reason I was late," Jack scoffed. "Ran the goddamn meeting over by two whole hours. So my coffee was cold, and it did no real damage, except to his wardrobe. But you know, it's the thought that counts."

You laughed. "Yeah."

"I admit, I would like it if you let me do more for you," Jack said, tone still easy and light. "I can put together a list of politicians you can spill your coffee on," you said.

"I was thinking a touch more personal."

"...You planned this vacation and were giving me a massage." You paused. "You can continue with the massage."

Laughing, Jack pulled you onto his lap and went back to rubbing your thighs. "That's not exactly what I meant. Yes, I planned the vacation around something I thought you'd like, something we'd all like. But we needed it. As for the massage, that's part of the aftercare package. I wreck you, I get to fuss over you afterward."

"O-K," you said, not quite understanding his issue. "You and Gabe commissioned all those shiny new weapons for me. That seems pretty thoughtful."

Jack shook his head. "That's work. And what's the point of being the Strike Commander if I can't keep my agents safe?"

There was more to it than that, but apparently that wasn't the point he was trying to make either. You mulled it over for a second. "Still not sure what you mean then."

"I worded it wrong," Jack sighed. "And I was doing so well too."

"You were. That was a good pep talk, by the way," you said with a nod. "Perked me right up. I appreciate it."

"Good." Jack kissed the top of your head. "So what's the point of being the Strike Commander if I can't keep my agents safe?"

You blinked. "So we're not counting work? Because let's be honest-"

"No, the weapons were purely work-related. Not about us and this thing we have," he said firmly.

"This cuddling?"

Jack blew out a breath. "We need to do it after last night. It's to balance things. Not that I feel obligated, more...we played rough, now we need to be gentle."

"Jack, I am very confused," you said, tilting your head back to look at him.

"The more I try to say it, the sillier I sound," Jack said, shaking his head. "I know you're a competent independent agent, a certified badass, and were possibly raised by wolves."
You snorted. "It's OK, Jack. You can say it. I'm kind of feral, I know."

"It's part of your charm," Jack said, kissing your neck. "But you hoard things, thoughts, feelings. You'd rather try to handle your problems alone than bring them to anyone's attention. And maybe it'd help if you occasionally opened up and brought that stuff up unprompted."

You blinked. "Are you asking me to be more high maintenance?"

"No, I am...botching this," Jack sighed. "I'm asking you to rely on me more. Like when you want advice, or you need to talk about Aishani, or when you needed an orchid-sitter. I get that you're being really considerate of my workload and I appreciate it. But sometimes, even when I know something's bothering you, it's hard to reach you. I know you're not trying to shut me out, but it sometimes seems that way." He gave you a rueful smile.

"Oh," you said.

"You rely a lot on Gabe. And I know that Gabe is better at anticipating you than I am, and I'm not jealous," he said quickly. "But...I'm here too, if you need something."

"I...Gabriel is just really good at reading me," you said after a moment. "And yeah, I guess I am bad about talking about my problems. I'm used to solving them on my own, with varying results. But I figure you have enough to worry about and."

"I know," Jack said. "And sometimes I'm not as perceptive as Gabe. But you know, if you need something, you can ask me too. And I'll work on making more time and being more observant."

You took a moment to analyze that thought process. "This is the part where I realize I need to be better at communication and not make my decisions in isolation, right?"

"Yup," Jack said, and you could hear the smile in his voice.

"I will try to be better at communication and not be so paranoid and secretive, even though that is a requirement for my job," you said, turning around to straddle his lap. "And I'm going to have to apologize in advance because I'm going to suck at it."

"I know," Jack said, eyes gentle. "I'm still going to be dense and inconsiderate. You'll have to help me too." He kissed your nose, hands resting on your hips. "But I'm not worried. We've come a long way from reluctant sparring partners."

"Were you reluctant?" You asked, crossing your arms. "Because I had the distinct impression you were looking forward to kicking my ass."

Jack had the grace to blush. "I wasn't looking forward to it, per se. I just viewed it as getting to know you."

"And warning me off your boyfriend."

Jack just laughed. "I honestly just wanted to drop in on Gabe that day. A "surprise your boyfriend at work" thing. Gabe's the one that partnered you with me."

You frowned. Jack was right. Damn. And you still had something else to ask him. Maybe it wasn't your biggest worry, but it was the one that had been in your thoughts for the last twenty four hours.
"What are we going to do about Gabriel's health?" You looked him dead in those sharp blue eyes. "And I did specifically ask you about that before and you-"

"I know and I'm sorry," Jack winced. "But he specifically asked me not to give you details till he had more information. We were going to tell you, just...later," he said awkwardly.

You crossed your arms.

"I...get that that wasn't the right way to handle things." Jack rubbed the back of his neck, his blue eyes welling up with sincerity and regret. And for a moment, you felt like you'd kicked a puppy. But this was Jack, he was trying to charm you. "We'll keep you in the loop from now on. It won't go down like that again. I promise."

"...So what are we going to do?" You asked, after a moment, because you weren't sure if you wanted to pick that fight now. "Because he's being stubborn. I don't like Zheng, but I...think we can rely on Feng."

"I've talked to Ray. She's willing to give On Sing access to her medical records. Her issues are milder, but from what we can tell, the root causes are similar."

"That's...uncharacteristically open of her."

"She isn't crazy about On Sing, but she trusts my judgment on this."

You tried to keep a serious face, because you had a very good idea what she distrusted his judgment over.

Jack laughed at you. "Ray likes you. Honest. She doesn't hate Gabe either. She's just...protective. We've always been close friends."

"Once she realized you weren't trying to woo her?"

Jack snorted. "Figured that one out, did you?" He shook his head. "Yeah. Once she realized I wasn't actually trying to romance her, she took pity on me, and we started hanging out, and...well, we get along pretty well."

"From what I hear, Andre, Ray, and Feng's people are hashing out the details. The US Army gets upset whenever their "proprietary" formulas get leaked, but Ray doesn't care either way and Andre likes sticking it to the man."

"What exactly does Andre do?" You asked, after a moment.

"He works for a private security firm. Very hush-hush, black ops contractor types. Andre...is one of our shadier comrades," Jack said. "I think you'd get along with him, if he could stop being a dick for ten minutes."

You raised a brow.

"We don't...hate each other. But we've never been close," Jack said. "I trust him at our backs, he's great in a fight, but I don't like his attitude. He clearly feels the same about me, but he adores Gabe though."

Your brow went a little higher.

"Yeah, like that, probably," Jack said with a sigh. "Blue wasn't wrong about his social skills either. And I don't know if Leah's seeing Blue, or Andre, or both of them right now. Maybe Lucy. Leah likes...stability, so probably Lucy. She didn't make it to the meeting because she was helping
"Huh," you said. "So, what's going on with Andre? I didn't think SEP messed around with a lot of cybridization."

Jack blinked. "Oh, you saw his eyes." He shrugged. "There were different branches of research, but you're mostly right. Andre's all about the augments. He's got the same chem enhancements the rest of us have. But that's not good enough for him; he's too damn competitive. So he plays around with cybernetic upgrades, biohacking, and gene-modding. He even has implants to read Omnicode. So he's our expert on dealing with outside researchers." Jack shrugged. "Gabe has him trawling other databanks for relative information. But I think he's genuinely interested in seeing what On Sing has to offer."

"You didn't bring drinks out?" Gabriel groaned as he emerged from the house, carrying a large tray of pancakes. "Lucky's going to end up heat sick-"

"I'm fine," you said eyeing the food. "You're just fussy, mom."

Snorting, Gabriel set down the tray down. "Keep giving me lip and you can eat your pancakes plain. Which is shame because there are some spectacular preserves, cheeses, compound butters, and honeys inside."

You groaned. "I take it back, I'm sorry."

"Good," Gabriel said. "Now don't eat all the pancakes, there are still bacon, eggs, and toppings to come. And the drinks, since apparently you two want to get dehydrated-"

"I'll help you," Jack laughed patting your hip, and you slid out of his lap. "Lucky, we'll be right back. Don't eat all the pancakes-"

"Would I do that?" You asked, smiling insincerely.

Your lovers' plans were terribly predictable. Soak, sleep, eat, and have sex multiple times in between. But you weren't complaining. You were too busy catching up on well-deserved rest. More than once you woke up to Jack stretched out beside you, Gabriel working him over, all while admonishing him to keep quiet, because you were sleeping.

You somewhat doubted the sincerity of their apologies, but sometimes you still joined in. Sometimes you just rolled over and pulled the blanket over your head, muttering about super soldier hormones.

That all changed on the fourth day.

It was midday and you were doing laps in the large covered pool, the one you'd pushed Jack into, because no matter what Jack said, sex was not enough exercise to burn off all the rich food you were eating.

Jack sat on the edge, reading a book, legs in the pool while he watched Gabriel run laps around the courtyard.
You paused your swimming when you saw a fish torpedo hovering beside Jack. While you knew Athena was helping with perimeter security, she'd made her drone selves scarce since you arrived.

Jack stiffened, no longer lounging. Back straight, eyes sharp, shoulders far too tense: you recognized the Strike Commander posture.

Quietly, you swam up to him and hung off the ledge.

Jack methodically clenched and unclenched his fists, not looking at you.

"Give me a moment," he said gruffly, when he noticed you watching him.

You nodded.

There was a long sigh.

"Orders, sir?" Athena asked timidly.

"Schedule the transport. I'll get packed."

What? That sounded bad.

You climbed out of the water and sat beside Jack, a thousand thoughts racing through your mind. Were Ziv and Jess all right? Had something happened in Zurich? Or Indiana?

Jack slung one arm around your shoulder. "Petras wants me back in Zurich for a debriefing. I'm listed as incommunicado, and Ana has the helm, but this is purely a dominance move. Since I'm "unavailable," he took it upon himself to order Jemison's squad to cover Nejem's old rotation in Greece, ignoring the fact we've completely changed our strategy for handling the Mediterranean region. I countermanded the order, of course, but now that I'm no longer incommunicado, well, I can't plead ignorance to Petras' summons. So I'll need to get back, if only to keep him from haphazardly reassigning my squads." Or at least playing stupid power games with their lives.

You were listed as on extended post-mission "R&R" and Gabriel was rumored to be on an op. No sense in leaving a bureaucratic trail, after all. But the Strike Commander did not get to maintain so many ambiguities or fictions.

"I think you should just say that you're taking some well-earned time off, and ignore him till you get back. He's a civilian authority and this isn't an emergency."

Jack shook his head. "I think we both know that won't fly."

Gabriel stopped behind you, looking far too comfortable in a hoodie and shorts, despite the cold weather. "What's wrong?"

"Petras wants me back in Zurich. Tried to transfer Epsilon squad to the Nejem's old territory even though we've created a no-fly zone throughout the area."

Gabriel frowned.

"Blocked it, of course, but now I'm out of hiding and he's demanding I meet with him." Jack rubbed his forehead. "I scheduled the transport. You two stay here, I have to handle this." And with that, Jack got up and briskly walked back to the guest house.

You glanced at Gabriel.
He was watching Jack, his face grim.

"Guess we should pack up then," you said after a moment.

Gabriel raised a brow.

"I mean, we're supposed to leave tomorrow evening anyway, so..."

"You'll miss the banquet," Gabriel said, giving you a wry smile. You'd both been looking forward to the extra fancy meal.

"...Yeah," you nodded. "But I'll miss poor overworked Jack more."

"Yeah, me too." Gabriel patted your head with approval. "Athena, give Mr. Ito our regrets. A work crisis has occurred and we'll be vacating the premises early. He keeps the full fee of course. We are extremely disappointed that we will miss his dinner, and we greatly appreciate his hospitality."

"Understood," Athena chirped.

You and Gabriel strolled into the house. You didn't have much packing to do, considering how little you'd brought along. However, Jack angrily folded his clothes and stacked them neatly in his duffel bag.

Gabriel silently packed his bag up and you changed out of your yukata into fatigues and a Blackwatch hoodie.

"What are you doing?" Jack scowled at Gabriel. "You two are staying here."

"Nah, we're coming with you," Gabriel murmured, slinging one arm around Jack's shoulders. "Place'll be dull without you."

Jack gave you both a hard look. "No, stay. I paid for another night and I want you two to have fun."

"Yeah, we'll have fun in your room tonight," you said. "We're still off tomorrow."

"I wouldn't mind sleeping in a real bed," Gabriel added. "The futons have their charm, but I like a good boxspring. Let's me bounce my hard-bodied boyfriend higher on my-"

Jack groaned. "Come on, don't let Pettras ruin your vacation too. This was supposed to be a treat for both of you."

Gabriel hugged Jack from behind nuzzling his shoulder, his hands flat on Jack's stomach. "It was a treat."

You wrapped your arms around Jack's neck, grinning because now he was trapped. "We'd just spend the rest of the night moping around the beautiful resort, eating fancy food, sighing in the hot tubs, and wishing you were here."

"So hanging out in your cramped quarters waiting on me to be done with Petras' bullshit is going to be better?" Jack said sharply.
"As long as we get you afterward, yeah. Give him hell, Jack. He interrupted your first vacation since Christmas, and for what? His petty little power games?" Gabriel scowled. "This won't go unpunished. I'll assign Tataryn to feed the tabloids some unsavory, but entirely believable rumors about his personal life." And Gabriel wondered why people considered him petty. Granted, that wasn't "petty," that was karma. At least in your book.

You kissed Jack's chin. "Finish packing and we can have a meal on the balcony before we go. Maybe we can come back another time."

Anger, disappointment, and grim acceptance all ran across Jack's face in quick succession. He tilted his head to the side and kissed Gabriel before leaning forward to kiss you. "You two are ridiculous," he said with a heavy sigh.

"I can set up the mats. We can cook some dinner, and when you're finally done with the political bullshit, we'll be in your quarters waiting," Gabriel murmured, his voice low and soothing.

Jack made a soft noise in the back of his throat. "I'd like that. But you don't have to-"

"Stop arguing. Let's raid the fridge and have a picnic before we go. Mr. Ito can't possibly eat all this food on his own. We don't want it to go to waste," you said, patting his cheek.

"You have the strangest priorities," Jack said, shaking his head.

You leaned against the railing of the balcony, squinting at the mountains. If you could melt the snow just by glaring at it... Well, that would be unwise; it would probably destabilize the terrain causing avalanches and rockslides. There really was no winning.

You turned back to your food. Gabriel had made you a ridiculously large sandwich filled with smoked fish, cheese, and onions. Plums, melons, and peaches had been sliced roughly and drizzled with champagne and honey. You had a bowl full of berries to eat with vanilla ice cream. Jack had also started mixing cocktails with...varying results. He and Gabriel were drinking them at an outrageous pace.

"Sorry, about cutting this short," Jack repeated and you rolled your eyes. "I'm really sorry. You could still-"

"Shh," Gabriel placed a finger on Jack's lips. "You've said that already. Multiple times. Stop apologizing, It's annoying."

"Lucky-"

"What he said." You flashed Jack a tolerant smile and he leaned against you, one arm around your waist.

"But you had fun, right?" He gazed at you earnestly.

"Obviously. Thank you, Jack," you said. "For doing this. I feel very spoiled."

"I'm glad." He kissed the side of your head. "We all needed it."
Gabriel stood on your other side, an arm over your shoulders.

"I'll take you on a fancy vacation every year," Jack said, staring at the horizon. "You just have to come back home to me and Gabe." The roughness in his voice took you off guard.

"Deal," you said after a few seconds. "I'll hold you to it."

"Witnessed," Gabriel said, squeezing your arm. "And no reneging, Jackie."

"I would never!" Jack scowled at Gabriel, eyebrows furrowed comically in outrage. "I don't like your implications!"

"I don't like going years without taking an "us" vacation," Gabriel said smugly. "Christmas and other family holidays don't count and you know it."

"When was the last time the two of you...?" You trailed off.

Jack hunched over, burying his face in your hair. "I can't remember right now. Stop picking on me."

"We're looking at maybe three, four years?" Gabriel mused, rubbing his beard. "It's been so long, I'm having trouble."

"I'll start planning next year's vacation, as soon as we get back to base!"

"Will that be in another three years?"

Jack hugged you tighter. "Lucky, make him stop."

You patted Gabriel's hand, smiling at the wicked humor in his eyes. "You're making him feel worse."

"Yeah, but you're trying to cheer him up and it's goddamn adorable."

Laughing, you stood between them, feeling the sun on your skin, their hands in yours. And you knew you would remember being here, just like this, for the rest of your life.

You sat on the Orca sulking, as Gabriel caught up on his messages. Jack had already disembarked, on his way to give Petras a piece of his mind. It wouldn't do for all three of you to turn up at the same time, so you were staggering your arrivals. You'd go next, and Gabriel would turn up an hour or two later. He had a lot of memos and reports to review.

The reason for your sourness were the two large temperature-controlled containers of mystery food that sat unopened on the floor. When Mr. Ito heard you were leaving early, he and Chef Astro hastily packed you a dinner, though Gabriel wouldn't let you peek at what they'd sent along.

Instead you were fielding a very concerned call from Feng.

"...Should I not have picked nabe? Would you guys rather have had proper washoku every night? Did I overstep? Oh God, I totally did. I planned your meals. I picked out your clothes. I sent
you my favorite bath soaps! I'm some kind of micromanaging psychopath. Holy Control Freak Batman! I've become my mother! Shitshitshit! I knew I should I have become a nun. Tons and tons of religion and maybe a lobotomy would have kept me from going down this reckless path-

"Feng, relax." You glared at Gabriel who had a very amused smirk on his face. He could definitely hear every panicked word that came out of the speaker. "Feng, come on. Let me get a word in."

"That was ten words!" She shouted.

Rolling your eyes, you cleared your throat. "Should I call back?"

"No! I mean, don't hang up! Not "don't call back!" if you get disconnected. Ah fucking hell! Who the fuck designed this portable projector? The ergonomics are terrible and how are you going to manipulate the energy if you can't bend your goddamn fingers?"

You sighed. "Feng, if you need to go-

"No! I'm multitasking, but I don't give a damn about the Vishkar lawsuit. They stole their tech from Dr. dos Santos anyway. I don't care if they filed the patents, we know what happened. He never saw a penny and they buried him under gag orders, noncompete clauses, and NDAs! He should have come to us or you. Probably you because I know my reputation is kind of shady, but still! One of us could've protected him!" Feng blew out a sharp breath. "Sorry, I'm done. I didn't mean to cross streams. I'm listening now. Actively listening. Yup. Listening with my ears, not my mouth."

"Jack had to come back because Director Petras tried to get his main fire team fragged in the Mediterranean. It was a power play, for sure, but as the civilian authority, Petras technically outranks Jack in times of peace. And we came back, because Jack's going to feel pretty rough afterward, and we didn't want him to be alone. He needs us watching his back. The vacation was wonderful. We're all super pissed that we had to leave early."

"...I do not like your civilian director," Feng said with great deliberation. "He is a scum-sucking ass-booger. I will now watch UN proceedings strictly to make fun of his hair. And then I will hold a corporate-wide contest to see who can make the most viral memes of him. Incidentally, the winner gets to go to Iceland. Anyway, you should kill him and take his job."

"It uh...doesn't work like that Feng," you said, shaking your head. "At least, not outside of organized crime."

"But it could," she said brightly.

Gabriel stifled a snort.

"So the vacation was amazing. Super luxurious. Way better than the last time I visited a spa."

"...I don't know, the towel thing was pretty hot." Feng paused, awkwardly. "I uh only know that because Jack told me. And because a blurry picture has been circulating on the net, but you can't really see...that much."

You groaned. "Look, my point is, thank you very much. I've never had a vacation like that before and it was awesome. I loved it. I didn't want to leave, but duty calls. Thank you for putting so much thought into it and helping Jack out. We all enjoyed ourselves, even Gabriel. The yukata were really attractive. The food was amazing. Mr. Ito and Chef Astro are incredibly knowledgeable
with great taste. The resort was heavenly. I would totally vacation with your people again. Do I need to leave an online review?"

Feng sighed. "Sorry, I'm just...what now, Li?!"

You couldn't quite make out what was going on in the background, but someone was yelling.

"I don't give a fuck if Vishkar's entire team of lawyers is outside the door with siege equipment! I can still take them! In or out of court! We're a goddamn Triad, not a fucking rotary club! You can tell Sanjay his offer is as palatable as regurgitated dog shit and all the money in the world won't buy him a personality! Also, I'm on a call! Goddamnit, handling them is your job, not mine!"

There was a muffled response.

"I know White Rabbit isn't technically part of On Sing! It doesn't mean I don't have On Sing's full backing for all-out war with those pretenders. For fuck's sake, Li, even Fa wasn't this naggy! And I bet he didn't cry his way through every viewing of Bambi either!"

You stared at the phone, wondering if it was time to hang up.

"Yeah! You tell mom, you crybaby! Wah wah wah! At least Fa didn't go running to his mom every time he didn't like something I did!" There was the shriek of rending metal and then, "Uh...hello?"

"...I'm still here, for some reason," you said.

"...I can't even pretend like you didn't hear that," she sighed. "To be fair, Fa's mother was dead long before I hit the scene, but Li doesn't need to know that. And I will admit I cried through Bambi for years, but unlike my brother, I'm not embarrassed by it. I am embarrassed by the creepy eyelashes they put on the female animals, but that's a completely different topic."

"Yeah, it is," you agreed. "Things uh...not going so smoothly?"

"...The nuisance lawsuits have increased, but we're in the PRC and Vishkar is an Indian company. They can't touch us here. But they're trying to play hardball in Brunei, Singapore, and Russia. It's...annoying, but our lawyers are countersuing, and we have the capital to play this game. They just don't realize it. Li's not used to this kind of grand strategy and he wants to freak out every time they do something aggressive. Like that's the whole reason they're doing it, to mess with us. Duh. So yeah, I need a vacation. Maybe in Iceland. Or Switzerland. Say-"

"Ask Jack," you said. "I don't make those calls."

"Well, you need to come visit soon. Genji said you have this weekend off..."

You raised a brow and Gabriel frowned, because your schedule was kind of classified. "Did he now?"

"He and Hanzo were planning on swinging by Shanghai. You should come too. Bayan is going to be there. Hell, bring whoever you want, it's just a daytrip, though you're welcome to stay longer. I'd love to have everyone over for a gaming night again, but I haven't been home in weeks. Just living out of my office, showering in the employee locker room, handling each new crisis as it arises, resisting the overwhelming urge to throw people out of windows...but only just."
"The temptation of defenestration is real," you agreed.

"I'm glad you understand. Everyone else just thinks I'm unreasonable."

Gabriel didn't even try to smother his laughter.

"Well, under most circumstances, actually defenestrating people isn't a reasonable action."

"I knooooow," Feng groaned. "That's why I haven't really done it. Yet. I'm hyperactive, not stupid."

You never assumed Feng was stupid: crazy, sure, but not stupid. There were literally graveyards full of people who'd underestimated her intelligence and resolve. "I'll see what the weekend looks like."

"You should come. Really," Feng said, suddenly serious. "I mean, I understand if you can't but, if you can, it'll be worth your while."

"I'll try," you said, not liking the smirk on Gabriel's face.

"Great, should we do Korean barbecue or dim sum? I mean we have in-house chefs and..."

"I trust your judgment," you said solemnly, and Gabriel raised a brow.

"...Lucky, that's the nicest thing anyone's said to me all week. Well, Bayan said, talking to me after my morning espresso was the auditory equivalent of staring into the sun on LSD." Feng paused. "He's a poet, that one. But now that I think about it, that wasn't exactly complimentary."

You laughed in spite of yourself. "I have to go Feng. Hopefully I'll see you this weekend."

There were a lot of messages waiting for you, and you sifted through them as you headed back to your room. In fact, there were four that all began with variants of, "please come see me as soon as you get back." Unsurprisingly, they did not go into detail. But Ziv, Genji, Távio, and Tataryn all wanted you to stop by.

You knocked Genji's door after you dropped off your bag, but there was no answer. So you left a note, and went off to find Tataryn, because his room was just down the next corridor.

He answered the door shirtless, hair loose and flowing down his back. Between the tattoos and the hair, he looked like some disheveled rock god on his way back from the orgy. Tataryn had a lot more tattoos than you expected, more than just the pair of stars, but then he had been Russian mob. They had an entire culture built around the symbolism. Yawning, he grinned at you, his smile all too devilish as he noticed you inspecting his ink.

"You are back early. Did you miss me that much?"

"Petras demanded Jack's presence," you scowled.

Tataryn's smile lost its cheer. "I see. That is unfortunate. I hope the rest of your trip was pleasurable."
"...Very," you said, and then realized you had let a dumb grin drift across your face.

Tataryn just laughed. "I bet. How was the beach?"

"No beach. Jack went above and beyond: he got us a reservation at a hot springs resort," you said. "Fully nude and private."

Tataryn gave a wistful sigh. "Now you are just taunting me, Lucky."

"Yes and you deserve it. So what'd you need?" You uncrossed your arms.

"I wanted to speak to you about Kseniya." He looked around. "Won't you come in?" The hallway was empty, but there was no guarantee it would stay that way.

You entered Tataryn's quarters, a little surprised by how much bigger they were than yours. They weren't luxurious by civilian standards, but his room was easily twice the size of a standard single. And Tataryn had nice things: colorful hand-woven rugs, wooden bookshelves with fanciful carvings, a plush red sofa, and a queen-sized bed with fluffy pillows and a thick quilt bearing a complicated starburst pattern.


You raised a brow. "Now I'm worried."

"Tea then," he said smoothly. "Tea is wonderful for worries." He retrieved a large red mug and turned on his electric kettle. You waited impatiently as he measured herbs into ceramic teaball and then let it steep.

"Peppermint, chamomile, and lavender." He set it in front of you along with a sugarbowl and a jar of honey. "I prefer it with honey."

You spooned a little honey into your cup. "Thank you."

"You are restless." He poured himself a cup and added a lot more honey. "I will start simple. The pilot from your Greek adventure is awake."

You blinked. "That's good news."

"It seems Zenyatta partnered with Dr. Ziegler to better utilize his talents. She is...very excited by these developments."

You sat back on the couch, recalling your last terse conversation with the omnic monk. About compassion. About motives. About your issues. And he'd put his money where his metaphorical mouth was. You didn't think he was trying to out-virtue you, because really that was no competition and there was no way in hell that you'd win. In fact, you realized that this might be his way of apologizing to you. Or at least it was an attempt to win you over. You weren't sure exactly, but you were going to have to talk to him again. Soon.

"He said you...appealed to his better nature and he was wrong to stand by when he could have helped. Dr. Ziegler was too pleased with the results to worry about that."

"But you are?"

Tataryn shrugged. "I just thought you should know. I don't know his angle, but that omnic
is unpredictable. You should be careful. He's targeting you for some reason, and that is worrisome."

"I'd assume it's my proximity to Gabriel."

"Maybe it is more than that. He knows a lot more than he lets on." Tataryn scowled heavily. "Those omnic faces, you cannot read them like humans, Lucky. They are purely for show. Those programs do not feel like we do. I do not like it one bit."

You understood that very clearly. Until Athena, you hadn't thought artificial intelligences could feel embarrassment. But you also knew that the underlying hostility in Tataryn's words wasn't entirely fair, and maybe you had Zenyatta to thank for it. He had odd ways of conveying emotion too. Sheepishness, sincerity, things that you couldn't quite read on his face. "I'm sure omnics have their tells. I'm starting to pick up some: twitching, light patterns, other mechanical quirks. We haven't learned them yet. It's just culture shock."

Tataryn's scowl lightened. "I suppose you could be right. I do not smile in Moscow. Smiling too much in some places is asking for trouble. But not smiling in other places is the same."

He shrugged. "Still, they are hard to read."

You sipped your tea, pleasantly surprised by the balance. "This is good."

"McCree isn't the only one who knows how to make a good cuppa," Tataryn said, waving his hand dismissively. "It still falls short of Ana's, but we can't all be perfect."

"So what else was worrying you?" You held the warm mug in your hands, trying not to get distracted by the numerous things Tataryn had all over his room, silver samovars, ceremonial daggers, and deck of what looked like tarot cards on the coffee table.

"Mmm," Tataryn gave a little shrug. "I am not worried, per se. But perhaps I realized that I did not share some important information with you about Kseniya."

There it was. The real reason he invited you here and made you tea. You sat back on the sofa, giving Tataryn a cool look.

"It would be best, if no one knows she is my daughter." Tataryn stirred his tea. "I understand if some of our trusted comrades have already been told, but I would like to keep our relationship a secret. For her own safety."

"OK," you said, because you'd dealt with enough traitors that you understood his caution. "I wasn't planning on bringing her here. You wanted me to go to her school."

"Yes, yes, but I suppose I should warn you that she doesn't want to be at school for their family visitation day. And given your track record when it comes to outings, I would prefer you only accompanied her to highly defensible locations."

"So she doesn't want me at her school? I guess she's just embarrassed by Pseudo-Aunt Lucky," you said dryly.

Tataryn laughed. "I think we both know what it's like to watch happy families milling about, completely oblivious to their own good fortune. We have the ability to shake it off, or at least hide our envy." Tataryn stared at the floor for a moment. And you kind of wished you didn't understand exactly what he was talking about. "But Kseniya is still young."

"And she's missing you."
Tataryn shrugged again. "I visit when I can."

"So you think I should bring her back here if she doesn't want to stay at her academy?"

"No, but if she insists, you can. But you must check out an armored car from the motor pool, ensure she rides in the back seat, and drive at a steady rate of eight kilometers below the speed limit."

You laughed. "No, seriously-"

Tataryn wasn't smiling. "I am very serious."

You blinked.

"And she cannot stay out late. You have to have back at the school by seven PM. She needs time to bathe and prepare for bed."

You blinked again.

"No scary films. No violent films. No films where the cute fuzzy animal dies. She finds those very upsetting." Tataryn finished his tea in one gulp. "I would prefer you did not inform her of my more...violent exploits, but you don't have to lie to her if she asks you specific questions. And she will."

Your eyebrows climbed higher.

"Ana and the commander are the only ones who have met her as my daughter. I have clearance from the commander to introduce her as his niece, if necessary."

"...Huh," was all you said.

"You should limit her sweets to no more than two desserts while out, and try to make sure she spaces them out. I will provide a list of her favorite foods."

You stared vacantly as Tataryn began to list off dishes along with alternatives. Apparently, Kseniya was trying out vegetarianism now and he wanted to be supportive. Tataryn was absolutely serious. Just what the hell had you agreed to again?

Chapter End Notes

 Almost dropped the a sliding glass door on myself today. It came off the track like "SURPRISE BITCH!" And I was home alone. Didn't drop it though and my cousin and I think we can fix it, but honestly, this home improvement stuff is something that terrifies me and I'm bad at it.

Back at work, and my filter won't go back on. This old guy kept asking for free stuff and jokingly offering his baby grandson as a trade. He comes up to me and says, "I bet this gal would want a baby!" And I was busy with projects, so I was reading the instructions on the computer and just said, "No thanks, I already ate." And he went "No...huh." And walked off. I consider that one a win. This lady wanted to ask me about age level and content of a kids graphic novel and it came up that this girl wrote a guy a love letter and it gets read in front of the whole class. My coworker says
something like "bet you wrote love letters." And I said, "No, I wrote threats. Until I realized you shouldn't write that kind of stuff down." Needless to say, the customer did not want to talk to me very much longer, even though I added "Just kidding!" in a not-very-convincing way. So oops.

I am bad at adulting.
Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

Tataryn is still the worst, but thankfully you have good food and good company to soften the bad news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rubbing your forehead, you left Tataryn's room, wondering if this was a terrible mistake. Scratch that. It was a terrible mistake, but how terrible? Well, you would have to wait and see. You weren't sure if you had the patience to handle Ziv right this moment, so you headed back toward your room, wondering if Genji had returned yet.

"Ma'am! I mean, Agent Strike!"

You turned to see Távio speed-walking to catch up with you. You stopped to give him time to reach you.

Still in his exercise gear, Távio's forehead was damp and you assumed he'd just come from the gym. His curls were still growing out, and you briefly wondered if he would go all-out like Ziv or keep them trimmed.

He grinned up at you. "Agent Tataryn just let me know you'd arrived."

You were getting Kseniya an extra slice of cake, just to annoy her father.

"Is everything all right?" You took in his big grin and gym bag slung casually over his shoulder.

"It's great, ma'am. That omnic, the Shambali one, he got Daniels to wake up! Told me that you'd convinced him to do it. He's something else," Távio said with clear admiration in his voice. "How'd you meet him...or is that classified?"

You rubbed the bridge of your nose. "He is in the employ of a UN ambassador. We've crossed paths a few times because of it."

Távio's eyes widened.

You reviewed your words, wondering if you'd accidentally said anything incriminating.

"What's he doing here then? Is he a spy?" His eyes narrowed.

You shrugged, but were quietly pleased that he'd read between the lines. "Politics are complicated."

Távio's mouth flattened. "So he's a spy."

"He's not a bad guy, I think, but he has his own agenda." You weighed the importance of
discretion versus Távio's inclination toward rash action. You would have to be more explicit, otherwise he might do something stupid. "It may or may not line up with ours. We're still working out his angle. Don't stress it, but don't get too cozy with him." You reached your door. "Was there something else?"

Távio actually squirmed under your gaze. "Permission to speak freely?"

You opened your door. "Yeah, come in. Athena, turn on privacy mode." You held the door.

Távio looked around your room, his eyes darting between your giant bear, your many plants, and the trophy weapons strewn across your desk. You gestured at the chair and shut the door, before sitting down on your bed, feet square on the floor.

"Reinhardt got me the bear," you said. "I wouldn't have bought something that big to put in this tiny room."

"Do you especially like bears or...?"

"I think that's Rein's aesthetic," you said with a shrug.

Távio turned his attention to the bullets lined up on the desk and your sheathed tanto before sitting down, the chair tilting backward as he steadied himself against the desk. "Your chair...uh...maybe I could fix it for you?" He got up, tilted the chair back, and looked at the underside of the seat, frowning. "...The swivel mount is cracked and this spring is all bent out of shape. I think I could fix it if you like. But you might be better off requisitioning a new one."

You laughed, because you knew that already. "I didn't break it. I'm waiting for the culprit to replace it. Though...that might never happen."

"Oh." Távio grinned sheepishly. "Do you just like watching your guests flail around?"

"Sometimes. Honestly, I rarely use the chair, so I forget it's broken. What's on your mind?"

Távio chose to sit on the floor instead of wrangling the chair. "Agent Tataryn says he's trying to place me in a squad. But the one he thinks I'll do best in is Epsilon squad."

You frowned. "Epsilon squad wasn't taking new members, last I checked." And with Lieutenant Jemison at the head, Petras had taken far too much interest in it. As evidenced by your shortened vacation. You felt a pang of guilt. That was partially your fault, though Lacroix bore the lion's share of the blame.

"Why'd he bring it up then?"

Why indeed? Oh, that shithead. Silently, you cursed Tataryn, deciding right then to give Kseniya as much goddamn dessert as she wanted.

"I have no clue," you lied. "I assume he was aiming high. Epsilon squad does a lot of hard jobs and you'd get some good combat experience. But they're not usually a rookie posting."

"Oh. I wasn't sure if Agent Shoal thought I'd be a bad fit." He stared at the floor. "I uh...might not have given her a good impression earlier on."

You rolled your eyes, remembering how Shoal compared Távio to you. Well, she didn't have a good first impression of you either. Luckily, Shoal was open-minded and could admit it
when she was wrong. You appreciated that, not being quite so magnanimous yourself. "You could
learn a lot in Epsilon squad, but the timing isn't right. Agent Shoal doesn't have a problem with
you, if you remember she came to the infirmary to fuss over you."

"Thought she was there to see Agent McCree," Távio said in a low voice.

You shrugged. "Not just Jesse, though that's her business."

"I know, ma'am. Wouldn't repeat that to anyone but you and Agent Tataryn," he said
quickly, eyes wide. "I just...wasn't sure what to do."

"Be patient," you said. "We're looking for a good fit. Especially if you want to transition
into black ops. Epsilon squad isn't a bad choice, but it isn't my first pick. It'll be hard to find
someone to match Rodriguez." And as you told Tataryn, you weren't actually that familiar with
individual Overwatch squad dynamics.

Távio nodded.

And you blinked suddenly realizing who did match Rodriguez. And though the position
held low combat probability, Chang ran intense drills and would not be the least bit lax with his
training. Hell, you'd send Ziv along just for some peace. Rayner Chang's military school for
wayward youths.

"You've thought of someone," he said brightly.

"I'll have to ask, and it would be up to the sergeant's discretion," you said. "I will warn you,
it's not a traditional career move and I make no promises about your acceptance."

"But you've thought of someone." He leaned forward. "If you think it will be a good fit,
ma'am, I trust your judgment."

You sat there, thinking dark thoughts at Tataryn. That ass had to know Távio wouldn't
make Epsilon squad. And once he told the boy, Távio would come to you, and you'd offer him
advice, and possibly fix the problem yourself. Even though you'd tasked Tataryn to place him.
And you'd already fulfilled your end of the bargain and agreed to take Kseniya out. Tataryn was
counting on you being too decent to renege. That lazy manipulative bastard. He'd played you like
a fiddle.

"Is everything...OK?" Távio asked, drawing back.

"...Just realized something, was all." It took effort to bite back the grimacing. That sly
weasel. He was as bad as Lacroix, and even more self-serving. "All right, give me a week or so,
and I might have an answer."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"You don't have to call me "ma'am," Távio."

"Habit, ma'am, especially since you're looking out for me."

"Was that all then?" You asked, checking your tablet. Jack hadn't sent any messages yet, so
you had no idea what was going on.

"...Uh..." Távio rubbed the back of his head, and stared at the floor. "I...uh...I know it's
none of my business, but there is something I was...uh...concerned about, ma'am."
You rested your elbows on your knees. "OK."

"This is the part where I wasn't so sure about speaking freely, ma'am," he said hesitantly. He gazed up at you, his unconvincing smile dripping with guilt.

"Go on," you said, rubbing your forehead and hoping you wouldn't regret it.

"A lot of people in Blackwatch think you're in a relationship with Commander Reyes. They don't spread the gossip, but...it's different outside of Blackwatch."

"Just who in Blackwatch have you been talking to?" You scowled.

To his credit, Távio just shrugged. "Nobody said anything outright. It was more like, "She and the commander are gone at the same time? No surprise. She keeps things running smoothly and he's in a better mood when she's around." That kind of thing."

You nodded, that was fair. A lot of Blackwatch suspected you two were sleeping together. But that wasn't an issue as long as they never got any evidence.

"But you're in a relationship with the Strike Commander," he said lowering his voice, and confirming that he remembered your declaration in those caves. "And everyone in Overwatch knows that things between Commander Reyes and Commander Morrison have been rocky for a long time."

You crossed your arms. "Just what are you implying?"

"Are you OK in this position, ma'am? I know you're capable, but having to mediate for Commander Reyes and the Strike Commander is a lot of pressure." He shrank down as he spoke. "And I'm pretty sure Commander Reyes has feelings for you too. Not that I think any of this is news to you, ma'am. I'm just...it's not an easy situation to be in, ma'am."

You blinked, taken aback by his reading of the relationship dynamic. And the constant ma'am-ing. Hadn't you broken him of that habit yet?

"And what exactly would you do if that was the case?" You asked, genuinely curious.

He shrugged. "I don't know, ma'am. Offer whatever help you wanted. I uh...figured you'd have a plan."

You weren't entirely sure you bought that explanation.

"Did you voice your concerns to anyone else?"

"Agent McCree said you were fine. So I was only a little worried," he said, jamming his hands in his pockets. "But Agent McCree's pretty loyal to Commander Reyes."

You smiled wryly at that. "Jesse has my back." Even if you hadn't realized the extent of it. "I appreciate your concern, but it's nothing to worry about. Jack and Gabriel get along fine. I very rarely mediate their disputes. There are political reasons why they have to appear at odds with each other. So don't go reassuring people too much, but know that things aren't as dire as they appear."

Távio sat there silently. "Are you seeing both of them?"

You nearly choked on your tongue. He hadn't come to that conclusion just in seconds, had he?
"I'm not judging," he said hastily. "But that's the only other explanation that makes sense."

"What, Gabriel and I can't just be friends?"

"...You're not...blatant about anything. But you don't act like platonic friends," he said, words very soft. "The body language is all wrong. And...the commander behaves differently around you. It's little things, like how he watches you. Agent McCree is one of Commander Reyes' favorite agents, but he doesn't treat him like he treats you. I can't put it into words, but you're not just friends."

You wondered how many other clever Blackwatch agents had deduced that already. Then you wondered how many actually cared. There had been a constant stream of requests for you to return to your administrative duties after Candle Arc went bad. Your fellow agents didn't care if you were sleeping with the boss, as long as you did your job and kept him in a good mood.

"I know what you're going to say," he said brown eyes meeting yours. "And I know how to keep my mouth shut, ma'am."

You sighed, leaning against the wall. "You're not wrong."

He swallowed, eyes getting bigger. "Oh."

As much as you liked Távio, you weren't going to out Gabriel and Jack to him just yet. If he went to Chang's squad, he'd find out soon enough. But until then, it wasn't his business.

"They both know. There's no deception among the three of us. It's fine," you said with a shrug.

Távio just stared at you for a moment like he wanted to ask more, but then he dropped his gaze. "Understood." He gave you a firm nod. "If you say "it's fine," then it's fine, ma'am. I just wanted to make sure you were OK."

You squinted at him, searching for any hint of sarcasm or even just pandering, but he just looked relieved.

"Well, I appreciate you looking out for me," you said.

He nodded, shakily. "I uh...thank you for not getting upset at me for overstepping or not minding my own business."

You sat there waiting for the awkwardness to dissipate. It did not. You waited a little longer, because your student had just asked you about your secret sex life and you'd given him a mostly honest answer.

"I uh...I should go then," Távio said, climbing to his feet, his eyes averted.

You were going to have to do something to clear the air. "I'm going to be...accompanying a kid around the grounds next week. Do you have any insight into what might interest a precocious eight year old girl?"

Távio stared thoughtfully at the wall. "Not your room. Maybe the bear, but not much else."

You snorted.

"Winston is great at science stuff. And he's nice. Good at explaining things when Agent
Mihret talks over your head. You should visit him," Távio said, and you didn't miss the wry expression on his face when he mentioned Ziv. "And Commander Wilhelm is pretty cool too. I think he'd be good with kids. Umm, I can look into it, if you want," he said, sounding more confident. "I used to look after some of the younger ones back home."

"That would be helpful," you said.

"You can count on me, ma'am!" Távio beamed, smacking his hand against his chest.

You just shook your head, unable to picture Távio as responsible enough to look after even younger children. That was clearly inaccurate; Távio was a capable youth, and you were just biased. Still, you couldn't look at him as anything but a child. When had you become the Overwatch babysitter?

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You sent Ziv and Genji messages saying you would meet with them tomorrow, and checked in with Athena. Petras was still occupied with Jack. But Gabriel had sent you a message inviting you to his quarters.

You headed over, though you thought the original plan had been to meet in Jack's room.

Gabriel knelt in front of his table, adjusting a large electric griddle. Your rice cooker sat next to it, steam rising from the vent. The coolers were on the ground, and you rubbed your hands together.

"Don't open the one with the fish symbol on it. Ito has some fancy temperature-control for the sashimi set up, and the food will stay good as long as you don't open it till we're ready to eat."

"But I can open the other one?"

Gabriel sighed. "If you must."

"You could just tell me what's inside," you said, not pouting at all.

"An assortment of dishes they managed to prepare while we were waiting to go: seaweed salad, braised vegetables, marinated Berkshire pork, aged wagyu beef, all the stuff that isn't raw fish. Some of it needs to be cooked or reheated, and this griddle should do the trick. I know the kitchen would be better, but we can't work in there without a bunch of scavengers congregating."

"That's a lot of food," you teased.

"And I'm not sharing with anyone besides you and Jack. You've seen those Shimadas eat. Can you imagine what they'll do if they see what we have here? No, I'm not risking it," Gabriel said firmly. "Now you can get into the other cooler, and start sorting the stuff that needs to be reheated."

Laughing, you opened the cooler to find about two dozen containers neatly stacked, and labeled, with finishing instructions taped to each one.

"Well," you said, a little taken aback by that level OCD. "That's...nice."

Gabriel smirked. "It's good to make friends, isn't it?"
"Chef Astro and Mr. Ito did take a shine to you," you said.

"Maybe, but I'm sure Feng had something to do with this. The girl is trying to buy our approval with food, and I will admit that it's working."

"I'm sold," you said, making two stacks of food.

"I can tell, but I'm not that easy," Gabriel said with a straight face as you started handing him the meat. "Jack should be done soon. If not, I've instructed Athena to page him with a complex and coded tactical "emergency." If that fails, you'll have to get one of your lackeys to run in and interrupt. I nominate Mihret. He might even give the old bastard a stroke while he's at it."

"Then we'll never hear the end of how he singlehandedly saved Jack and Overwatch."

"Never mind," Gabriel muttered, shaking his head. "I'll do it myself." He began cooking the meat first. The steak would need time to rest before it was served. Letting the beef sit awhile before cutting it ensured the meat remained juicy. He could always throw the steaks back on the heat to sear right before he served them.

"So, I'm...spending the day with Tataryn's daughter next week. He says he has permission to claim she's your niece."

Gabriel looked up, expression shrewd. "Suckered you in then, did he?"

"Yeah," you grumbled.

"You're not the only one," Gabriel said, sounding very casual about it and you wondered why he hadn't warned you about Tataryn's predilection for foisting his kid on other people. "And Kseniya's a good kid. So it shouldn't be too painful. But Tataryn and her mother made a lot of people angry. And those Thieves-in-Law bastards have long memories. He's being extra cautious is all. My sisters have a dozen or so kids in various stages of development. It'll be fine."

You nodded. "Just checking. Because you can't take that asshole at face value." And then you told him about how Tataryn managed to weasel out of your deal.

Gabriel just laughed. So much for sympathy.

"But I think Távio might do well with some lessons from Chang. Do you think she'd be open to working with him? It's not a live-fire combat-rotated squad, but-"

"...They see combat," Gabriel said, flatly. "At least twice a year, some asshole with big guns shows up looking for the Strike Commander's family. Usually it's a loner; sometimes it's a mercenary troop. But Chang's good at keeping a lid on the situation, and if she takes one alive, which she usually does if there's more than one, we get them for interrogation."

"Oh," you said.

"What? Don't think your boy can handle it?"

"He's not my-" You shook your head, realizing the futility of your protests. "I was just surprised. I'm not worried about him. He wants to join Blackwatch. So yeah, I think he can handle it." You paused. "He figured out that we're together too."

Gabriel's smile widened. "Oh?"
"Didn't tell him about you and Jack. Kid knows too much as it is. But if he gets stationed with Chang-"

"I wouldn't count on it," Gabriel said wryly. "But it doesn't matter, you're going to have to convince Chang to take him on. And don't expect Jack's help either. I doubt he wants a roguish young agent anywhere near Maggie."

"...I'm not entirely sure he wouldn't prefer Michael," you said after a moment. Though you hadn't considered the danger of two adrenaline junkie teenagers in each other's proximity. Which was rather foolish of you, to be honest.

Gabriel shook his head. "No one prefers Michael."

You choked on your laugh. "Gabriel!"

"It's true and you know it," he said, completely unrepentant. "I'm not worried though. That girl can take care of herself. Michael though? Michael's a great big weenie."

You recognized the wicked glint in Gabriel's eyes and dropped your protests. There would be no winning. "Do you have any suggestions for placement?"

Gabriel shrugged. "You could ask Wilhelm to take him on. He's a soft touch."

You considered it. Reinhardt would not cover black ops material, but Távio needed a more balanced training regiment. He was eager to please you, because he respected your reputation. On top of being clever and sneaky, he was a quick study with good people skills. But you recognized that same vicious survivor's streak that you possessed. Being ruthless came easier than you liked to admit, and you didn't have trouble committing crimes for "good reasons" and some bad ones. That cool practicality and flexible morality were a boon in your line of work. But left unchecked, they could warp a person's sensibilities or make them cruel.

"They have very different skill sets," you said. Távio was smaller, and while he was strong, he wasn't built to be a bulwark or carry around power armor all day.

"Wilhelm, for all his bluster and idiocy, does have good networking skills and a knack for teaching. If he didn't think he could help the boy, he'd find someone who could. Chang isn't a bad idea, but you need a backup plan."

You nodded. "OK."

Gabriel had the Berkshire pork on the griddle now, rich fatty cuts of meat marinated in mirin, sugar, and soy sauce. It smelled divine.

The door creaked open, and you turned around to see Jack kicking off his boots. He slammed the door behind him, and threw himself facedown on the couch, pulling a pillow over his head.

"Jack?" You blinked.

"Give me a minute," he growled, words muffled by the cushions.

"Do you want to cook or rub his back? I'm in the middle of this so-" Gabriel asked, not looking up from the griddle. He seemed more interested in the food.

"I guess I'll rub his back," you said.
Gabriel chuckled and began to hum.

You climbed over the back of the couch, grinning down at Jack's back. "Incoming!" You slid down and lifted one arm, tugging his sleeve off. Jack mumbled something, but just stayed face down, letting you peel his ridiculously heavy overcoat off. You unfastened his holsters, took them off, and carefully set them on the coffee table. Then you worked your fingers under his waist, unbuckled his belt, and pulled it off, also placing it on the coffee table, next to his sidearm. With the constrictive clothing out of the way, you straddled his waist and began lightly pounding on his back, loosening the tense muscles.

He groaned loudly when you dug your metal fingers into the knots, some in his shoulders, others in his low back. You used your right hand to work on the more delicate parts, like his neck and spine. There was something fascinating about having all that taut solid muscle underneath you, responding to your every touch. Gradually, he lifted his head, glancing over his shoulder blearily.

"Are you an angel?"

"Shut up, Jack," you laughed, in spite of the cheesiness.

"Oh, I see, you're from the other side. That's OK, too," he said and winked.

"Close enough," you said.

"I like bad girls. And boys," Jack laughed. He patted your legs before rolling onto his back. "Gabe, is dinner almost ready?"

"Yes, dear," Gabriel said exaggerated cheer. "You just lay on the couch and cuddle our girlfriend while I do all the work."

"OK, thanks, you're the best!" Jack said, smirking up at you. He ran his fingers along your calves.

You looked up at Gabriel who was giving Jack a sardonic smile, one brow arched. He just shook his head and smiled tolerantly at you. "Pendejo," he muttered, and turned his focus back to the food.

"Kiss?" Jack puckered up, eyes squeezed shut.

You leaned over and pecked him on the lips, squealing as he grabbed to fistfuls of your hoodie and yanked you in for a longer kiss, his teeth nibbling on your bottom lip. You laughed, and pushed him down against the couch. He let you, eyes shining as he grinned up at you.

"Don't get too carried away," Gabriel called out. "Food's almost ready."

Jack lay flat against the couch, one hand on your hip.

"Feeling better?" You patted Jack's stomach.

"Yeah," he sighed, running his fingers through his hair.

"Corazon, do you want to help me take some plates to the couch?" Gabriel picked up the unopened cooler and brought it over to the coffee table.

"Are you sure it's wise to leave Jack alone with the food?" You asked, already getting up to
"Hey, the most important part of any relationship is trust!" Jack sat up. "And you can trust me alone with the food for about five minutes."

You brought over a tray with the a large bowl of cubed pork and the plate of sliced beef tataki with its ponzu-soy dipping sauce to the coffee table. The wagyu filets were next: you were serving this out of order, but you knew Jack would prefer the meat first.

Gabriel had already set out the seaweed salad, marinated bamboo shoots, lightly pickled shrimp with cucumbers, and a whole sea bream, its crisp skin crusted with salt, the pink skin seared to shades of golden brown. The fish lay in a bed of shredded daikon radish. There were fine-sliced braised mushrooms over white cubes of tofu drizzled with a thin brown sauce. A large ceramic bowl held a savory egg custard mixed with sliced clams and greens, and was topped with sliced scallions and sesame seeds.

Gabriel went back to scoop out bowls of rice while you opened up the sake, foregoing the cute little cups and pouring coffee mugs of the high quality stuff that Mr. Ito had sent along. "Serve chilled, slightly below room temperature," were the instructions, and you weren't going to argue.

Jack sighed happily. "I'm sorry about our vacation."

"But you're really glad we're here right now with all this food," Gabriel said, handing him a rice bowl and a set of chopsticks. He then opened up the sashimi cooler, removing several platters of sliced raw fish.

"I can't deny that having you both here makes it a lot better," Jack said.

"Should we take a picture for Feng?"

"No, if Genji find out that we ate all this and didn't invite him, it won't be pretty," you said.

"Not my problem," Jack said, snapping a quick photo.

Gabriel handed you your rice and sat down on Jack's other side. Jack leaned over to kiss him. "Thank you, babe."

"You're welcome, amor.″ Gabriel sat back in his seat, looking very pleased with all the food. "I know this is meant to be served in a specific style, but I figured you'd be too hungry to care."

"It was meant to be eaten just like this, sitting beside your favorite lover," Jack said, grabbing a steak and dropping it onto his rice.

"Mmm, switch me places then," Gabriel said, picking up a piece of pork.

You just laughed and reached for the sashimi.

It was only when you were finishing up that Jack finally started to talk about the reason for your early return.
"Jemison was happy she didn't have to move the squad on such short notice." Jack shook his head. "Also relieved because she knows Petras' angle."

"What'd he want?" Gabriel asked, idly taking a bite of braised bamboo.

You snagged another bite of cold tofu with oyster sauce, sesame oil, and matsutake mushrooms. The umami flavor was much stronger than you'd expected and it went very well with the rice and eggs.

"It was mostly a power play," Jack grumbled. "To remind me who's in charge. He's worried about something though. First he feigned concern over Epsilon squad and the Mediterranean region, claiming he only wanted to send the best to deal with the threat."

Epsilon squad was solid, but it was only led by a lieutenant because it handled short-term blitz-style ops, usually under the Strike Commander's supervision. Rodriguez and Nejem had been higher ranked because their squads operated independently: they required less oversight and had more freedom to establish their own perimeter and maintain stability. Epsilon squad was not built for that purpose. It was a bad fit all around, and either Petras was a total idiot or obviously trying to get them killed. You weren't sure it wasn't both.

"He went on to tell me that I'm not handling the situation "as well as he'd hoped." Then he wanted to talk to me about my foolish foray into politics and my "well-intentioned" inclusion of "one of those talkative ones," alluding to Zenyatta's presence. He then had to tell me what a mistake it was to try to "pander to a select minority in this political climate." Obviously, my ties to Kwento have him nervous."

"Greasy eelfucker," you muttered.

Jack laughed and kissed your cheek.

"Did he do that thing where he tries to appear all paternal and worried about you, like he's just some saintly soul telling you this out of the goodness of his heart? Because it's fucking insulting," Gabriel scowled. "Don't call me "son." You're not my father, you pasty-faced televangelist fuck."

"Dibs," you said raising one hand. "I'm still calling dibs on killing him."

Jack sighed. "So, I made a concession-"

You groaned.

"I told him I'd had trouble finding an assistant as competent as Ainsley. I asked if she was still looking to come back."

"Nooooooooo," you groaned even louder.

Gabriel snorted. "I bet Petras was thrilled."

"He practically started salivating. It was really creepy. Yes, I know she's a Trojan horse, but with Athena, Winston, and Agent Mihret monitoring all her electronic traffic, I think this will give us a better idea of what Petras is after. Gérard suggested it awhile ago. I just hadn't needed to throw that bone, till now."

"You do realize this limits the amount of sex we can have in your office," you said, less than thrilled and perfectly comfortable showing it.
"Gabe's office is better for that anyway," Jack said with a shrug. "I know we'll have to be more careful, but I think we can manage it. It seems Ainsley's just been traveling on her father's dime, "seeing the world" and "finding herself." But now she's ready to come back."

Gabriel just looked as amused as he had when he first mentioned "Overwatch Barbie." But that was because he hadn't spent several days in her company listening to her talk about herself.

"Cheer up, baby. She won't be arriving till next week." Jack nuzzled your neck. "You're so cute when you're jealous."

You smacked him with a throw pillow, unimpressed by his implications. "Jack Morrison if you think that's why I'm annoyed-"

"Jealousy! Madness!" Jack laughed and you hit him again with the pillow. "Gabe, help!"

Gabriel sighed and poured himself more sake. "Taunt her at your own risk, Morrison. If I remember correctly, Overwatch Barbie was driving you nuts too."

You waved the throw pillow threateningly, and Jack held his hands up in surrender. "It's true, I'm dreading it too. But we'll see what happens."

You vowed then to clinch this deal with Kvento. You had more than enough motivation to move up the time table on ousting Petras. Tomorrow, you would visit Zenyatta.

"So Maeda Vargas needs a new posting, and Lucky wants to know if Chang will take him," Gabriel said, reaching out and scratching your back lightly.

Jack's brow furrowed. He looked between you and Gabriel, like this was some kind of trap. "Is that so?"

"I can ask for Rein's help if Chang isn't interested," you said. "But I'd like to keep an eye on him."

"And he's not even a hacker," Gabriel said, with a grin. "I think Wilhelm might be a better choice. But I won't deny Chang has a unique way of handling difficult youths."

Jack stared at the table, tapping his knee. "...That's entirely up to Ray."

"Right, I'll shoot off a message tonight," you said with a yawn. "Now we better clean up." You began to gather the plates, noting there would be enough leftovers for breakfast tomorrow.

"He's figured out that she's seeing both of us, but he thinks she's collecting an SEP harem," Gabriel said in a stage whisper. "Still hasn't connected the final line yet."

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose, grimacing. "I see."

"He's not that bad, Jack," Gabriel smirked. "Quite a promising young agent, in fact. Lucky's going above and beyond by mentoring him. He's got a lot of potential, but if left unchecked, he could easily become another Mihret."

Gabriel was completely off-base. Távio had far better social skills than Ziv. He'd be more like Tataryn. But the world didn't need more of that either.

Jack gave Gabriel a dirty look.

"And just think, she never would have had the opportunity to teach him, if you hadn't run
off to Mongolia without me..."

Groaning, Jack buried his face in his hands.

Gabriel winked at you.

You blew him a kiss. Served Jack right for implying you were jealous of Ainsley.

You woke up to crumbs falling on your head. Again. Why did Gabriel let Jack eat in bed? Yawning, you dusted off your face, ignoring Jack's soft laughs. You tried to pull the blankets over your head, but Jack began to rub your neck with slightly greasy hands.

"Why are you like this?" You sighed, opening your eyes.

Bare-chested and flecked with crumbs, Jack offered you his croissant. You obligingly took a bite, pleasantly surprised to find it filled with whipped chocolate butter. The sugar perked you up immediately, and you stretched, reaching over to squeeze Gabriel's arm.

"Thought you'd need some more energy," Jack purred, one hand stroking your hip. "We still have today off..."

"More food," you said.

Gabriel laughed and rolled over, his hands gently brushing the crumbs off your head. "Jack, why?"

"It's flaky!"

"Like you," you muttered.

"I don't share my breakfast with mean girls," Jack said, holding the croissant over your head. "They can get their own."

"Going back to sleep then," you murmured.

Jack just started chewing extra loudly over your head, finishing the bread with lip-smacking gusto.

"Are you going to Shanghai this weekend?" Gabriel asked, nudging you.

"It'd probably just be a daytrip. Why? Do you guys want to come?" You sat up, stretching, because obviously your lovers weren't going to let you go back to sleep. Jerks.

"I probably shouldn't," Jack said wistfully.

"I might be able to," Gabriel said then groaned. "Probably not, though. Have a five days of work to catch up on."

"Guess I should stay back and help," you said, because part of your job was helping manage Gabriel's workload.
"No, you should go," Jack added quickly. "Feng would be delighted to see you."

"Yeah," Gabriel yawned and patted your head. "Go see your friend. We can manage for a weekend."

"Maintaining good ties with On Sing can count as a work trip," Jack said with a wink.

"Oh, I see how it is. I'm your "thank you" sacrifice to Feng," you said with an eye roll.

Suddenly you were flat on your back, Jack's hands on your shoulders, as he pressed you to the mattress.

"Nope. Feng can find her own girlfriend. This one's mine. And Gabe's,' he added, eyes locked on yours, his smile a little too sharp to be completely playful. "That's all the sharing I'm doing." He nipped your collarbone for emphasis.

You ran your fingers through his hair, grinning as he kissed your throat. "I just meant you're sending me to hang out with her so you don't have to."

"Delegation is important," Jack said, giving you a mock serious look, his hands already peeling the blankets away from your body. "But it's more important to know when you have to do a job yourself, like right now..." His hands slid down under your t-shirt.

"You should at least take her some kind of thank you token. It's only polite," Gabriel said, his smile a little too amused.

"Gift basket?" You wondered, as Jack's fingers hovered over your ribcage.

"I think you should pick out the gift basket yourself, Strike Commander." Gabriel leaned over to kiss Jack. "It will mean a lot more if the gift has a personal touch."

Jack gave Gabriel a disgruntled frown. "Really, Gabe?"

"Well, we are talking about the person who helped arrange that extra nice vacation we just returned from. I thought you were working on being a more thoughtful and considerate individual."

Groaning, Jack sat back on his haunches. "Gabe-"

"Feng wanted to visit Zurich again," you said. "We could probably put her in big sunglasses and a floppy hat, and let her hang out for Family Day."

"That'll work," Jack said quickly. "And I'd like your input on the basket contents too, Gabe. You and Lucky are better at picking out presents anyway."

Gabriel chuckled. "In a hurry, are you?" He wrapped his arms around Jack's waist. Jack leaned into him, tilting his head back to kiss Gabriel's chin.

"Family Day invitation and fancy gift basket personally delivered by Lucky," Jack said. "Sounds like a plan."

"So is that it?" You traced the a ridged scar across Jack's pectorals.

"Yeah, Gabe, is that it?" Jack murmured, tugging at the blanket covering you.

"Stop that." Gabriel rolled his eyes. "You're getting crumbs everywhere. You're doing the laundry and sweeping my floor, Jack."
"OK," Jack sighed. "We can get a shower after this. I'll wash your hair, baby. To make up for getting stuff in it." He went back to pulling on your blanket.

Gabe snorted. "Focus, Jack. And not on fucking in my shower."

"You're invited too," Jack said brightly.

"I should hope so, considering it's my shower."

"Hey, let's focus on fucking in the bed first," you said, laughing as you took your shirt off.

Chapter End Notes

This would have come sooner but AO3 ate my last draft and I had to redo some things. Writing is slowly picking up again. Needed some time to plot the details of the next arc and steer it toward the finish line.

Real life is weird and extra social right now, which cuts into my writing time. But it's good for me, I think, and I'm trying to work on balance so I don't burn out (in everything, not just work and writing).
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

Friendship is magic. Friendship is also awkward, invasive, and only lets you shoot things some of the time. You wouldn't trade it for anything.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"How do you do it?" Ziv practically shouted as he paced your room. "How do you have a relationship with two people? I have enough trouble with one!"

You sat on your bed sipping strawberry Fanta and trying not to laugh. "Well, to begin with, I have higher level social skills than you. And I also have friends-"

"Ben-zona! That was rhetorical, and you can shut the hell up-" He stopped, jabbing his finger in your direction. "And the three of you are banging each other so it's not the same! This is way more complicated!"

"Then why are you asking for my help?" You rolled your eyes, because Ziv was being an unreasonable brat, as usual.

"I don't know!" He wailed, and sat on your bed, avoiding your broken chair.

You covered your mouth. "Are things not going well with Amélie?"

"Things are great," he hissed. "Amélie and I spent the entire weekend watching K-dramas, doing spa routines, and drinking unspeakably expensive wine. But Gérard was nowhere to be seen!"

You snorted. "So Amélie is a fun friend, isn't she?"

"She's spectacular," Ziv scowled. "Way more fun than you."

You couldn't argue that. "And she's not...pressuring you for sex?" You winced at the harsh wording. That was more indelicate than you intended. But it was better to ask.

"No! She would never! We get along great. It's fucking fabulous! But Gérard..." Ziv took a couple deep breaths, jamming his hands in his pockets. "Well, he keeps avoiding me!"

You shrugged, not missing the fact he was now calling Lacroix by his first name. "He's probably trying to give you time and space to figure out if this is what you want. I mean, you're hanging out with his wife, and knowing Amélie, she isn't shy about talking about sex with you."

"...She isn't," Ziv said with a sheepish smile. "I don't think women are gross, except you. Amélie is gorgeous, elegant, and amazing. I'm just not...attracted to her that way. And she's fine with it. We get along really well."

"Which is saying something, considering what a pain in the ass you are."
"Fuck you," Ziv said with very little feeling. "So things are going well with Amélie. Why is Gérard checking out? Is it only fun if it's illicit?"

You sighed, wishing he'd found literally anyone, besides you, to explain this to him. "The smartest thing he can do is let you and Amélie sort out how both of you feel about this, before he starts escalating. And the two of you seem to be bonding." You left out the comment about "harem-buddies" and "sister-wives" if only because you didn't want that to get back to Amélie. Fuck what Ziv thought.

"He's thinking long-term. You remember when Gabriel not-so-subtly sent me off to Paris with Jack and Overwatch Barbie, who, by the way, is coming back?"

"I know, we've got her account handled," Ziv said, his smile not nice at all. "You just worry about her trying to steal your pretty blonde boyfriend."

"I'm actually more concerned about her cornering me and telling me about how hard her life is," you sniffed. "Jack can fend her off on his own. He's the one who invited her back."

"Gérard explained it. Just another version of "keep your enemies closer." I guess it's good that you're not worried."

"I am," you said. "Just not about her poaching Jack. We have enough hostiles wearing our uniforms, we don't need more...and she annoys the hell out of me."

"It's a good thing your social skills are so much better than mine," Ziv said, ending the sentence in a high-pitched falsetto.

"Shut up," you scowled.

"Anyway, you mentioned Paris? Oh, and Amélie is talking about her own Paris trip some time. Maybe just the three of us. She's very envious of your Iceland trip. I showed her the pictures you sent." Ziv's eyes were big and round, his expression verging on panic. "It better not be like your Paris trip!"

You leaned back against your pillows. "Outside of Ainsley and the terrorist attack, it wasn't that bad. At the time, I assumed Gabriel just wanted someone he trusted watching his boyfriend's back. That was part of it, sure, but he'd wanted to push me and Jack together alone, and it obviously paid off. Cologne was meant to be your version of that."

"It was...kind of." Ziv sighed. "No, it was. Until I fucked everything up."

"Yeah, well Lacroix drank a big old bottle of Bordeaux before he confessed that the two of you were rooming together. So he's not as unmoved by the situation as you may think." You paused. "He also gave me some pretty good advice about handling Amélie. You have to "make her see your perspective and appeal to her better nature." Otherwise she can bulldoze you thinking that she's helping."

"Yeah, I've heard that already," Ziv said with a shrug. "I'm not having problems with Amélie."

You rolled your eyes. "So if things are going your way, why are you so upset?"

"Things never go my way!" Ziv snapped. "I don't know! I don't know how this works! I don't know how to handle this! I'm just going with it, and I don't know if that's good enough!"
"Story of my life, drama queen," you said with a shrug. "Look, it's pretty serious if you're hanging out with Lacroix's wife and she likes you." It was a struggle not to say something mean like, "and that's a goddamn miracle." But Ziv had come to you in distress, and you were trying to be supportive. He just made it really difficult.

"What do I do?" He rubbed his face.

"What you're doing now. There's no rush-"

"Easy for you to say! You're getting nonstop sex, I haven't been laid since-"

"I don't care," you said pleasantly. "If you only wanted no-strings-attached sex, you wouldn't have gotten yourself into this situation."

Ziv grunted.

"Take it slow. Make sure it feels right. Make sure everyone's happy. Talk to Amélie about your concerns." Maybe he should discuss his feelings with Lacroix too, but you had trouble offering that advice. You didn't trust the sneaky Frenchman any further than you could throw him and telling your hacker to trust Lacroix still seemed wrong. "Talk to Lacroix too, after you've talked to Amélie."

"Yeah," Ziv took a few more deep breaths. "You're right."

"Communication and trust," you reminded him and yourself. "It takes time. And you're going to fuck up, so you better compile a list of their favorite things for bribes and work on your apologies. Because you suck at them."

Ziv downed his bottle of strawberry Fanta and belched at you.

"Get out," you said, knowing there was not much more wisdom you could impart on him. And that he was fairly likely to ignore any of the advice you'd already tried to share.

He just belched again, smirking at you.

Once you'd chased Ziv out of your room with a slipper, you went down the hall and knocked on Genji's door. He answered before the second knock, still in his armor, his face grim.

"Oh, didn't realize you'd been on a run."

"We just got back." Genji shrugged. "I should have clarified that we wouldn't be back till today."

"So, yes, I'm down for Shanghai this weekend. Did you need something else?"

"Have you seen, McCree?" Genji asked, eyes darting to Jesse's door.

"No, haven't heard a peep from him," you glanced at the door. "Something wrong?"

"You should check on him," Genji said, abruptly. "And leave me out of it."

"That's a Hanzo move, you know. I care, but I can't admit that I care because I'm emotionally immature."
"No, he's just going to be annoyed by your interloping, and I'd rather not get involved in that fight."

"...Coward," you sighed. "Can you at least tell me what's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," Genji said. "Bandit is fine, if that's what you are wondering. Commander Wilhelm watched him while we were out. He posted pictures on the internal network, if you want to see them eating currywurst and sprawled out on a couch."

"...A thousand times yes," you said. "Thanks for the tip." You paused, glancing back at the door. "How bad?"

"Bring whiskey and chocolate; don't skimp on the whiskey," Genji said. "And I'll let Feng know you're coming for sure." He had an oddly satisfied expression and you weren't sure how to take that. "You might...consider putting any breakable objects up high."

"...What?" You asked.

"Exactly what I said. Move your breakables and consumables up high."

"...Is Bandit being destructive?" You wondered aloud. "Like, you can't just say shit like that and not explain any of it."

Genji just rolled his eyes at you and shut the door in your face. Because apparently, he could and did. You sighed. Friend or not, Genji was a rude little shit.

You went back to your room, grabbed the bottle of Johnny Walker Gold and a couple bars of chocolate from your drawer. Then you knocked on Jesse's door.

Bandit woofed a few times and you heard a curse as Jesse stumbled around his room. 

"Who is it?" Jesse growled, his voice ragged.

"Your favorite harbinger of whiskey and chocolate."

There was a grunt and then the door opened. Jesse stood there, in pajama pants and no shirt. He was hatless, his hair mussed, his eyes bloodshot. You took a discrete sniff and smelled cheap booze and maybe corn chips. Jesse noticed the gesture anyway and gritted his teeth.

"Look, I'm tired and just got back from a run-"

Bandit slipped out, his little tail thumping as he took a seat on your foot, so you couldn't just leave. You reached down to pet him. He panted happily.

"What a good boy." You glanced at your whiskey and chocolate, realizing you were going to have to start carrying dog biscuits or something dog-safe.

"What do you want?" Jesse scowled.

"You look rough," you said, going for honesty.

"Some of us didn't just get back from a hot springs retreat with an all-you-can-eat sex buffet," Jesse said sharply.

It clicked then. Well, shit. You hadn't been expecting this. Not after... Well, obviously he hadn't been expecting it either.
"Sex buffet?" You snorted. "No, I got a buy one get one deal, at best."

Jesse glowered at you.

"I'm sorry," you said. "I really thought it was going to go the other way."

Jesse flinched and shuddered, looking away, his profile in shadow. "Yeah, me too." The aggression drained out of his voice, leaving him sounding raw and exhausted. "Does everyone-?"

"I just figured it out while standing here," you said. "You're normally happier to see me, or at least my whiskey."

"Sorry," Jesse mumbled. "Just sore about it. Nothing for you to worry about, sweetpea. But I'm not going to be good company-"

"Well, I have Johnny Walker Gold and chocolate," you said. "I can swing by the cafeteria if you need something more solid. But if you lock me out and try to pretend you're asleep, I'll just get Athena to let me in." Or Vo to blow the door down. Whichever.

"I'm fine," he said, the words clipped and harsh.

"Then I'm coming in."

Scowling at you, Jesse stepped backward. He glared as you set the whiskey and chocolate on his table and settled onto his worn couch. Bandit hopped into your lap, obviously voting for you to stay.

"I thought you were going to come find me..." You said, watching Jesse shut the door. He ungraciously slammed two glasses onto the table and plunked down in a chair across from you.

You slid a chocolate bar across the table and Jesse slumped in his seat, not looking up. Then you opened the whiskey and poured.

"So..." you said, petting Bandit. "You want to vent?"

"I just want to go back to bed," Jesse grumbled, downing his glass in one go.

"You weren't going to fall asleep anyway. Being alone when you're feeling like this sucks. Do you need to go the mats?" You asked, sipping your whiskey.

Grumbling, Jesse just refilled his glass. "No."

You scratched Bandit's chin. "What changed?"

Jesse shook his head. "Nothing that she would tell me. She just finally made up her mind. It was polite, apologetic, and so gently worded it took me a few to realize what she was saying. Took the wind clean out of my sails."

You sighed, remembering the names Jesse called out in the dark of the caves. You felt a pang of guilt over Jamie, but this one wasn't your fault.

"After the rescue, I thought, I thought maybe we had a chance." Jesse stared at the wall. "She came after me. She cares about me, just...maybe not enough. Not the way I want her to. I know the reasons. You do too. I know what she's worried about. I thought, I thought we could beat that, you know? I'm willing to do whatever she wants. But...that isn't enough." Jesse sat hunched over. "I'm not enough."
You could taste the bitterness in his words, and it was enough to make your stomach turn. "That's not true. If you weren't, she never would have let it get this far." Though you had wondered about that numerous times. How seriously did she take his declarations? Other than escorting him to the Overwatch Ball, there'd been very little confirmation that she viewed Jesse as anything other than a good friend. And even if her feelings were stronger than that, it didn't mean she wanted to pursue anything more intimate with him. But it wasn't your relationship; you didn't know what words were spoken between them. All you knew for sure was that Jesse was your friend and he was hurting.

"Darling," Jesse stared at you, eyes hypnotic in their fervor. What exactly does a man like me have to offer a woman like her? You've seen where I'm from. Ain't nothing but cursed dirt, bad blood, and ugly history." Jesse slammed back another whiskey. "Hell, what do I have to offer anyone? Sure, I'm a crackshot, and a snappy dresser-"

You snorted.

"Shut up, sugarpie. I am a snappy dresser, and I brew a mean cup of tea. But that don't exactly make good relationship material." He reached for a cigar, squeezing between his thumb and forefinger. "As for the future? Hold up now, I don't even know what I'm doing next week." He managed a weak smile.

"Those are the wrong questions," you said, though you were intimately familiar with those kinds of doubts. "You're a good man, Jesse McCree, and that's enough on its own. There's no other friend I trust more at my side. When I came here with nothing, but trauma and Gabriel's clothes on my back, you showed me the ropes and watched my six. When I was at my lowest, you stuck by me and helped me stay afloat. When I couldn't figure out what the hell was going on with Gabriel and Jack, you were the only one merciful enough to spell it out for me. So you need to pull your head out of your ass and remember that you are enough."

Jesse blinked a few times, clenching his teeth. "Maybe that's it," he said after a moment. "Got some issues too, you know." He managed a wry smile. "Maybe she knew I wasn't-"

"Do you think it will help if you try to identify the one thing that maybe sunk the deal? If you just change that single attribute will you suddenly be good enough?" You stared at your gloved hands. "Because I've been down that road and it doesn't work like that. We all have issues, Jesse. They all have issues. And if someone you trust can't be supportive or vice versa, it isn't going to work."

Jesse shook his head. "You've been spending more time with that shrink than I thought." He unwrapped a bar of chocolate and took a bite.

"Gabriel and Jack both make me talk about my problems, which happened a lot on vacation, you know, in addition to the sex buffet," you said.

Jesse choked on his block of chocolate, and began to cough. Bandit stood up, slightly alarmed. You patted the dog's head, grinning as Jesse slapped his bare chest.

"So I'm trying to open up and make sure they do the same. You know firsthand how bad I can be at communication."

Combing his fingers through his hair, Jesse shook his head. "Whatever you say, huckleberry."

"You deserve better than crumbs." You patted his hand. It occurred to you then that maybe
the captain understood Jesse better than you did. That maybe she knew all about his fears and
doubts, and the way he idolized her. Maybe she knew that she couldn't give him what he wanted,
or fill that void in his life, though she still wanted to be a part of it. It was an idle thought, not one
for sharing now. "I know it's clichéd, but there are other-"

"There ain't no one like her," Jesse said, his tone almost reverent with admiration.

"There's no one else like Shin Sato either," you said, your voice gentle. "Gabriel and Jack
didn't...replace him. But I think you understand that already."

Jesse stared at his lap. "Lucky-

"Whatever her reasons, the captain is missing out. And she has to know it too. But this
doesn't mean you're not good enough, Jesse. I guess it might feel that way, but it might just be a
bad fit. No fault. Just...it won't work." You fumbled with the words. "Also, it's not you, it's her.
And if you tell her I said that, I'll stand by it, even as lightning strikes me dead."

Jesse managed a faint smile. "Ain't necessary for you to stick your neck out like that.
I'm...avoiding her for awhile." He poured himself more whiskey. "It's her prerogative to tell me
what she wants. But I'm still upset and it fucking hurts." Jesse closed his eyes. "There's really
nothing you can say about that that I don't already know, Lucky."

You mulled that over. "OK. I'm just here to listen if you want to vent. Or say "that bitch!"
in a really quiet voice, because I don't want to die just yet. Or just pet your dog, the one that
Gabriel is definitely going to let you keep, in case you hadn't figured it out already."

Jesse snorted. "Thanks, sugarpie."

"Come here," you said patting the cushion beside you.

Hesitantly, Jesse rose and wobbled over. You placed Bandit on his lap and then hugged
him. He stiffened briefly, then rested his head on your shoulder.

"I saw the picture of your dog carrier, and that shit was fucked up," you said, sotto voce.
"You look like a city slicker."

"...Fuck you, sugarpie," Jesse muttered with no heat. "Amélie Lacroix is a scary witch
when she wants to be."

"I've been saying that for months. But very, very quietly."

Jesse gave snort of laughter.

"Want to come to Shanghai with us this weekend?" You reached over to pet the dog.

"...I don't know. I appreciate the thought, but I don't want to intrude. Ain't really my scene."

"You're not intruding. Feng is always happy for more visitors. We're going to see Bayan
too. There'll be food, Hanzo-baiting, and maybe some awkward flirting. You can probably bring
Bandit along, though there isn't any shortage of people who want to dogsit him for you."

"...I'll think about it," Jesse murmured, his cheek against your arm.

You patted his head.

"Missed this," he said, not looking up. "You, me, sometimes Mihret... Slumber parties, bad
movies, and late night kitchen raids."

"We'll do it more," you promised. "But Bandit is way more likeable than Ziv. He probably eats less too."

Jesse laughed into your shoulder, his chin scratchy with stubble. "Wanna do some clean up missions tomorrow? Just some mindless shooting?"

"I did get a fancy new gun," you said, thoughtfully. "It's sighted in and everything..."

"But you're still hunting for a blade," Jesse said, shaking his head. "No, don't want to drag you into combat without your throat-cutting knife."

You rolled your eyes. "I'm not that superstitious-"

"Maybe I am," Jesse shrugged. "That blade of yours made all the difference on more than one occasion. You still shopping around?"

"Put an order in with the original smith, but he's got a long waitlist." You shrugged. "Torby made me one, but..."

"Genji bitched about it to me already," Jesse leaned back on the couch, idly scratching Bandit's ear. "Said he'd convinced Hanzo to start looking for one for you."

"Yeah, he said Hanzo needed a project and this was perfect. But that he'd be at it for awhile. I may just have to make do with Gabriel's K-bar." You paused. "Figured I'd ask Feng if she had any connections while we're in Shanghai. You should come, seriously. I think you'll have fun."

"...Do I have to dress up all fancy like you did last time?" Jesse asked.

"Think we're going for street casual this time. Though with the Shimada brothers, who knows what that means?"

"Something ridiculous," Jesse said, without a hint of irony.

You just laughed and took another sip of whiskey. "Yeah, probably."

Jesse chewed on his cigar. "I'll think about it," he said.

"Nothing to think about. Just do it." Yawning, you stretched out and let Bandit crawl into your lap. "And let me tell you, watching everyone needle Hanzo is remarkably therapeutic."

You awoke to a knock on the door. Jesse had fallen asleep on your shoulder, and at some point Bandit had wedged himself between you two, his head on Jesse's lap, his butt on yours.

Yawning, you reluctantly wiggled out from under the dog and ambled to the door. Head a little fuzzy, you checked the peephole. Gabriel stood outside. Smoothing back your hair, you opened the door.

Gabriel quirked a brow and he glanced over your shoulder, taking in the sleeping Jesse, the empty whiskey bottle, and the chocolate wrappers. Behind you, Jesse began to stir, Bandit
You were sprawled out in his lap.

"You hungry?" Gabriel asked, his eyes soft as he looked at you. The gentleness made your breath catch. If you'd been in private, you would have kissed him then.

"Yeah," you said, your stomach gurgling quietly in agreement. "Did I miss dinner?"

Gabriel shook his head. "Just made roasted chicken with mole poblano and rice. Jack's tossing the salad-"

You snickered, like a mature adult.

"And if you ask nicely, he might toss yours too," Gabriel smirked.

Jesse coughed, apparently awake enough to be appalled.

You jerked your chin at Jesse, giving Gabriel an inquiring look.

He raised a brow, then nodded. "You can come too, kid. We're eating in my quarters. Just get dressed first. Don't need any more unsavory rumors about my personal life."

"I don't wanna intrude, boss-"

"Bring the pup, too. Jack's been asking about him," Gabriel continued, ignoring Jesse's weak excuses. "If he gets to fuss over your dog, I don't have to worry about him running off and adopting a puppy."

"One that he doesn't have time to take care of and will foist onto us," you added.

"You'll be doing us a favor," Gabriel said offhandedly, looking bored by the exchange.

You smiled at him, not fooled for a second.

"Yeah, OK. Uh...yeah. Just give me a minute to take Bandit out and get cleaned up. I'll meet you there," Jesse said, pulling on a shirt. He shot you a slightly panicked look. "Should I bring anything?"

"The dog," Gabriel drawled.

You waved over your shoulder and shut the door, looking around quickly before kissing Gabriel on the lips.

"Thank you," you said quietly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gabriel muttered. "Now let's swing by the kitchen and find something dog-safe. Mole poblano has dark chocolate in it and Jack won't be happy if he doesn't have treats to spoil the mutt with."

You stood outside the infirmary room wondering if whiskey and flowers were too much. You didn't actually know Daniels. You hadn't ever had a real conversation. And you weren't sure how she felt about you. Maybe she was one of those stick-up-the-butt Overwatch agents who
spread rumors about you once upon a time.

Taking a deep breath, you knocked.

"Come in?" You recognized the voice from right before the crash and opened the door.

Daniels sat upright in her hospital bed, metal frames, like an exoskeleton, covered her hands and wrists while she opened and closed her fists. She'd been unconscious for almost two weeks and the hand strengthening exercises would be a necessary part of her physical therapy. Nanites and some of Angela's cutting edge tech slowed muscle atrophy, but she would still be weak for awhile.

Her brown hair was up in a messy bun and she gnawed on her lip, brows furrowing as she struggled with making a full fist. She had narrow straight nose and now that she was awake there was a nervous energy about her, like she'd had too much coffee and was trying very hard to sit still.

"Agent Strike," she said, eyes widening. "I uh...wasn't expecting you. I'd shake your hand, but..." She snarled as she forced her hands open. "This is extremely uncomfortable. It's uncomfortably warm, to stimulate blood flow, and the nanites are really going to work. I shouldn't complain, but it's tingly and unpleasant."

"Should I come back?"

"No, no. As long as you don't mind me making strange faces and grunting a lot." She sighed. "Or I could take a break. No, I should take a break. I've done my requisite sets already. I'm just an overachiever. But if I overdo it I could just hurt myself again."

You set the vase of carnations in one of the few free spots on the counter. Daniels had a lot more flowers than you had received, as well as balloons, model ships, and some plushies too. You put the whiskey on the bedside table.

"I don't know if you indulge, but..."

"Thank you," she said, still watching you with big eyes. "I uh...wow. I think I should be buying you the drinks."

"I didn't do that much," you said with a shrug. "Jesse's the one who carried you to shelter. " You tapped the bottle. "And you brought us down as gently as you could. I'm grateful."

Daniels didn't lose that watchfulness, and you wondered if she just always looked like a deer in the headlights. "You're the one who convinced that omnic to come help. I get that it might be poetic justice, but-"

"How so?" You wondered aloud. Because it wasn't poetic justice if you fought a bunch of humans and then were healed by more humans.

"Well, we got massacred by omnics and he's a-" She frowned and fell silent.

"Zenyatta didn't owe us a thing," you said. Though that wasn't entirely true. Zenyatta had owed you an apology, if only for constantly needling you.

"Yeah, I uh... that was kind of racist. I'm embarrassed." She sighed. "Computer, disengage." The exoskeleton opened up and Daniels pulled her hands free. Very slowly, she raised her left palm and smacked herself across the forehead. "I said something stupid. I plead being
medicated, traumatized, and kind of dumb. Can we try that again?"

"I know the feeling," you said. Because haranguing her wouldn't help anything either. Especially when you only barely knew what you were talking about.

"Thanks for getting Zenyatta to help out," she said. "My stupid comment aside, he was something else, and wow, he was kind of what I always pictured a bodhisattva to be. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful to him or you."

"I get it. I honestly didn't do that much. It was all Zenyatta," you said. "I only brought your case to his attention."

"And Agent Maeda Vargas read me the reports," Daniels continued, like you hadn't spoken. You blinked at the mention of Távio. Apparently, he had been visiting Daniels too. "You made sure I stayed hydrated and you dug the vent that ensured we got fresh air. You might not have done the dramatic part of the rescue, but without you, I wouldn't be alive. Or awake. So thank you. I appreciate it. I know, you'll probably say something flippant like all the impossibly cool Blackwatch agents. But seriously, thanks. I'm pretty attached to being alive."

Impossibly cool? You thought of your fellow agents and couldn't name one. Genji was a spoiled little shit. Tataryn was a lying swindler. Jesse was a Clint Eastwood wannabe. Vo was a pain in the ass...

"Uh, you're welcome," you said, unable to think of something impossibly cool.

Daniels smiled at you, still looking nervous. "Can I buy you and Agent McCree drinks some time?"

"Sure," you said, because you did not say "no" to free drinks offered in good faith. "I'm sure Jesse would enjoy that too."

"Oh good. Because I wanted to thank him in person, but I was kind of scared to bother him. Like, I never know what you Blackwatch agents are up to: are you just going to dinner or are you preparing for a top secret mission and am I supposed to leave you alone so you can focus? I don't know. It's nerve-wracking."

"...You can always send him a message on the internal server," you said, picking a carefully neutral route. "I mean, if you see us on base, sure say something. We'll let you know if we're busy. If we're off base, don't blow our cover, but here at HQ you should be fine."

"Yeah, that makes sense. I probably would have come to that conclusion eventually. It would have taken an embarrassingly long period of time of though. Honestly, I'm a much better pilot than speaker, I swear. I know that you might not believe me since we got shot down, but-"

"Most of us survived the crash," you said. "Your skills were never in question."

"Oh. Yeah." Daniels stared at her hands. "It wasn't the landing that killed most of our friends. Just some of them."
buildings, but that he was still on the grounds and gave you his last known location. So you took a walk, and were slightly surprised to see him meditating beside the memorial wall. You took a seat on a bench, not wanting to interrupt whatever he was doing. Sleeping, maybe. Did omnics sleep? Not like humans did. Maybe it was cache-clearing process, and reordering of systems and revitalization of processes.

You stared at the wall, covered in names you knew and ones you didn't, though after all this time, a lot of them were familiar, even if you didn't have faces to match with them. Closing your eyes, you couldn't help but reflect on your dead. From Rodriguez's squad, to Captain Patel, Shin, and Rivka, and then further back, into dark uncharted territory and the roots of your knowledge of loss and grief.

Some days it was hard to focus on the future, when you'd already lost so much. You had rebuilt so many times, and for what? One more hit like that might actually kill you. You were painfully aware that there was a limit to your resilience. If Petras, Nguyen, and Talon, and whoever else managed to destroy what you had built here...

You took a shuddering breath, your insides twisting into knots.

"Agent Strike," Zenyatta's oddly pleasant voice roused you from your dark thoughts.

"I'm awake," you said, opening your eyes very slowly. The omnic hovered beside you, his head cocked to the side.

"You looked...upset."

"It happens," you said, staring at the memorial wall. "And when it happens, sometimes I say things I shouldn't." You took a deep breath, because even though Lacroix said you had to apologize for the sake of the mission, maybe you actually were a little sorry. You weren't sure why. Zenyatta had been on your case since you first met. You were sorry that you'd reacted. You were sorry that he revealed some of your prejudices, though maybe you were sorrier that you held them so unquestioningly in the first place. But you were mostly sorry that you were in this situation at all.

"The error was on both sides. As they say, to err is human, to SYNTAX ERROR is also human." He nodded. "To crash with disk errors is unique to AI."

You'd been around Winston and Ziv long enough to get the engineering humor. Maybe not appreciate it though. You just groaned. "I was going to apologize for being a jerk, but your joke just destroyed my puny soul. Is that the true secret weapon of the Shambali? Because I'll go write up humanity's surrender papers now."

Zenyatta gave a warm laugh. "If only our weapons were that sophisticated: to do no harm except the pain one's own mind is willing to inflict on oneself."

"Are you saying that the greatest enemy comes from within?" Because you were coming to understand that angle all too well. Sure, Petras, Nguyen, and anyone in Talon would torture and kill you, given half the chance. But it was your own coping mechanisms and emotional barriers that threatened to sabotage your personal life.

"...I find that "enemy" is a strong word," Zenyatta said. "An individual's greatest struggle is with oneself. Even if they have external adversaries, they must conquer their own fears and doubts to move forward. And they must always be on guard to ensure they do not become the thing they are fighting."
You sighed, because that was the Blackwatch dilemma.

"But no, that wasn't really what I was trying to say," Zenyatta said cheerfully. "Not that I
mind the philosophical discussion, in fact, I welcome your ideas. They are much more interesting
than apologies," he said, giving you a way out.

"Yeah," you agreed. "But I still have to apologize for my part." You forced yourself to look
at him, or at least where his optic sensors should be. "I'm sorry I was a jerk. There's a lot I don't
know, and while I don't appreciate trick lessons, I shouldn't be too proud to learn from them."

Zenyatta took on a formal bearing, though he barely moved and you could not pinpoint
what changed, something about his presence or stance shifted, something that made you sit up
straighter and pay closer attention. "I am sorry I pushed you so hard when you were vulnerable,"
he said. "I assumed much, and wrongly so." He sounded so very sincere, though you had to
wonder if omnics had a setting for that: humans faked it all the time, omnics could probably
automate it.

In the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter whether he was really sorry or not. You had
to be honest about your own shortcomings if you were ever going to improve, just like you had to
forgive yourself and do better, rather than wasting time wallowing in recriminations. Zenyatta's
apology might be a sop to your ego, but in the long run fixing yourself was far more important than
any tit for tat criticism of his behavior.

"And thank you for helping Daniels. It wasn't on you, you know. It's not your job to pay
the blood price for what other omnics have done," you said, wondering if that was part of his
motivation.

"Of course not. And while Adaeze encouraged me to keep a low profile, compassion is a
greater calling than politics, don't you think?"

"I can think of a lot of things that are a greater calling than politics," you said dryly, though
it was not lost on you that he didn't seem to mind going rogue for the greater good.

Zenyatta laughed. "Your raw emotional response was a reminder that I cannot expect to
change the world if I live apart from it." He hummed again. "It is a lesson my brothers and sisters
overlook."

You weren't sure what to add to that. "You didn't have to tell everyone that I asked you to
do it. That isn't exactly what happened-"

Zenyatta regarded you placidly. "There is no debt, Agent Strike."

"That's not what I meant!" You scowled. "I yelled at you a bunch about my unresolved
feelings about the dead and the state of Agent Daniels. I didn't politely ask you or do anything
really selfless. And that's how they're taking it." You sighed. "I'm not looking for credit."

"You didn't ask me, but you reminded me of what I should be doing. It is to your credit,
Agent Strike. If you hadn't drawn my attention to the situation, I may have overlooked it."

You didn't believe that, not really, but you accepted the explanation. "OK then. Thanks. I'm
glad you did it."

"I believe it," Zenyatta said. "You are not what I expected, Agent Strike."

"...I'm not sure why you have these expectations," you said.
"Are you completely unaware that you have earned a...rough reputation? Because I have heard a variety of troubling rumors about you, from your excitingly varied romantic life, to your murky origins as a secret government weapon, to your alleged penchant for cannibalism. I doubt most of their veracity, but you can see my concern."

You were going to kill Tataryn. And leave a bottle of hot sauce in his mouth. The one you may or may not keep in your utility belt.

More likely you were going to take Kseniya out and buy her cake, caffeinated soda, and a kitten. You figured that would bother him more.

"I just ignore the rumor mill," you said after a moment. "It changes all the time and attempting direct damage control would only make it worse."

"Commander Wilhelm agrees. He has only the nicest things to say about you," Zenyatta said pleasantly. "Not the response I expected from a man who dislikes black ops on principle."

"Rein's a good man," you said. "A little overly optimistic, but a good man and we need that."

"Meanwhile, Agent Lacroix - he should have another title, since he's higher up in the hierarchy than most agents- seemed pleased to wax on about your many perceived faults."

"...That's nothing new. He does it to my face too," you said with a shrug. "I do it back. It's the nature of our relationship. But we haven't killed each other yet."

Zenyatta regarded you, oddly relaxed. "Agent Lacroix has many enemies."

"...He's a very irritating man," you said with a shrug.

"And yet, he seems rather fond of you, in his own fashion," Zenyatta continued and you involuntarily thought of the show you'd put on for Korpal. You had to suppress a shudder. "There is a vortex of chaotic misinformation around you, Agent Strike," Zenyatta said, like he didn't notice your growing discomfort. "It almost seems cultivated."

He said it so matter-of-fact. You gritted your teeth, knowing that he was engaging in his game once more. Whatever he was after, your answers had not yet satisfied him. "I am aware that some of my...associates spread rumors about me for fun. The more outlandish, the better. Some of it is mean-spirited, some of it just to see how gullible our comrades are."

"Which seems somewhat mean-spirited," Zenyatta observed.

"I'm not actually arguing," you decided. "It's easiest to just dismiss all the rumors and only believe what you can prove."

"I thought so too," Zenyatta said with a sage nod. "It's good to know that you agree."

You clenched your teeth, knowing then that you'd said too much.

Chapter End Notes

Catching up on stuff. Still fighting the hospital bill fight. Still job hunting. Still a salty
meat sack of cynicism and lethargy.

On the bright side, still alive, still have awful dogs, and trying to play video games again. I have a list of books I need to read, and I'm going to try to make more time for that kind of stuff. :D Fic is coming along better. Next chapter will be longer and rather self-indulgent. I hope you can forgive me/enjoy it too.

We're getting some of the fluff and friendship sidequest/arcs moved along before the plot really starts ramping up. So hopefully you don't mind some slice of life adventures for the next few chapters. I'm starting to suspect this is going to be longer than 700k. *facepalm*
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

Another Shanghai visit that throws your expectations back in your face like karmic confetti. You have better karma than you thought.

Chapter Notes

Well, in the rough drafts, I'm at 637k. So maybe the finished piece will be 800k? Because I'm so bad at calculating this and this is the longest thing I've ever written, counting the years of middle school bad Sailor Moon fanfiction scribbled hastily in old notebooks that I don't like to admit to ever. But you know what? I had to start somewhere, and while looking back at it is very cringey, I have no regrets or shame. I also have no intention of ever sharing it. :D

Also, I've received some awesome art this week and let me tell you that gives me life. I love hearing from you guys and there's just something great about "I made something, and now you made something, which makes me want to make more things! HELL YEAH!"

So on my tumblr, I shared a little headcanon about "The Men of Overwatch...And Baby Animals" calendar done as a fundraiser. Shirtless Jack cradling puppies, Reinhardt carrying around baby goats, Winston holding a human baby and looking extremely uncomfortable. Of course, Blackwatch has to make a parody version, and I mentioned Jesse cradling a cactus. Thistle Witch ran with it and it's Jesse looking like a proud cactus-daddy. I...uh don't actually know what that means.

peercat ambushed me out of the blue with this badass Lucky looking like she's getting ready to stab people through the eyes. :I was up at like 4AM squealing like a murderous guinea pig.

Then Gaia Fesbak made this awesome R76 comic from the time Jack took all those hits in Kandahar...

All the feels guys. (ง™₃.hours)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jesse squirmed beside you, dressed in stiff new blue jeans and a plain black t-shirt, his hat askew. Bandit sat on Genji's lap, ignoring the long looks Hanzo kept shooting in his direction. The dog just wagged his stubby little tail and looked awfully smug as Genji scratched between his ears.

Feng had arranged a private transport shuttle, though she didn't ride along this time.

You held the gift basket and the handwritten invitation to Family Day. The basket
contained a mix of fancy cheeses, chocolates, smoked meats, and two bottles of wine. You and Gabriel had handpicked everything and filled the basket. Jack had written the invitation out numerous times, gritting his teeth every time Gabriel casually remarked on how sloppy his penmanship was. Finally you'd "borrowed" one of Lacroix's fountain pens so Jack would have an edge. Of course, Gabriel had to point out how crooked the lines were...

You bit back a smile at the memory. It was good-natured ribbing. Moreso than the teasing you put Hanzo through. You did not miss how Jesse's eyes darted between Bandit and Hanzo, like he expected the archer to start trouble over his dog.

"So Bayan was really reticent about mentioning his work," you said, trying to break the ice. "Is that a bad sign?"

Genji didn't look the least bit concerned, but Hanzo tensed beside him.

"There are probably nondisclosure agreements in place," Genji said.

"Yeah, I know, but I guess I just expected him to say that he couldn't talk about it, rather than dance around the subject. I understand that explanation perfectly well."

Bandit began to thump his hind leg as Genji scratched the skin at the base of his tail. Genji maintained a disinterested expression, but you weren't fooled. He was as wrapped around that little dog's paw as Jesse was. So you weren't worried about Hanzo.

"So is there a lot of...formality?" Jesse asked. "I've only been in Shanghai for ops. Don't know much about wining and dining with billionaire tech heiresses."

"Nah," you said. "Feng's middle class American origins keep her humbleish."

"On our last trip, she picked up the tab. Dinner was only a few thousand credits. Nothing too fancy. She keeps it modest," Genji said, a glint in his eyes.

You rolled your eyes, because while that was insane and possibly true, he was baiting Jesse on purpose.

Jesse adjusted his collar, looking a little green. "Genji, I think we have different definitions of "modest." Some of us weren't born with silver chopsticks in our mouths."

"The term is "silver spoon," peon," Genji said with exaggerated pomp, shoulders square and chin raised at an arrogant angle. And you squinted, because he moved and sounded a lot like Hanzo right then and you doubted that was an accident.

Jesse's lips quirked and he shot a look at Hanzo. "Oh, my mistake, young master," he drawled.

"Ah well, it is good that you can learn from my greater wisdom," Genji continued, mimicking Hanzo's posture. "Some day, young McCree, you may even rise above your humble station. Not very far, but-"

Jesse smiled sardonically. "Your faith means so much to me."

Hanzo glanced between Jesse and Genji, brow furrowed, like he knew they were mocking him, but wasn't entirely sure how to address the situation. You had to turn your head and cover your mouth, feigning a wracking cough.
You disembarked on the roof, gift basket in hand. Jesse held Bandit, though the dog also wore a padded harness and a long leash clipped to Jesse's belt. Genji wore his oversized hoodie and sweatpants, an outfit that seemed too hot for Shanghai in the summer. Hanzo was the most stylish in his narrow legged trousers and layered shirts, his bow bag slung across his back.

Feng waved frantically, looking deceptively youthful in a lacy green tank top and white capri pants, a matching thin blazer slung over her arm. She clapped Genji on the back, grinning at him. Then she saw Bandit, her eyes going wide.

"Puppy..." she said, slowing down noticeably and extending her hand so Bandit could sniff it. "What's his name?"

"He goes by "Bandit" now," Jesse said.

Bandit nosed Feng's hand, panting in the heat.

"He's adorable," Feng said, eyes locked on the dog's face. "Hi, I'm Feng. I don't think we've actually met, but I'm too busy taking in your adorable dog to be sure. Look at his little paws and his wiggly little butt! He's so cute and friendly! I have a new favorite boy, yes! Just don't tell Li's dogs I said that!" Halfway through her spiel, Feng switched to the "good dog" voice. "You're the best boy, yes you are!"

Bandit wagged faster, soaking in the attention.

"We haven't met. I'm Jesse."

Feng finally tore her gaze away from the dog and blinked up at Jesse. "...Oh wow, are you really a cowboy? Like are you good with horses, or cows, or doing rope tricks? Because I went to a rodeo once and that shit looked hard. Or are you a rodeo clown? Because I totally respect the way you run out there slapdash and try to distract a raging bull. That takes balls. Or a distinct lack of self preservation."

Genji snorted.

"Umm..." Jesse blinked. "Sorry, I ain't a rodeo rider."

"That's OK, you're Blackwatch and hey, I recognize you from Lucky's Shanghai adventure. You, Mr. Lacroix, that cute bitchy hacker... Well, you're pretty badass, cowboy."

Jesse looked uncomfortable for a fraction of a second, then flashed an easy smile. "Why thank you, darlin'. You're too kind." He used that slow easy drawl that was part charm and all distraction.

Feng pursed her lips, looking thoughtful. "Wow, you remind me of someone I know," she said, shaking her head.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No, he's an old friend. Helped me get over to Shanghai and covered for me with..." She trailed off, frowning. "It doesn't matter any more, that story is boring. Thanks for coming. I'm
Feng. You probably knew that and more. Lucky, you better make sure my Blackwatch dossier photo is flattering, OK? Like, I get that you have to compile as much embarrassing and terrible information about me as you can, but please don't use any yearbook photos."

"I...don't handle any of that," you said.

"Damn." Feng glanced back at Jesse, realizing she'd been babbling again. "Sorry, I get distracted. A lot. But thanks for coming out anyway. It's great to see people who aren't my subordinates and more importantly people who are not related to me." She nodded and then turned to you. "Lucky! Is that cheese in a basket? Because I love cheese. Baskets are OK, but I love cheese more than I love my own brother right now. Which isn't hard considering what a pain in the ass Li is, but you get the gist."

You handed her the basket. "Thank you for all your help with our vacation. Gabriel and I made sure you got real cheese and not processed cheese food." Unsaid was the fact Jack wouldn't have made that distinction.

"You are an angel," she said happily. "I will stash this in my office and eat everything after you leave. Then I'll roll around on the floor holding my stomach going "why did I do that?" And Auntie Zheng will be like "I told you not to eat all that, why don't you ever listen, Feng?" And I'll just groan louder and pretend like I can't hear her. It'll be great." She paused, taking in your faces. "Shit, did I say that out loud?"

"Say what?" You asked, now very well-versed in pretending you hadn't heard one of her outbursts. "Oh, before I forget: this is an invitation to Family Day. For obvious reasons, it would be best if you attended incognito, maybe with big sunglasses and a floppy hat, but we figured you might like another Zurich visit."

Feng nodded, enthusiastically tearing the envelope open. "I'll be there!"

"You don't even know the date," Hanzo said, looking irritable, like maybe he didn't like being left for last.

"I don't care! I'll be there! And yeah, I can totally make that," Feng said, beaming.

"It's the least Jack can do for his "oath sister," you said, unsure if you should mention Jack's biological sister would be there.

Feng made a high-pitched noise and then slapped her hand over her mouth. When she pulled her hands away, her smile remained big and delighted. Then she finally deigned to look at Hanzo. "Oh, Hanzo. Hi." She said it all very casually, like she hadn't just been squealing.

"Feng," Hanzo said with a curt nod.

You squinted at her, wondering if she was actually annoyed at him, or just trying to play it cool.

Feng glanced down at her watch. "Oh shit, we better move. Uhh, Lucky, you're with me. Where the hell is Bayan? He was supposed to meet me up here!"

You wisely made no comments about the awkwardness of inviting him onto the roof with Hanzo.

Feng headed toward the entry door, waving for you to follow. "Come on then," she said, setting a brisk pace. "Hanzo, I looked into that matter and your connections are better than mine. I
can smooth the way if you need, but I don't have the tact to make the request correctly."

"I would be happy to advise," Hanzo said dryly.

"I bet you would," Feng said, rolling her eyes.

You glanced at Genji, but he didn't look concerned at all. Jesse stuck to your side, a polite grin pasted on to mask his discomfort.

Feng cocked her head to the side, no longer looking at any of you. "Oh...is that all?" Feng touched her ear. "Bayan's waiting for us in the lab. Had to oversee a delicate process," Feng said, leading you down a hallway to an elevator. "Jesse, you're going to want to hold onto Bandit. Uh...don't put him on the ground while we're down there."

Jesse tightened his grip on his dog, looking alarmed. "Should I stay back with him?"

"It'll probably be fine, but I'm not going to risk it," she said, giving him a serious look. "Do you need a carrier?" The door opened to a carpeted freight-sized elevator with padded benches and potted plants. You all filed in, but no one sat. Feng touched a button.

You gave Genji the side eye, wondering if he'd tipped Feng off about Jesse's ridiculous chest rig harness of Bandit.

"-Because I have some lockable titanium reinforced ones down in the lab. They're padded too, for comfort." She reached over to scratch Bandit's chin and you realized she was talking about the box-shaped ones with handles.

"I can hold him," Jesse said, shoulders tense.

Feng stared at his biceps for a second too long, her smile widening. "Yup, I believe it." Her eyes fell on his Deadlock tattoo and you knew she had to recognize the emblem. "Oh, you were biker. I get it now. I bet you rocked those leather jackets."

Jesse shrugged. "I didn't look too bad."

"Bandit needs a leather jacket." Feng pressed her lips together, trying to contain her grin. It wasn't working. "And a helmet, and he could ride in your sidecar, it would be adorable-"

"He already has a cowboy outfit, a bowtie, and a unicorn headband," Jesse said with a shrug. "And no, I didn't buy any of that." He glared around the elevator, daring any of you to comment.

Feng stared thoughtfully at Bandit. "He definitely needs a leather jacket and...oh wow, sometimes I surprise myself with my own brilliance."

Jesse hugged the pooch closer to his chest. Bandit just panted, looking unperturbed by the situation. The little ham was used to being the center of attention and didn't seem the least bit concerned by Feng's plotting.

The elevator dinged and opened. Feng gave Jesse one last look. "Are you sure you don't want an armored carrier?"

Jesse stared at you for a moment, like what had you gotten him into? "Am I going to need a hand free for shooting?"
"You shoot one-handed anyway!" Feng laughed. "But probably not."

Jesse shrugged. "I think we'll be fine then."

You followed Feng out, the room oddly humid. It was a laboratory, but painted in soothing shades of green and blue, with lots of ferns and other plants in niches, on shelves, and decorating the area. The lab smelled funny, like the back passages of a zoo: earthy, musky, and a little too wild for your tastes.

"This is...a lot of shielding," Genji said, sounding oddly approving.

"Well, you know, better safe than dead," Feng said brightly. She linked arms with you. Leading the way to a reinforced metal door. She flicked her finger against it.

"We've talked about this before," Zheng's smooth voice wound through the room. "You're supposed to put your finger on the bioreader-"

"Oh you know it's me!" Feng said, rolling her eyes. "I shouldn't even have to knock."

"Cultivate good habits, Feng. Or at least adhere to the safety protocols. Even if most of them do not apply to you." Somehow Zheng managed to sound annoyed without raising her silky voice.

"Yes, Auntie," Feng said as the door opened. "So everyone's feeling OK? No shortness of breath or signs of allergic reactions?"

You blinked. "Feng-"

"We just went through decon. About .04% of the population has an allergic reaction to our patented process, but that's almost exclusively found in tandem with severe genetic immunodeficiency issues, so I figured you guys wouldn't be bothered at all. Just checking though!"

"...I think we're fine," Genji said dryly, looking around. "But some warning would have been nice."

"Slipped my mind!" Feng said with a shrug, and sadly you believed her.

Jesse squeezed Bandit closer, and the dog just panted happily, not sounding any different or looking the least bit distressed. But his ears perked up.

Bayan stood there, wearing a green lab coat covered in odd stains. His wavy brown hair had been pulled back in a messy bun, and he'd filled back out, looking tired, but nowhere near as broken as you remembered. He smiled at you, looking a little nervous but not unhappy.

"Bayan," you said, reaching out to hug him.

"You might not want to do that," he said regretfully. "I uh...am covered in unsavory biological matter." He turned his gaze to your side. "Feng, it's happening now. And I was in the middle of the usual routine. Should we...?" He trailed off, taking in the rest of your group. "Hi guys. Great to see you. Give me one moment!" He waved and turned back to Feng. "I cued the recordings about an hour ago. I'd give it another five minutes at most."

Feng clapped her hands together, dragging you closer by accident. "Oh, sorry! Lucky, I need you to follow Bayan. Don't ask questions, just do what he says! He's got this process down to
an art!"

"It's science, Feng!" Bayan said, sounding exasperated.

Feng just snickered. "Go!" She released your arm and gave a light push.

"Can someone explain what's going on?" Jesse asked, his worried gaze still focused on Bandit.

"No, because I love surprises!" Feng chirped. "Now come on, you guys can watch from the observation deck."

"What?" You wondered.

"Come on," Bayan said, pushing you toward a well lit room. "I just need you to stand over that pedestal, look inside, and speak slowly. Use nice encouraging words. Maybe coo a little. None of that antisocial Blackwatch bravado."

"What?" You gave him an incredulous look.

"Why are you arguing with me? Just do it, agent," Bayan said sharply, reminding you of times spent in the infirmary and the threat of blunt needles and no pudding.

"Oh flashbacks," you said, trudging into the small chamber, filled with a dozen similar pedestals. They were carbon-colored cylinders, about a foot in diameter, and a small marquee on the side flashed metrics such as temperature, humidity, and a timer.

You glanced down at the pedestal, surprised to find a clear glass lid. You took a quick glance upward and saw your companions on a balcony about ten feet up, watching you. Feng waved. Hanzo and Jesse just looked confused. Genji was the only one who seemed unbothered, and you had a sneaking suspicion that he knew exactly what was going on.

"Eyes on your unit!" Bayan told you. "And start talking!"

Too shocked by the strange orders, you bent over, resting your hands on the side of the pedestal. You could see an oddly-shaped leathery ovoid rock sitting in the center, bits of it flaking off. It was about five inches long and speckled with greenish blue.

"Hi there," you said. "I'm not sure what to say, but if I don't talk, Bayan's going to yell at me, and I forgot just how terrifying he can be-"

There was an odd noise and your eyes widened as the outer shell began to crack. Wait a minute...

"Keep going!" Bayan snapped and you were really starting to wonder why you'd come to visit his bossy ass.

"I feel like an idiot," you said. "I bet I look and sound like one too." You frowned, staring at the moving thing. Because that wasn't a rock. You were talking to large leathery egg. "OK, I think I get it. I really hope no one is recording this, because that would be really embarrassing and who am I kidding? I'm in an On Sing lab-"

"White Rabbit!" Feng yelled.

"Shhhhh!" Bayan hissed.
You heard Feng clap her hand over her mouth. That or someone smacked her in the back of the head.

"Stop talking about yourself. Be encouraging!" Bayan said.

"OK, then. Hi, there. It's time to come out and see the world, eat some...whatever you eat, and, then poop it out on Bayan's lab coat."

There was an clicking chirp. The shell made you think some kind of reptile, but the chirping was avian.

"OK, little bird, you can do it. Stop being shy. It's time to get your fluffy butt out of the egg and-"

A tiny eggtooth tapped out another fracture in the shell, and then tiny little black claws, just big enough to wrap around your fingers, began kicking out weakened pieces. You frowned, because you'd seen chickens hatch before and it didn't happen quite like this...

"Come on," you muttered. "This would be so much faster if you let me take the lid off and-"

"She has to do it herself," Bayan whispered. "Now keep talking! These are not difficult instructions, agent!"

"OK, fuzzy bird," you said. "Come on chick-chick. You can do it. There's food for...her, right?" You glanced up at Bayan.

He nodded firmly. "They're all female."

"Yeah, there's delicious bird food," you continued. "Nom nom nom. Great times. Can't think of anything better! If you don't hurry, I'm going to eat it all. Just kidding. But Uncle Jesse might. Yup. Or Hanzo. Hanzo is an unrepentant snack thief who helps himself to other people's shrimp chips, rice crackers, and squid jerky, among other things."

You heard a disapproving cough and muffled laughter. Belatedly, you realized there was a camera with microphone in the incubator, and everyone up top could hear you just fine.

You laughed awkwardly. "Come on little bird-thing, I am the worst cheerleader ever-"

In the corner of your eye, Bayan nodded vigorously, and you scowled at him.

"Who's a clever girl?" You cooed, watching the tiny talons and eggtooth carve away at more swathes of shell. The opening was growing big enough for you to see what was coming out.

Classical music started to play over the speakers, soft strains to set the mood, but not loud enough to drown you out. It was an orchestral piece that sounded familiar, but you couldn't quite focus on that yet.

"Come on, I'm dying to see how damn cute you are," you muttered, though you knew chicks were often damp and kind of bedraggled when they first hatched. They'd get cuter after they dried off. "Don't be shy."

Little talons cut through a quarter-sized hole and you blinked as a tiny bedraggled black head popped out, its eyes a shocking shade of blue. Even dilated, the pupil was oddly-shaped, two parentheses fused together, the ends tapering into points. You stared, unable to identify what kind
of bird this was. Wait, that wasn't a proper beak, it was a snout.

It looked at you with those bright blue eyes, more an electric aqua than a true blue, and gave a chirp, tiny little white teeth gleaming in its gray mouth.

"Hi," you said, very slowly, realizing what had happened. "You are not a bird. Birds do not have goddamn teeth. You do not have a beak." Your voice rose with every sentence. "You are...Feng, did you really fucking do it?"

Her responding chortle answered the question.

The goddamn dinosaur chick flinched and you leaned over. "No, no, it's OK. I know she sounds scary, and she is pretty fucking scary now that I think about her life choices, but she's not going to hurt you-"

It trilled, blinking at you.

You made clawing motions. "Come on, time to get out, and how long do I have to cheerlead? Because I would like some fucking answers..."

To your surprise, the baby...whatever it was, pushed through much quicker, looking up at you every few seconds to chirrup at you. You answered in words, feeling very much like you were having a conversation, though you had no idea what was being said.

"Yeah, you're doing a great job," you said. "I know it's your first time and all, and I have no idea if you have evolutionary instinct or if you're just making it up as you go, like I am, but hey, keep it up."

The noises ranged from soft peeps to throaty warbles, to hisses and shrieks when you looked away at Bayan, trying to get him to explain what the hell was going on. He just ignored your pidgin sign language, most of which involved pointing at the incubators, shrugging, and then mouthing "What the fuck?" over and over again.

The music swelled, and you slapped your forehead, recognizing the echoing strains of French horns and an strings section. Because that was the goddamn Jurassic Park theme song.

"Feng, I bet you think you're funny!"

She just cackled like a mad scientist and you watched Bayan shake his head, like this wasn't the first time she'd reacted that way.

You turned back at your outraged dinosaur baby. She had managed to free her upper body and was now kicking holes the rest of the shell off of her legs. She was black and fuzzy, with three claws on her little "hands" and four claws on her feet, counting the dewclaw. The second innermost claw was larger and set at a higher angle than the rest. Very slowly, she dragged herself out of what was left of the shell, her little tail wiggling from side to side. She made a little jump toward the lid, chattering quickly.

"That's a raptor," you said, recognizing the claw. "Goddamnit, Feng, she's a raptor-"

"Velociraptor," Feng called out. "With modifications."

"Here," Bayan handed you a bowl of what looked like raw beef in some kind of nutrient paste. "Chew on it for her, then baby bird it back into her mouth."
"You are shitting me," you said.

Bayan just gave you a long empty stare and took the glass lid off the incubator. You looked at him, then the bowl, and then back at him. Then back at your little baby murderbird.

"Seriously?"
Bayan was not smiling.

Sighing, you picked up a small scoop and put it in your mouth, chewing unhappily. You'd eaten raw meat before. In fact, you'd eaten far worse, but not with an audience. Shaking your head, you leaned over the chick.

Squeaking, she opened her mouth and you dropped it in. The goddamn velociraptor baby began to chew, making odd little purr-chirps even as her egg tooth dropped off.

There was a moment of silence. Then choked sniggering came from behind you.

"Bayan, I can't believe you did that! I love you so much!" Feng shouted, laughing.

"Holy shit, I did not actually expect you to do it!" Bayan said, aghast.

"You guys suck." You could hear more laughter from the peanut gallery.

Using your metal fingers, you scooped up a small portion and reached into the incubator.

"Oh, let me get you tongs, their teeth are really sharp-"

She bit down on, through your gloves and to your fingers in her hunger and then squealed in outrage.

"Don't bite me," you said shaking your head. "Go easy."

Eyes bright, she snuffled and tried again, teeth glancing off your metal fingers. She squeaked in protest, because it probably hurt.

"No," you said firmly.

She looked at you and bit down again.

"Nope," you repeated, in a lower voice.

Hunching over, this time she lightly took the ground meat from your hands, very carefully not biting you. By the time you were finished with the bowl, you could feed her with your bare flesh hands, and while she'd nicked you with her needle-sharp claws, she wasn't aggressively biting you.

"...She learned faster than the others," Bayan murmured, looking down at his own scarred fingers.

"Metal fingers aren't tasty," you said.

"You can pick her up, but be careful of the sickle claws. Keep a firm hand around her lower half. They can get really squirmy."

"I want some liquor and some gum," you told him.
"I want a clean shirt, a full night's rest, and to get rid of the smell of raw meat. But that isn't happening. And just so you know, I never signed up to be a dino-daddy," Bayan said. "This is your fault."

"...No, this is not my fault," you said. "Feng gets the credit here."

Bayan blew out a deep breath. He checked his watch. "I've got ten minutes to answer your questions, and then my brood are going to be awake and demanding attention."

"Your...brood? How many...?"

"This is the third generation of viable hatchlings," Bayan said. "Zheng had worked out most of the kinks by the second gen, but they were still a little too feral for conventional domestication. That batch has a nice enclosure by the Mongolian Death Worms. Their favorite pastime is hunting live goats. Feng can handle them, but most everyone else keeps their distance."

Bayan shook his head, and you weren't sure if that meant Feng had a way with animals, or that she was just enhanced enough that she didn't have to worry about taking damage from them.

"How'd you get involved? No offense, I thought you were sticking to medical care and maybe cybernetic development."

"I accidentally imprinted on three of the third gen when I was helping Feng record measurements. Which is why we now have one egg per incubator." Bayan glared up at the balcony.

"Oh," you said, carefully lifting your murderbird out up. She was damp and covered in a fine black down. She wiggled, her little sickle claw slicing through the air. "Hey, hold still. I don't want to drop your fuzzy butt."

You held her carefully in both hands, and she stared up at you, those bright eyes darting around the room, noticing Bayan, the balcony, and the other pedestals. But she only made happy little chirps when she stared at your face.

"You can hold them against your chest, but keep a good grip on their legs. If they feel unstable they'll start flailing and tear you up on accident. We have falconry gloves too."

Very gently, you held the baby murderbird against your chest, keeping the pointy parts facing outward. To your surprise, she relaxed, trilling happily as she rubbed against your hands.

"OK, now what?" You asked looking around.

"I'm hungry, what about you guys?" Feng said leaning over the balcony.

Lunch was dimsum, complete with omnics wheeling multi-tiered carts around the table, each tier containing bamboo steamers full of appetizers. You were still in the underground lab, though this room had mood lighting, Chinese brush paintings of dinosaurs on the wall, and a large round table for dining. The Jurassic Park soundtrack continued to play, despite Bayan's protests and eye-rolling.

He sat in the corner with three other chicks, all louder and bigger than yours. They were
the size of bantam chickens, just a little shorter than Bandit, but far more slender. Each one wore a complex harness fitted behind the neck, under the wings, and around the legs. The harnesses were attached to Bayan's belt. They were sleek things, their feathers just starting to fill out their wings. They stuck close to Bayan, watching all of you, and especially Bandit and your murderbird, with terribly intelligent eyes. None of them had that vibrant shade of aqua irises that yours did, but their colors were all markedly different: peridot green and yellow; cream and brown, with gradient striping along the wings; and one gray one with a deep rose along the wings and belly.

"Can they fly?" Hanzo asked.

"They shouldn't be able to," Feng said, picking up a fried taro cake and biting into it with a loud crunch. "It might happen though. We added a few mutations for color variety and plumage, and modified their proportions just a little; sorry if you were feeling purist, Aunt Zheng thought her alterations would be more practical and aesthetically pleasing. They do have hollow bones, so it isn't out of the question. They might be able to glide though, eventually when their feathers finish coming in."

Your baby dino sat on your lap, dozing while you downed a glass of plum wine, trying to wash the flavor of raw meat out of your mouth.

Jesse set a few steamer trays in front of you and you grabbed some shrimp hargow; the little dumplings were succulent and plump. You took a plate of beef chow fun, stir-fried beef and rice noodles. The fresh hand-cut noodles were wonderfully chewy and coated with just the right amount of sauce.

"What are you going to name her?" Feng asked. She paused. "They're all female, and while parthenogenesis is a concern, I figured you could just not let them hatch the eggs. It shouldn't be a problem, but just to be safe..."

"...I uh...I have no idea what I'm going to do with this murderbird," you said, staring at the little creature.

"You're not naming her "Murderbird," Jesse said, looking slightly appalled.

"And you're definitely keeping her," Feng said cheerfully. "She's obviously imprinted on you. And since you were the one who asked me to reengineer dinosaurs for you-"

"...Fuck," you said, staring at your lap. Damnit, that meant Bayan was right. This was your fault.

Bayan shot you a dirty look while he fed his "babies" little chunks of raw beef. They nipped his fingers, and while he muttered under his breath, you noticed that they didn't break the skin. Though they kept a wary eye on your party, they all stayed close to Bayan, behaving fairly well for a trio of murderbirds. And when he thought you weren't looking, he kissed their fuzzy heads, and they trilled happily at him.

You had to cover your mouth.

"How did you circumvent all the ethical boards on this?" Genji asked.

"Pfft, no one else knows what I do down here," Feng said with a shrug. "And Auntie Zheng needed a project. Plus she used to keep birds..." Feng trailed off, her smile flattening. "She drew palette inspiration from her former aviary. Like Peony over there has patterning from a rose-crested cockatoo," she pointed at the pink and gray one, current nestled in the crook of Bayan's elbow.
"They're very smart, like predatory parrots," Feng said.

"...How dangerous are they?" Hanzo asked, still looking skeptical.

"They're territorial, and fully capable of tearing up unprotected flesh. But they are more docile than I expected - Auntie Zheng's doing."

"This is not a good sales pitch for a pet," you said.

"All animals should be able to defend themselves," Feng said with a shrug. "Auntie Zheng designed them to be more social and playful than they were originally. With some tweaking, she was able to induce neoteny. They'll retain juvenile behaviors and that should dampen aggression. It's the same as the domestication process that separated wolves from dogs. I'm not sure if they'll be like dogs and stay immature forever, or if eventually they'll hit another version of maturity. That's why the imprinting was so important."

"But are they safe?" Jesse asked, eyeing your murderbird.

"They have teeth and talons; I'd say physically they're about as dangerous as any modern flying raptor, but they're going to be smarter. And I definitely wouldn't leave them alone with any small defenseless animals."

Jesse frowned at the velociraptors, holding Bandit closer.

"Let me clarify! I've been socializing them with Li's dogs and cat," Feng said quickly. "I wouldn't leave them unsupervised just yet, but aside from a few nips and accidental scratches, there hasn't been much bloodshed." She paused. "But don't try it with anything guinea pig-sized or smaller. They do seem to sense the difference between prey animals and other omnivores."

You decided not to ask for the details.

Genji just piled his plate full of shumai while Hanzo nibbled on a char siu bao. You blinked as he hesitantly offered some of the roasted pork, from the middle of the bun, to Bandit. His face was utterly still, the severity of the "I am the heir of the Shimada" expression was dampened slightly by the meat in his outstretched palm. So that's why he'd been staring at the dog all day. He'd been trying to resist the adorable pupper, and could not. How the mighty had fallen. You had to cover your smirk.

Jesse raised a brow as Bandit accepted it, politely accepting the treat from Hanzo's hand. Hanzo stared straight ahead, not looking at Jesse or Bandit.

"Anyway, you should thank Genji for helping arrange it. I knew we had a few eggs due to hatch this weekend and I'd hoped you could make it in time for this batch," Feng continued, eating a scallion pancake.

You turned to look at Genji who just popped a piece of shrimp toast in his mouth and then went back for a jellied chicken foot.

"Is this why you told me to put all my...consumables up high?"

"Yes, but that was before I learned they could climb," Genji said.

"Huh," you said.

"They're very social, but not on the same level as pack animal," Feng said. "At least, ours
aren't. They like being around people, and each other, but they can be left alone without too much psychological distress. I'd keep them contained because they're naturally curious and like to try eating everything at least twice."

You stared at the tiny monster in your lap. She opened one eye, gave a soft chirp, and you petted her downy head.

"Can you housebreak them?"

"Theoretically, yes," Feng said, as Bayan gave a groan. "They have...uh...better muscle control than birds. But the ones in the lab environment haven't really caught on. One of my advisors, Mr. Li - not to be confused with my brother -has taken one home and says he's had some success with it." You had a hazy memory of the older man who'd accompanied Feng to the oath-swearing ceremony. "His seems to have favorite spots. So it's a work in progress."

Your little monster yawned and nuzzled your stomach. You waited for the bite, but it didn't come. So you carefully broke off a piece of beef.

"Anything I shouldn't feed her?"

"They're omnivores with a heavy protein requirement." Feng chewed on a spare rib. "I'd avoid lots of salt, refined sugar, and preservatives, but Auntie made them pretty hardy. They don't have the avocado allergy that the first gen did either."

You offered the chick some beef and she nibbled it, concentrating on the new flavor. Then she gobbled it down and chirped for more. You gave her a noodle. And a piece of shrimp. And part of a chicken foot, though you removed the bones first.

"She should be able to digest small bones," Feng told you. "You won't need to give her grit or stones for digestion. Her teeth should be enough."

"OK," you said, offering her some egg custard.

"We'll get her vaccinated in a moment, and I have a whole folder about the care and keeping of modern velociraptors," Feng said happily. "Bayan wrote most of it."

You looked over at dino-dad, covered in poop, and cuddling three squawking murderbirds.

He just sighed, shaking his head while "Peony" nibbled on his shirt.

She pooped on you. It wasn't pretty. It was slimy and part of it was white like bird poop, the other part brown.

She shrieked angrily when you tried to hand her to Feng so you could clean up. To your surprise, Genji offered her a piece of bao and she quieted down as he picked her up in his metal hand. He spoke softly to her, while you petted her head.

You cleaned up in the washroom, hoping this wasn't going to be a trend. When you came back out, she trilled happily, ignoring Genji as he offered her more steamed bread and meat, and flapping at you.
"You should introduce her to Bandit," Feng said. "Maybe not put them together yet, but definitely do it while she's still so much smaller and cute."

Genji handed her back to you and she rubbed her snout on your hands. You reached over and carefully scratched Bandit's head, while she watched. Then you scratched her head. She sniffed your hand, chattering rapidly. "No biting," you said as she nibbled on your fingers, mouthing rather than trying to break skin.

Jesse reached over hesitantly, offering a piece of steamed fish. She swallowed it whole, making happy noises the entire time. Very slowly he rubbed her head, and she watched you as much as Jesse, like she was trying to gauge your reactions to all these "strangers." She was frighteningly intelligent, you realized.

"Uncle Jesse's safe," you said, patting his hand, laughing at his pained expression.

Jesse scooted his chair closer so you were almost touching. Bandit leaned over to sniff.

Your murderbird froze against you and you reached out again to pat Bandit. He licked your hand, looking nonplussed by the baby dinosaur. It was smaller than him after all. And he was a veteran Overwatch dog. Such things didn't faze him.

Very slowly she stretched out her neck, her tail, lashing back and forth. She watched him warily. He yawned and stretched out in Jesse's lap.

"Hmm, maybe single hatchings are a better way to go," Feng said, looking at Bayan as he tried to make sure all his babies got equal amounts of food and attention. "I thought because they're social animals they shouldn't grow up alone, but now that I think about it, a lot of us might have been happier being the only child..."

Both Genji and Hanzo snorted.

"You are the worst," Bayan said.

Very slowly, your hatchling walked across your lap, steadier on her feet than she had been half an hour ago. She moved like an oddly graceful chicken, head bobbing as she stretched her neck out, tail extending to balance her.

Bandit sat still, letting her come toward him. She leaned over and nipped his leg.

"Shit!" Jesse nearly jumped.

Bandit just yawned, because she hadn't bit down hard. She was just mouthing him, and you booped her nose lightly. "No biting."

She grumbled, and continued "tasting" him. Bandit leaned over and licked her face, and she froze, shocked by the dampness and maybe the smell. Then she ran back to your torso, cheeping loudly.

Laughing you picked her up and held her against your chest while she chattered away, probably telling you all about the horrors of dog breath. You looked up to see Feng grinning broadly holding up her phone.

"That was so fucking cute."

You reached out and let Bandit lick your hand, all while your chick watched. Then you set
her down again and she hesitantly headed back over to investigate the dog. She reached out, poking him with one of her tiny "hand" talons.

Bandit lazily swung his front paw, smacking her off-balance onto her butt.

Squeaking, your murderbird jumped up and ran back to your lap, chattering away at a rapid pace, her outrage clear. You picked up another piece of shrimp hargow and ate it, watching her hop from foot to foot, peeping. You offered her a small bite, and she ignored it for a second, flapping one wing at Bandit. She took half a bite chewing slowly as she watched the dog. Then she grabbed the rest of it and headed back over to Jesse's lap.

This time, she put the piece of shrimp dumpling in front of Bandit, and sat down, waiting for him to take it.

"...Well," Feng said, sounding very interested.

Bandit delicately picked up the offering and chewed it. The raptor chick looked at you, then slowly approached. She extended one of her little wing talons and gingerly touched his face, not quite able to reach the top of his head. She cooed softly, sniffing his face while she mimicked petting him.

"Good girl," you said, not entirely sure this wasn't some elaborate raptor trap to get Bandit to drop his guard.

She moved to the side, grabbing little fistfuls of Bandit's skin and began to climb him. He held still, but grumbled when her toe talons nicked him. She was on his back in seconds and she rested against the back of his neck, little hands lightly scratching the top of his head. She looked at you, chirping with excitement.

"That is impressive," you said, wondering how much of that was predatory behavior and how much of that was just mimicry with a dose of quick problem solving skills.

She looked up at Jesse, head tilted to the side. He hesitantly pulled off a piece of pork char siu and held out his hand.

Squeaking, she grabbed it out of his hand with her little talons.

"Ow!" Jesse grimaced as she clawed him in her excitement. "Careful." He tapped her nose.
"No claws."

She hissed at him, and them crammed the meat in her mouth, like she expected him to try to take it back. Which was kind of ridiculous because no one had tried to take her food yet, even as punishment.

You reached over and tapped her nose and talons too. "No clawing."

She shrunk down, falling silent as she flattened herself against Bandit's head.

"How could you be so mean to the baby?" Feng wailed. "Look at her, so dejected!" She reached over to pat the chick. Your murderbird shrieked and fell off Bandit's head, racing back to your lap for safety. She curled up against your stomach, tail wrapped around her body while she hissed at Feng.

"It's OK," you said. "Aunt Feng is safe too." You patted Feng's outstretched hand as Feng's lower lip wobbled.
"...Aunt...Feng?" Feng blinked, her green eyes big and watery.

"Did you want to be "godmother Feng?" Because I'm just improvising," you said.

"I'll be Auntie Feng!" Feng shouted frantically. She grabbed a piece of spare rib, shredded it in her left hand, and then pushed her hand out.

The hatchling looked at you, and you nudged her forward, watching her slink over to Feng, sniffing experimentally. She nibbled on a piece of pork, then another. Except when Feng went to pet her, she nipped Feng's finger, stole the last piece of meat, and ran back to you.

"No biting," you sighed and you swore that was a defiant look on the raptor's snaky little birdface.

Feng just laughed. "You are a clever little shit. But that's OK. You're smart and Auntie Feng respects the challenge."

Hanzo, Genji, and Feng apparently had business to take care of. So you hung back in the dining room with Bayan and Jesse, watching as your baby raptor called to Bayan's trio. They didn't approach each other, but they were certainly vocal. It sounded like a mix of birds, cicadas, and squirrels all chattering at each other.

Bayan eyed your single hatchling enviously. "She's more eager for human contact than mine were initially. I think she'll acclimate to your lifestyle faster."

"Come on, this is really cool, Dino Dad."

Bayan sighed. "Do you know how long they're supposed to live?"

"...No," you said, looking down at your squawking chick. "Ten, fifteen years?"

"If nothing goes wrong, they have parrot-length lifespans," Bayan scowled. "Thirty to sixty years."

"Oh," you said.

"Three of them, for thirty or more years, Lucky."

You laughed awkwardly. "Umm, if you don't want them-"

"The combination of prolonged juvenile behavior and imprinting means I'm probably stuck with them forever. They like Feng and Jalair, but they won't let any of the other lab techs handle them without me present. If I try to separate them, they panic."

"Huh," you said.

Bayan sighed. "I'll have to separate them eventually, just for training. It's just so hard. They get really upset and cry..."

Which was kind of hilarious, because in the infirmary Bayan was not such a soft touch. He was kind and compassionate sure, but he didn't hesitate to make you suffer for your own good.
And he did it *cheerfully*.

Jesse just petted Bandit, who remained unperturbed by this entire ordeal. "So Lucky has to take her new baby with her?"

"Baby? This is a dinosaur, Jesse. A juvenile dinosaur. It can walk, feed itself, and communicate. This is not a baby."

Both Bayan and Jesse gave you skeptical looks.

"What?" You scowled. "She's not a baby. Babies are gross."

Your not-baby raptor chose that moment to relieve herself on you.

You sat through her series of immunizations, trying to think up a name. Sure, you could call her "Murderbird," and probably would, but that was a nickname at best. You rubbed your forehead, still not sure how you were going to explain this. Yes, she looked like a really weird bird. Except birds didn't have teeth, a long wiggly tail, or that distinct wing claw-hand scientifically known as a "manus." Any dinosaur enthusiast would recognize her for what she was. But most everyone else could be convinced that she was a "mutant bird" you "adopted" on an op. You lived in a world with genius inventor gorillas and super soldiers. Mutant birds didn't even rate a second page news story.

Feng sat beside you, grinning. "We're still collating data and writing the patents, but once we have a better idea about their behavior and temperaments, we might start out selling them to reputable people at an exorbitant price. I might have to gift some to government officials. But I think it will be OK."

"Well, thanks. I'm overwhelmed. This is...not what I was expecting."

"Dinosaurs like shiny Pokémon," she murmured. "They're going to be pricy, and we'll spawn a bunch of imitators and maybe an awful market of poorly engineered dinosaur-replicates." She paused. "I'll have Bayan draw up a training course that people have to pass on top of the fee. Maybe deal more heavily with zoos and wildlife parks."

"...Not a bad idea," you said, watching your chick snap her teeth at the frustrated lab tech.

"I'm gifting some to loyal family members with an inclination for exotic pets. It's more of a diplomacy project," Feng admitted. "But the novelty is pretty damn enchanting."

"Family giving you problems? Other than your brother, that is?"

She shrugged. "I'm managing them. It's irritating, but not dire. The dinosaur project should impress everyone long enough to roll out some of my other initiatives. We'll see." Feng leaned forward.

"Are you adopting one?"

"Are you kidding?" Feng laughed. "I don't have time to mother a dinosaur. I don't have time to date or maintain civilian friendships." She shrugged. "This isn't my only big secret project,
Lucky. This is just the most fun one."

You almost asked then if giving Bayan three dinosaurs was really an oversight on her part. Because Bayan looked much happier with their companionship, even if he complained profusely about the addition to his workload.

The tech brought you a reinforced fabric sling, and you wound it over the back of your neck and around your chest, then put your sleepy new pet inside. There were snaps to cinch the fabric together, but she settled down quickly, not trying to peek out.

"Let me know what housebreaking method you choose. We've been using chicken diapers on some, but Bayan thinks he can get them to poop in his shower." There was an odd silence. "That's really gross, now that I say that aloud."

You sighed. "I don't know anything about anything," you said.

"They should be really hardy. The vaccinations are more of a precaution than a necessity." Feng rose. "I've put together a starter kit for you. On top of the manual, it includes some custom harnesses, a sun lamp, chicken diapers..."

"Thanks," you said, getting up. The two of you walked to the elevators, pretending you didn't hear Bayan crooning lullabies to his raptor babies.

"Just one more thing I'm terrified of fucking up."

"Yeah," Feng said, with both palms up. "I feel that way about everything."

Chapter End Notes

So goose!anon, you were very close. I saw your ask and was like "...how did they get in my brain?"

But seriously though, I left the first Jurassic World film wanting a pack of raptors, a motorcycle, and a barbarian-style fur outfit. I can't really explain the last one. Now the velociraptors in Jurassic Park are actually based on deinonychus and velociraptors were actually the size of turkeys. Yes, I went full dinosaur-nerd when writing this. I took some liberties, because pretty feather patterns are cool and I wanted something like a cuddly killer parrot with little claw hands. I will admit that I was looking at Kim Rhodes on Deviant art and her amazing little feathered raptor figures as reference points for cute. (I used other sources for scientific reference, but those were the cutest damn things I'd seen in a long time). No, velociraptors probably couldn't glide even if they had feathered arms. No, they probably weren't true pack hunters. And I doubt they were cuddly at all. But I can dream.

Working on keeping my attitude more internally positive. Because I'm good at being cynical and really I don't need to be thinking harsh thoughts all the time, even if they're true. They're not helpful.

As for Ana and Jesse, I initially wanted to try writing them as a rare pair, but the more I wrote them the more it didn't feel quite right. There's a Korean fan artist (zo-km on tumblr) who does a tragic pining Jesse who waits for Ana post-fall Overwatch, and
that's really what inspired me to try. I think Ana cares a lot about Jesse, and maybe she was tempted, maybe she wasn't (WHO WOULDN'T BE, OK?) , but with the way they are now, it wouldn't work.
Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

Sometimes it's hard to pinpoint the exact moment you connected with someone. It's usually easier to remember when you finally realized it.

Chapter Notes

We have officially broken 600k!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Genji had convinced Jesse to go upstairs, with him and Hanzo. You weren't sure what they were doing. Your murderbird dozed as you rode the elevator with Feng who kept shooting amused looks in your direction.

"So what were Hanzo and Genji doing?"

"They had a couple errands," Feng said. "I had to send some couriers to do some shopping for them. You know, since they can't exactly waltz around Tokyo any time they please."

You pictured Hanzo and Genji stuffing designer suitcases full of shrimp chips, wasabi peas, and wagashi. Maybe Genji had Feng pick up some limited edition release of a new video game, a few comics, several expensive bottles of alcohol...

"Don't tell anyone, but Hanzo really likes South Korean beauty products," Feng said. "They're usually really good and super cheap, but he gets embarrassed when you point out that he prefers anything to the Japanese brands."

You blinked slowly.

"Oh yes, he has a complex facial regimen all worked out." Feng's smile was sneaky. "And while I'm not entirely sure why he's so worried about that stuff, considering his youth and the availability of anti-aging gene mods; it's pretty hilarious when he lectures me about the importance of sunscreen and moisturizing."

"I can't tell if you're joking or not," you said.

"Well, he wanted snacks, clothes, and some gear too. Won't stop bitching about the inferiority of western blades and arrows, but how many weapon smiths still make fucking combat arrows? Most fletchers just make hunting gear. Of course, he's going to have to custom-order them to his insane specifications," Feng said, rolling her eyes. "You know, maybe I should buy stock in some of those chaebol beauty companies. I suspect when Hanzo has enough capital, he's going to take over one or two. If only for special access to their products."

"...I still can't tell if you're fucking with me," you said as the elevator opened. You patted
your sleepy, pooped out murderbird, who snoozed happily against your chest. "You realize I didn't actually expect you to make designer dinosaurs, right?"

"...Yeah," Feng shrugged. "But it's brilliant. And cute. And I have no regrets. Yet." She gave your raptor chick a speculative look as you both walked out of the elevator into a fancy high-rise lobby, complete with marble floors, leather couches, and more brush paintings of dinosaurs.

Hanzo stood with his back to you, while Genji sat on the arm of the couch, tossing a knife back and forth in his hands.

"Stop that," Hanzo said, turning his head.

"Why?" Genji asked, spinning it.

"It's not yours!"

Genji slouched on the couch, not looking like he cared, but he stopped playing with the knife. Jesse sat on the other side of the couch, rolling his eyes. Bandit napped in his lap, not looking particularly concerned.

"Any issues?" Feng asked.

"No, your people did a good job," Hanzo said begrudgingly. "They're loading the items as we speak. The money has been transferred and I've given the referral; you shouldn't have any trouble getting your supplies from that area."

Feng just smiled. "You have such admirable efficiency."

"He just didn't want Lucky to see all the limited edition Kitkats he ordered," Genji laughed. "There were Fuji apple, wasabi, and sake flavors, if you're interested."

Hanzo gave Genji another withering look. "Quit being ridiculous. I needed time to inspect the Kobayashi and the Yoshihara."

"Oh, is that who you went with?" Genji asked dryly. "I thought this was a Hasegawa?" He held up the knife.

"It was not what I expected. And I ordered different sets," Hanzo said sharply. "Because unlike some people, I believe this business to be serious."

"As the grave," Jesse drawled.

Hanzo whirled, brows furrowed, teeth clenched.

Genji just rolled his eyes. "He didn't actually kill me, McCree."

Hanzo winced.

Jesse flashed his easy "aw shucks" smile and you weren't fooled at all. "So you going to tell us all about this serious business? Because seeing you load up on all that hardware after saying you were done with swords, well, that makes me mighty uncomfortable."

"American, this isn't your business. It's hers." Hanzo jabbed his finger at Feng.

Genji made a face.
Feng blinked. "Uh...Kind of? But I just sent the couriers..."

"Most of the smiths I know work in sets," Hanzo said. "They create heirloom masterpieces, and have spent their entire lives honing their craft. Asking for a single knife from most is...a waste of everyone's time."

"Go big or go home," Genji said with a shrug. "But I'm fairly sure those are my brother's sensibilities and not a requirement of the smiths-"

Hanzo shot him a dirty look.

"...But who am I to question my elder brother's expertise?" Genji said so politely, that Hanzo had to do a double take and Feng covered her mouth.

"The Yoshihara set a superior work overall; it is one I would gift to a trusted family member," Hanzo lifted a large wooden box onto the couch. He lifted a katana, wrapped in silk, the lacquered scabbard and handle a vibrant green. "The blades are perfectly balanced, the katana is the shining centerpiece, the steel strong and flexible. The engravings done by a true artist; the tsuba alone is an intricate work of art, bearing the motif of a dragon, perhaps a tad extravagant for a hand-guard, but still exquisite The handle is battle-wrapped in silk, lacquered leather, and ray skin. I admit the katate-maki style is not as aesthetically pleasing as some of the traditional patterns, but it makes the handle easier to clean after battle. The wakizashi and the tanto are of an equal quality and have been crafted to complement the longer blade."

"So, were you interested in learning the katana?" Genji said, interrupting Hanzo's monologue.

"...Someday," you said, a little worried about Hanzo's reaction. "When I have more time, maybe?"

"That's what I thought," Hanzo said sourly, lips pursed. He set the katana down and removed another set. "Kobayashi did not deign to attempt to provide a true daisho, despite my requests."

"Maybe he'd rather demure than provide a subpar work," Genji suggested, a smile playing on his lips.

"She crafted this set, and took my money, but did not provide a katana. I specified that this was a gift, and I could not give an incomplete set..." Hanzo blew out a frustrated breath. "But she has no manners. I don't know what I expected from a woman smith."

"Imagine that," Feng said dryly. "And here I thought all Japanese people were polite. Those uppity women, how dare they? Did she charge you for a katana too?"

Jesse choked back a laugh and had to cover his mouth. He locked eyes with you, happier than you'd seen all week. You were suddenly very glad you'd pestered him into coming along.

Hanzo whipped his head around, giving Feng a dirtier look. "No, but I asked her to make me one." Apparently, Hanzo still had trouble with the subtle difference between an order and a request, but you had faith that with a little more work, he might get it by the end of the year.

Grimacing, Hanzo unwrapped a two and a half foot wakizashi, the scabbard black, the handle trimmed with red. "She used a fox for the tsuba!" He scowled at it. "I had to check the tsuka wrap to ensure she actually used real ray skin on the handle..." Hanzo grumbled. "It is genuine and will not fall apart."
Genji rolled his eyes again, and you suspected this was not the first time he'd heard these complaints.

"The balance is passable. The weight is acceptable. The blade won't just snap under pressure, but it is insulting. Look at it!" He shoved the sheathed wakizashi in your face.

You took the short sword, weighing it gently in your hands. The grip was quite nice and it fit well in your hand. The pebbled ray skin leather gleamed under the red silk wrapping. It was far lighter than you expected; you could wield it one-handed if necessary, though it was still a bit long for your ambush kills, but you suspected you could adjust. You glanced at the hand guard; it bore a stylized fox, like Hanzo said, its sinuous body and multiple tails flowing through the metal. You carefully drew the blade, admiring the wave pattern. It looked very sharp.

When you looked up, Hanzo was watching you expectantly. "It is mediocre, isn't it?"

"...No, it's actually rather pretty; more importantly it is well-balanced, light, and the blade looks keen," you said. "But I'm no expert."

Genji smiled.

To your surprise, Hanzo didn't protest, his face remained oddly neutral. He just handed you the tanto. "She is a cheeky smith with no respect for decorum. The tsuba bears a familiar sign."

You carefully sheathed the wakizashi and offered it back to Hanzo. He just waved his hand, and you held it under one arm, inspecting the tanto. Unlike the wakizashi, the handle was black, still ray skin leather with black silk instead of the rubberized grip your last tanto had. There was a tiny weasel-creature on the guard, its claws long and stylized. You shot Genji a look. "Kamaitachi, right?" Genji had called you "Kamaitachi-chan" during that first arrow-studded encounter with Hanzo, where you'd managed to stab the archer twice. Huh.

"Sounds about right," Genji said lazily, and you fought the urge to throw something at his head.

The tanto was a little heavier than your original, its blade a smidgeon longer. You drew it, surprised to see the blade blackened, just like yours had been. It was slightly wider at the base, but still had the razor sharp chisel tip.

"And she can't even get the colors to match. No respectable swordsman wants a mismatched set with an assassin's blade," Hanzo said, shaking his head and confirming your suspicions. You held the sheath in one hand and the knife in the other. It fit and it felt...good. Not exactly like before, but still right: much better than Gabriel's K-bar.

"I like it," you said softly.

Hanzo lowered his head, eyes closed. "Well, there is no accounting for taste. I cannot just give a subpar gift like that to someone important."

You shrugged, looking at Genji.

"Well, if you're not going to use it," Genji said, rolling his eyes. "You could ask Lucky to take it off your hands. She has been trying to find a new blade."

Hanzo made a show of rubbing his chin and looking thoughtful. "Oh, that's right. It completely slipped my mind." He turned his head slowly and studied the blade in your hand. "I suppose this could be a small repayment for all the food you have shared with me. A mere trifle.
These are minor matters, you see.

Jesse had to pull his hat down over his face. Feng made a rude noise beside you. And did this mean you weren't supposed to give him crap about stealing your snacks? Because honestly, you were just hiding the good stuff in your room now. You glanced helplessly at Genji. This was the weirdest gifting ritual you'd been a part of; though to be fair, you hadn't engaged in many.

Genji just smirked at you, enjoying the show.

"Well, if it eases your mind, I uh...I would be delighted to make use of these fine blades. This is most generous of you," you said, because you weren't entirely sure what would happen if you just outright thanked Hanzo for the obviously custom-made and terribly thoughtful gifts. He might explode from embarrassment, and that would be messy. "My compliments to the cheeky smith and her intransigence. After all, a full katana would be wasted on my lack of skill."

Hanzo exhaled slowly, shoulders sloping as he relaxed. "Think nothing of it. Just, try not use blades as shovels," he said, a pained look on his face.

"I wasn't interested in repeating that experience," you said, rolling your eyes. And he'd been doing so well too.

Feng winked at you. "Well, I'm glad you found a solution for that terrible problem."

Hanzo nodded and looked at the Yoshihara set. He carefully wrapped it back up and stared at the box for a moment. "You prefer spears, don't you?"

"Most of the women in my family do." Feng raised a brow. "I actually prefer Berettas; I inherited a love of guns from Dad. But Mr. Li has been running me through an advanced melee course. Apparently, my aunt - my mother's dead sister, not Great Aunt Zheng- had quite some skill with the dāo. It's a traditional Chinese saber, single-edged," she said to you.

"These are superior," Hanzo said, thrusting the box into Feng's hands. "A person in your position shouldn't be using a peasant's weapon."

You glanced at Genji, who just sighed and rested his face his hands.

"Is he talking about spears or the Berettas?" Jesse asked, nudging Genji with his elbows. "And hey, what's he implying about Lucky?"

Feng just took the box in both hands, grinning at Hanzo. "Wow, these will look really nice on my wall next to that kimono I bought at the airport and the Pokémon wall scroll Li bought me."

Hanzo's jaw dropped and he stared at her in pure horror.

"I was kidding!" Feng shouted as she examined the blade set. "Come on, Hanzo, it was funny! I don't actually have an airport kimono on my wall or a Pokémon scroll! Do you think Aunt Zheng would let me be that tacky?"

Hanzo had locked himself in restroom ten minutes ago, and had not returned. Genji sat perched on the arm of the couch next to Feng, not bothering to hide his grin.

You sat beside her, your new blades in your lap. You felt a pang of sympathy for Hanzo,
after all, he had done all that work to get you both nice presents, and then made an elaborate show of giving you your gifts in the most emotionally-stunted fashion you could imagine. And then Feng had counter-trolled him.

Jesse was still laughing, while Bandit sniffed your sleeping murderbird. He licked her head and she hissed softly, apparently not keen on being disturbed.

"I really do like these," you said. "Should I tell him that, or will that blow his mind?"

"Hanzo's still taking baby steps at friendship," Genji said, a faint smile on his face. "He best understands relationships in the terms of debts and balances." Genji gave you a sheepish look, because both of you weren't so far removed from that viewpoint either. Sure, you were making progress now, but before...

"Hanzo doesn't owe me that much," Feng said. "I mean, if you guys decide to retake the family business, sure, I'll help, provided Jack doesn't blow a gasket." She looked at you, reaching over your lap to pet Bandit.

"I don't know what they're planning," you admitted. "If they follow the keiretsu model and go legit, then it shouldn't cause too many problems. You know, provided you don't go making unsavory allies like Talon and you quit the drug trade." You paused. "But we haven't really talked about that yet."

Genji shrugged. "I suspect Agent Lacroix and the commander may have some opinions."

Jesse stared at the swords in Feng's lap, and then her face.

"You know, I'm sure we all know this little farce wasn't as coincidental as Hanzo would like us to think." McCree looked between you and Feng for confirmation.

"Jesse, I am nowhere near as dumb as I act," Feng said sternly.

Jesse just laughed. "Just making sure we're all on the same page."

"I think this means I have to be...nicer," you said with a sigh.

"No," Genji said. "Don't change a thing. The shock would kill him."

You weren't sure if he was being serious or if he just enjoyed watching you bait Hanzo too much to see that change. It could be both.

Feng snorted.

"You're pretty patient with him, huckleberry," Jesse said, patting your head.

"That's me, patient as fuck," you said.

No one said anything, and you weren't sure if that was agreement or discretion.

"Anyway, Feng, I just had to ask your opinion, because I'm not too knowledgeable about this kind of thing." Jesse's easy drawl didn't fool you for a second. He played dumbest right before he went for the kill. "Do you think it's "endearing" or "tacky" that those swords match your eyes?"

Feng stared very hard at the scabbards. "Yes," she said, turning a very deep shade of red.
Bayan arrived in a clean gray shirt and jeans. He sighed when he saw the four of you snickering and no Hanzo in sight.

"...What did you do to him?" Bayan asked, sounding tired and maybe a little disappointed in your life choices.

You pointedly did not look at him or Feng.

Jesse whistled innocently.

Feng giggled.

Genji just shrugged. "He's in the bathroom. We were not going to make jokes about his delicate constitution."

Bayan squinted at Genji, then shook his head and came over to sit on one of the couches. "She's sleeping?" He stared at your raptor chick. "Damnit, why did you get the easy one?" He glared at Feng.

"They keep each other up," Feng said, rolling her eyes. "If you'd just give them separate beds..."

"They're bonded to each other!" Bayan scowled. "They get scared!"

On cue, your chick yawned, her little teeth gleaming under the lights, and she burrowed deeper into the sling, tail wrapped around her fuzzy body.

"...I guess we could say Lucky is a better dino-parent," Feng said, smirking at him.

"I though we were going to watch a movie," Bayan said, not taking the bait. "And not Jurassic Park or any of the sequels or remakes."

"The Land Before Time?"

"No. No dinosaur movies: you're just going to spend the entire time critiquing the science." He glanced at Genji.

"I was kidding," Feng said sulkily, and you didn't believe her at all.

"No westerns," Genji said, giving Jesse a look.

"Aw come on, Genji. I didn't say no "kung fu" movies."

"That's because you like kung fu movies," Genji sniffed.

"You like westerns! Hell, you like the Magnificent Seven better than the Seven-"

"Silence," Genji said.

"Period dramas?"

"Eww, periods are gross," Jesse laughed.

You punched him in the arm.
"Thank you," Bayan said. "Blackwatch seems to prefer thrillers, action flicks, and anything with lots of explosions." He pursed his lips. "Why don't we watch a Miyazaki film?"

"Oooh," Feng nodded. "Good idea. Spirited Away or Nausicaä?"

"Who?" Jesse asked, raising a brow.

Feng smacked Genji in the arm. "Hayao Miyazaki was a national treasure! You've never shown him a Miyazaki film?"

Genji shrugged.

Feng stood, eyes flashing. She grabbed Jesse's hand and pulled him too his feet. "Let's go. We're going to have snacks, drinks, and Genji, you need to pick one to start him on. But we are not watching Grave of the Fireflies."

Jesse blinked. "Uh.."

"That was my first choice," Genji said, lazily.

"You're a dick." Feng said, shaking her finger at him. "And you've forfeited your right to choose. We'll start with Nausicaä, go on to Howl's Moving Castle, and maybe Princess Mononoke. That's not going to be too dark, is it?"

"It just highlights the fact that the price of progress was the death of magic and the inevitable extinction of." Genji began.

"No spoilers!" Feng yelled. "We can watch Spirited Away, instead. And don't you tell me 'I'm a grownup, I don't watch cartoons!'" She gave Jesse a hard look. It was amusing considering she was half a head shorter than him.

"...I am a grownup. I sometimes watch cartoons?" Jesse admitted.

"Good," Feng said. "Come on, Hanzo. Stop sulking. We want to show Jesse some Miyazaki films and we need someone with culture to help." She winked at the rest of you.

It was half a minute before Hanzo emerged from the restroom, looking disdainful, and sadly there was no toilet paper stuck to the bottom of his shoes. So you almost asked him what took him so long and if he'd fallen in, but Bayan stepped on your foot.

Feng's office had a massive viewscreen, blankets on the floor, and a truly distracting number of snacks. She'd blacked out the windows, put on Nausicaä, and sat down.

Jesse, Feng, and Hanzo were glued to the screen. Bayan had fallen asleep facefirst on the couch, unable to fight his exhaustion any more. You and Genji ate buttery popcorn, your baby dino still out cold.

"Do you not like Miyazaki films?" You asked, keeping your voice low.

"...Everyone likes Miyazaki films," Genji said out of the corner of his mouth. "Even the commander is very fond of them, if you didn't know."

"...Huh," you said.
"...I haven't watched one in years," Genji admitted. "Too...nostalgic." His gaze fell on Hanzo, who was eating rice crackers and watching a the titular character steered a glider through a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

You nodded. "Do you need to step out?"

Genji shook his head. "No." He gave you a small smile. "Thinking about the past doesn't bother me as much as it once did."

The trip home was...interesting. Bayan had packed you a survival kit, complete with adjustable harnesses, chicken diapers in various sizes, a solar lamp, and one of those titanium kennels, complete with a hardened lock, because apparently the older ones could operate the latching mechanism with no difficulty. You had tried to skim the handbook, but then your raptor chick was awake, and hopping out of the carrying sling, and no, she didn't want to sit still, she wanted to explore and eat things.

It took you and Jesse twenty minutes to catch her once she hit the floor, mostly because the Shimada brothers didn't deign to help. They just laughed at your struggles, Hanzo holding Bandit in his lap.

Once you'd caught her and cleaned up her mess, Jesse helped you put the smallest harness on her, and you attached the leash, and sat back down, watching her trying to wiggle free. She was alarmingly flexible, her little claws tearing at the foreign material, while she squawked furiously at you. But the harness straps held.

You still had no idea what you were going to do with a baby velociraptor. Between Gabriel's administrative duties, Lacroix's Shit Spiders missions, and the care and upkeep of your fellow Blackwatch agents, you had a full schedule. Now that you were out of Shanghai, this seemed like a terrible idea. You weren't ready for a dog, let alone a highly-experimental genetically-engineered murderbird brought back from extinction. What if she got sick? The closest "expert" was in Shanghai. What if Gabriel or Jack didn't like her? What if she hated them? Could you even take her in public without inciting panic? There were so many potential problems, and sheer magnitude of your responsibilities began to weigh on your chest.

Breathing deep, you looked down to see her balled up on your thigh, her tail curled around her fuzzy little body as she dozed. Reaching down, you scratched her head and she chirped softly, nuzzling your hand, her claws closing around your finger. She cooed, holding you there, warm, and fragile, and so damn trusting that you had to look away.

Whatever the problems, she was your murderbird now. You'd find a way to deal. You always did. Now, you were just going to have to explain to Jack and Gabriel that she had imprinted on you, you were now an honorary velociraptor guardian, and you couldn't just send her back.

Gabriel sat in the docking bay waiting room, still in casual uniform, a tablet in hand. He looked up, his eyes immediately going to the pet carrier full of dinosaur care supplies. He raised a brow, his gaze lingering on the new weapons in your belt, and finally stopping on the sling around
your chest. Frowning, he rose, closing the distance between you, and looked inside fabric sling.

Your murderbird popped her head up and began chattering rapidly. She gave Gabriel a quick onceover and fell silent as she looked to you for your reaction to him.

You leaned over and kissed him, his lips soft against yours. He caught your bottom lip between his teeth, one arm curving around your waist.

"Miss me?" You asked, kissing his nose.

"Of course. I had to look over all those forms on my own." His words were casual, but his eyes were warm, and you didn't mind the teasing, not when he was standing here looking at you like that.

He glanced back down at your dino chick, who was still silent.

"Gabriel," you said, patting his chest. "He's safe."

She tilted her head, watching him with those piercing eyes, her little hands folded together like a praying mantis. She cheeped a few times, not sounding upset or even excited. It was a lot like acknowledgement and you wondered briefly just how clever she was going to be.

Gabriel's brows climbed higher. "So that maniac really did it?"

"Yeah," you said, a smile creeping across your face, because Gabriel was smart and knew right off the bat, so you didn't have to completely explain the situation. You weren't entirely sure what you would have done if he disbelieved you.

"What kind?" Gabriel crouched down, so he was eye level with your hatchling. "Does it have a name?"

"Velociraptor," you said. "And no, not yet. I've been calling her "Murderbird," but that's more a term of endearment."

Gabriel shook his head, not even looking surprised. "No, chica, you can't name her that." He reached over and she eyed him warily, puffing up as his fingers hovered over her head.

"No biting," you said in a low voice.

She ignored you, her eyes on Gabriel's fingers. He held his hand out, giving her time to sniff. She opened her mouth slowly.

"No," Gabriel said firmly, tapping her on the nose.

Grumbling, she sat back down, but held still as he gently rubbed her downy head.

"How old is she?"

"She hatched about eight hours ago," you said. "Imprinted on me and...well, that was it. She has her vaccines and can eat just about anything. I know you said no pets in the Blackwatch dorms, but you also said I could keep it if Feng made me a-"

"I remember," Gabriel said, standing up. His expression was distant, almost dazed. He leaned in and kissed you again. "I'm still processing the fact you are wearing a baby dinosaur in a sling on your chest."
"Bayan has three, all a few weeks older than her," you said. "He's exhausted." You stroked your chick's back and she made a pleased thrumming sound. "She's pretty social, so far she likes Bandit, Jesse, and Genji, still kind of wary of Aunt Feng though..."

Gabriel chuckled. "Clever girl." He paused, looking at you, loaded down with supplies. "I know we talked about a dog or a cat. But this..." He laughed. "Are you ready for this?"

"No," you breathed, shaking your head. "Not in the least. I'm sorry I didn't consult you guys. It all happened so fast. I have no idea what to do. Please say you'll help me."

Still laughing, Gabriel stroked your cheek. "I think we can arrange something."

You forwarded a copy of Bayan's manual to Gabriel's tablet. Your baby dinosaur peeked out of the sling, head jerking from side to side as she tried to take in her new surroundings. The metal halls of Overwatch HQ were markedly different from the sinuously organic architecture of White Rabbit's laboratories. Gabriel had the metal carrier slung over his shoulder and a wry smile on his face. He kept glancing over at you, his amusement clear.

She started trilling when you passed through the mess hall, and you had to draw the fabric of the sling up, shushing her as you walked. The room was loud enough that she didn't draw much attention and you were able to keep her concealed, but you did get some strange looks.

"Why am I not surprised that she's extremely food motivated?" Gabriel asked, nudging you with his elbow.

You shrugged. "I thought most things were."

Gabriel just laughed, like you'd missed the point of the joke. No, you understood it just fine. You just ignored it. Because you were in public and it wouldn't do to bite the smartass Blackwatch commander in front of your fellow agents.

Jack was waiting on Gabriel's couch, one leg curled under him, his brow furrowed as he looked over something on his tablet. A steaming mug of coffee sat on the end table beside him. He waved without looking up. "Welcome back, sweetheart. Did you have fun?"

"Yeah," you said, kicking off your shoes. "I did."

"What'd you do?" Jack asked, still focused on his tablet. "No robberies this time? What about ancient gods rising from the deep? How about a demonic incursion? Maybe werewolves?"

"No, no, and no," you said. "Nothing like that. We stayed in the White Rabbit building and the security was topnotch."

Jack nodded. "How's Feng?"

"Loved the basket. According to her own predictions, she's probably rolling around her office floor, wishing she hadn't eaten the entire basket of cheese in one sitting, while AI Auntie passive-aggressively reprimands her."

"...Sounds about right," Jack said, smiling. "I got her RSVP for Family Day. The message literally said, 'I'LL BE THERE.' Followed by one that said, 'Uh, this is kind of embarrassing, but can I stay with you guys?' Don't want the paparazzi finding out that she's so cozy with us. So we'll
Gabriel set down the carrier next to the couch and began unpacking the goods. He actually laughed when he saw the little diapers. He wouldn't be laughing when she shat in his shoes or somewhere equally awful.

Your murderbird cheeped, eyes on Jack.

"What do you have there?" Jack asked, finally looking up. He took a moment to inspect the empty metal carrier. Then he set his tablet down, looking slightly confused. "Gabe?"

"Ask your girlfriend," Gabriel laughed going to his cupboard and grabbing a dented metal bowl and plate. "From my old mess kit," he said. "Should be sturdy enough for now."

Jack examined the carrier, still confused. "Did you get a...what is that?" Jack's eyes widened in alarm. He crossed the room in three strides. "Sweetheart, what's wrong with your little chicken's face? Did she lose her beak?"

"Uh..." Suddenly you weren't sure where to start.

Jack scrunched up his face. "She looks healthy."

Gabriel chuckled, getting into the fridge. "Is raw hamburger OK? Or you think we should cook it?"

"She'll eat it either way," you said.

"I'll cook it just to be safe. She like eggs?"

"I haven't found anything she doesn't like yet. They're omnivores, but they need more protein than anything else."

Jack crouched down, staring hard at your chick. She sat low in the sling, wings folded at her sides. "Is that a harness?"

"Yeah, she's fast."

She chirped at Jack, then looked at you and chirped again.

"That's Jack," you said. "He's safe too." But you suspected she already knew that. She was getting good at figuring out your body language and your vocal cues. Even if she'd been excited in the mess hall, she hadn't tried to attract attention or approach any of the other agents.

"Is she a silkie? A Polish? One of those really fancy Asian breeds? You know, the ones the extravagant plumage that they breed for cockfighting?" He squinted. "Or is she some kind of pheasant? She's too big to be a bantam. Unless she's older than a few weeks?"

You weren't entirely sure what to make of Jack's fixation on poultry. But she did sort of resemble a chicken. "Uh, no. Jack-"

"No, don't tell me, I got this," Jack said, with cheerful confidence. "Farmboy here, after all."

Gabriel snickered. You covered your mouth.

"You know, I thought you were going to start with a dog or cat, sweetheart," Jack said, and you could detect just the faintest wistful disappointment in his tone, like he'd really been looking
forward to a puppy. "But I get that you're being responsible and starting small. We probably don't have time to train a puppy. And if you want a bird, that's fine too; I don't mind at all. They don't potty train though. And chickens poop everywhere." He paused. "You're sure it's not rooster right? Because that could be a problem down the road -"

"It's not a rooster, Jack," you said with a wry smile.

"Hold on, I'll bring up Poultrypedia. Chicks tend to look the same. Does she have sex feathers by chance?"

"...What?" You and Gabriel asked in unison.

"With some breeds you can determine the sex by the coloring or patterning on the chicks. Makes it easier to separate out laying hens. Not foolproof, but -" He paused. "Can I get a better look at her?"

You gently lifted your raptor out of the sling, holding her against your chest, the clawed tips at the end of her wings now visible. She yawned as Jack got closer.

"...Sweetheart, your chicken has teeth," Jack said, wincing. "Gabe, do birds have teeth?"

"Not that I know of."

Jack stared. "And she has tiny little hands," he muttered. "Gabe, that's not a chicken. I'm not entirely certain that's even a bird."

"Never claimed it was," Gabriel said, chopping up some melon, his lips curving upward. "That was all your "farmboy" expertise."

Jack inspected your chick, his brow furrowed, his expression severe. You could see the moment the epiphany hit Jack. His eyes got big and his jaw went slack for a second, before a big stupid grin crept across his face.

"...Did she really make you dinosaur?"

Gabriel began to laugh and you couldn't stop grinning.

"Feng actually got AI auntie to engineer modified velociraptors. She's third gen, which is apparently the first set that's domesticated enough for companionship."

Jack just stared, his eyes wide and full of wonder. "Can I pet her?"

"Go slow, and scold her if she bites."

Jack gently offered her his hand and she sniffed it, mouthing his fingers, her little claws reaching out to hold on to him.

"No biting," you said, tapping her snout. "Careful with the claws."

She made a grumbling sound and released Jack's fingers.

"She's not hurting me," Jack said. "Can I hold her too?" He sounded like a kid at a petting zoo and you exchanged smiles with Gabriel.

"You can try. Jesse and Genji had to bribe her with food."
Jack reached his hands out, grin big as you passed her over to him. She didn't struggle, but she kept looking between the two of you, even as Jack gently petted her head, cooing at her softly. She trilled back at him, relaxing against his hand. "She likes me," he said, delight breaking through his quiet tones.

"She actually does," you agreed. Jack didn't even have to feed her first.

He held her against his chest, grinning as she stared up at him. "What's her name?"

"Don't have one yet," you said. "Been calling her 'Murderbird,' but I'm very aware that I can't name her that."

Jack just laughed. "You can't name her 'Ana' either. Not if you want to live." He rubbed her chest, grinning as she wiggled in his big hands.

"My mind didn't even go there," you said, rolling your eyes.

"There aren't any namesakes you'd like to use? If I have any kids, I might have to name one after Mateo or Ray."

You blinked, thinking about your dead. "It doesn't seem quite right." The names from your past were heavy with history and you weren't sure that was fair to anyone, human or not. Not to mention, you weren't sure how Ziv would react if you named her "Rivka." Probably not well.

"I wanted to name a daughter 'Ishana,'" Gabriel said, coming over with the bowl of water and a plate of meat, eggs, and melon. "It's a variant of 'Aishani.' Same meaning."

"Oh," you said. "I couldn't take that."

"I'm not having any daughters any time soon," Gabriel said with a shrug. "It's just a suggestion, if you wanted a name. I have plenty of other names picked out." He flashed you a cocky grin.

"It's a good suggestion," you said, after a moment, not entirely sure how to interpret that.

"We could call her 'Isha' for short," Jack said.

"Could work. Because I feel like we're probably going to be yelling at her a lot and that's easier with shorter names," you said.

"It sounds so much more severe when your name is three syllables or more and it gets dragged out," Gabriel said dryly. He sat down on the floor, putting the water in front of him. You and Jack sat down, forming a circle.

"Can I put her down? I've got a good grip on the leash," Jack said.

"Yeah."

Jack gingerly set her on the floor, and she strutted over to the water, clutching the rim of the bowl with her little hand talons as she lowered her head to drink. Her gaze stayed on Gabriel's plate.

"You can hand feed her," you said. "But you have to discipline her if she bites," you said.

The raptor cocked her head to the side.

"Isha, come," Gabriel said firmly, lowering his open palm.

She looked at you.

"Go on," you nodded.

She strutted over, her walk having already evolved into the cocksure swagger of a barnyard rooster. You could see why Jack had mistaken her for one. She plucked the melon from Gabriel hand with her talons, watching him warily as she delicately took the first bite. Then she chirped happily and practically shoved the entire cube of fruit into her little mouth, spraying fruit pulp as she chewed.

Gabriel watched her gobble it down, a faint smile on his lips. "Messy, but it looks like she should be easy to train: you just have to bribe her with food."

"Let me try!" Jack reached extended his hand.

Gabriel passed Jack the plate and he took a ground beef crumble and set his open palm on the ground. "Come here, Isha," Jack said, using the good dog voice. "Come on girl."

She blinked owlishly at him, head cocked to the side, and she did not move.

"The high-pitched voice doesn't have the same effect on birds," Gabriel said.

"She's not a bird, Gabe," Jack rolled his eyes. "We've already establish this," he said impatiently. "Come on, Isha," he said switching to low tones anyway. He smiled, rolling the meat crumble in his hand.

Your murderbird, whom you hadn't actually agreed to name Isha, bobbed from side to side, cheeping as she stalked over to Jack, looking almost predatory. It was fine if they wanted to call her that though; it was more important that they liked her and wanted to keep her. And "Isha" wasn't a bad name; you weren't sure if Captain Patel would approve, but you didn't think she'd be offended.

She glanced up at Jack and then ate the meat straight from his hand.

"Ow!" Jack laughed as she bit him in her excitement. "Careful!" He got out another piece of beef.

"No biting," you said, because apparently that was your line now.

"It's fine," Jack laughed, leaning over to rub her chin. She thrummed happily. "She's just a baby and she didn't mean to-"

You looked at Gabriel and the two of you rolled your eyes.

"So have you already picked out her enclosure and toys, or do we need to get more?" Jack asked feeding her more melon. "Because you're going to need stuff for her in my quarters too..."
It's been a weird week. I'm trying to be less...negative? That doesn't mean I'm being "positive." It just means I'm not letting the world and my anxiety bring me down. I don't know. I'm a pretty big cynic. And sometimes my thoughts just get overwhelmingly dark, heavy, and awful, because I read the news every day. (Dystopic future? More like present.) That doesn't mean I'm wrong, it just means feeling that way doesn't accomplish anything. It's a weird balance.

The other day I was across the store when some guy just starts screaming profanities and telling people to leave him and his family alone. He was enraged. It was a long loud rant. And he had no family with him. Managers went over and calmed him down. He said a group of teenagers was saying racist things about him so he had to go out for a smoke. Obviously, the reaction was over the top and made us all suspect there were some underlying issues there. The managers questioned these teens, and they denied it. Who knows? A couple of the boys (who worked at a baptist church camp - sussed out because they were wearing staff t-shirts) had that smarmy "tee hee" look that makes me go "I just want to punch you in the face just for looking at me." We're inclined to think they were.

Of course, right after that everyone's on edge, and since I live in America, I was mentally reviewing our active shooter protocols. It's been awhile since I did that. The guy comes back inside holding his lighter. And then some young upper middle class white woman runs up to us with breathless excitement says, "I think he's holding a knife!" It was his lighter and the manager told her that very plainly. Thankfully, the manager handling the situation has a good crisis mode, and the guy later apologized for losing his cool. I just look at this and go "...wow, that could have ended very badly for a whole slew of reasons, but didn't. Phew." Just another day in the bookstore.

Today I got all the weirdos. This one guy followed me around asking me for postcards of that Manhattan Project mushroom cloud shot where the scientists are watching it with big protective glasses. Then he told me he wanted this guy at church to do a painting of Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed with a mushroom cloud in the background. Also, there's something not right with that kid, but he sure can draw. Though he's not quite right in the head if you know what he means?

Also, this customer started to tell me the whole story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and I'm just trying to walk away, and he's following me talking and showing me this artist's slightly odd drawings, talking about how weird this other guy is. I'm sure the irony was lost on him.

Taking my cat to the vet tomorrow. He's been acting a little strange and since he's FIV+ and over 10 years old I'm concerned.

I have several kids events to run on Saturday. I will have to hypercaffeinate myself. 

Hope everyone else's excitement has happy outcomes!
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

What do missions, murderbirds, and other people's children have in common? You need to plan for handling them, and then you need to understand that that plan is going to go out the window at a critical moment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Did you really ask Ziv if I was...forcing him into sex?" Amélie asked as you lined up the shot.

You nearly choked to death on your tongue, but decided to try to cough up a lung instead. When the fit had passed, you glanced up at Amélie, who was serving as your spotter. She held her own custom rifle in hand.

"Can we talk about this later?" Patting your chest, you looked down the scope, moving the barrel to adjust for your clumsiness. The hotel room had a lovely view of the river, and you'd chosen this for spot its west-facing windows.

"Chanceux, I am very worried. Do you really think I would-"

"No, I don't," you said tersely. Exhaling, you spotted the target, sans the traditional scarlet robes. Instead he wore an outrageously expensive suit as he walked along the bridge across the Danube, chatting amicably with an omnic in an equally expensive suit. You squinted, not recognizing the fellow. "Who's the omnic?"

"I am getting a picture of his companion. Quite a dapper one. He dresses better than many people." She said it in such a matter-of-fact fashion, that you didn't think the insult had been directed at you. And to be fair, she was right. He wore a three piece suit, a red paisley pocket square, and his bowtie matched the lights on his facial plate. "Do we want to eliminate him too?"

"Do we know whom he is?"

"Running him through the database... Oh, so very dashing. His name is Maximilien. He has a casino in Monte Carlo." Amélie laughed softly. "How intriguing."

You exhaled slowly, remembering the litany of names that Gleeson had called out under Gabriel's torture. There had been a few candidates, but no one was quite sure which Maximilien he had meant. That this omnic was in the company of a known Talon financier, and a cardinal no less, was damning. But then, Gleeson had accused Jack of being in on it too. Proximity and circumstantial evidence were not enough to warrant a death sentence. But the omnic was now on your radar.

"Chanceux?"

"We'll leave him for now," you said. "Need to get more info on him before we pull the trigger."
"As you say," Amélie said, her voice low with excitement. "We should visit him some time. I'll pick the outfits, you pick the weapons."

You waited for Cardinal Kovács to enter your kill zone. Your finger rested on the trigger and you counted your breaths, focusing on the space between. Your world narrowed to the man in the expensive suit, not the omnic beside him. Not the woman at your back. Holding steady, you squeezed the trigger, your index finger pulling back slowly.

"So then what did you ask him?"

Your finger jerked to the left and you swore vehemently as the shot went wide. "Really?" You shouted.

Quick as a snake, with a small smile on her lips, Amélie lifted her rifle and fired two shots. They both connected, fatally, despite Kovács' alarm and Maximilien's attempt to shepherd him to safety.

There were already private security drones moving to calculate the origin of the shots. The extra shooting had shaved seconds off your escape time. You glared at Amélie as you broke down your rifle and packed it into your bag. "Was that necessary?"

"I'm sorry, Chanceux," Amélie laughed. "Come on, we must hurry. We can talk about this later!" She teased as she folded up her rifle, dropping it into her bag as she opened the door. You hadn't, of course, registered to stay in this room or even this building.

Lowering her sunglasses, Amélie led the way, breezing through the hallway in a floppy white beach hat, cerulean summer dress and strappy gold heels. You were just as casual in a lacy black tanktop, red cropped trousers, and black ballet flats. You wore a sheer red scarf around your neck.

"They've pinpointed the building," Athena chirped in your earpiece. "I'm still looping the security cameras, but you're going to have to take the secondary exit if you wish to remain undetected."

You and Amélie took the elevator, Athena bypassing the other floors, till you hit the basement. There was a maintenance tunnel that connected to the Metro. It had fallen out of use, but according to Tataryn, it was still accessible. Still, you weren't going through the tunnels in frivolous shoes.

"That was a dick move," you said, kicking off your flats, slipping out of your fancy pants, and changing into combat cargos. You put on leather boots and dropped your clothes into the same bag as your rifle. You wore a pistol and your new tanto in your belt.

Amélie giggled and began stripping in the hallway, winking at you as she shimmied out of her dress. She was wearing fancy underwear. She wore a lacy violet matched set with little black silk bows, on an assassination op. You weren't the least bit surprised.

You rolled your eyes. "I'm not distracted that easily."

"I am sorry," she purred, winking at you as she bent over to unbuckle her sandals, wiggling her hips as she stretched her impossibly long legs. "Better?"

"Come on, Amélie," you facepalmed, hoping you sounded more exasperated than flustered.

"Relax, Chanceux. We're moving too fast. They won't find a thing. And I will take full
responsibility for the consequences." She pulled on black fatigues, folded her street clothes, and put them in the bag. "You must admit, those were impressive shots." She gave you a proud smile.

They were, and that was the only thing that might excuse her flamboyant actions. You didn't answer, instead removing the hastily-erected wall-panel that concealed the tunnel access.

"I've altered all footage that could reveal your presence," Athena said in your ear. "The hotel is on lockdown and local authorities have pinpointed your sniper's nest. Judging from the comm traffic, the cardinal's private defense forces are searching for you as well."

"Oh Chanceux, don't be angry. I knew I could make the shots. I would never jeopardize a mission." She nudged you with her elbow. "I am very sorry. I should not have stolen your thunder. Please do not be cross."

"Can we talk about this later? Like when we don't have Hungarian security forces actively hunting us?" You let her go first, taking a moment to slide the panel back in place.

"I suppose. I hear the prison conditions in Budapest are appalling," Amélie said cheerfully. "But you, Fedya, and Gérard planned this exit route. I am not worried about that. I am concerned about what you must think of me-"

You pushed open the security door, safety lights flickering on. From what you, Ziv, and Tataryn could figure, the tunnel drew power from the Metro maintenance grid, and that was different from the hotel. That would make it harder for anyone else to trace your route.

You followed the tunnel down, the orange lights casting eerie shadows on the concrete. You followed the tunnel several meters till you found a half recessed security door covered in dust.

You oiled the hinges first, just to be safe. Kneeling down, you flicked your fingers. Examining the lock, you found that it was old, but intact. Your middle finger lit up and a pick emerged from your index prostheses. You inserted a tension wrench with your right hand, and it didn't take long to work the pins into place. The tumblers clicked, you pushed once, and the metal groaned. You braced yourself and pushed harder, and this time the door creaked open.

The passageway was pitch black, of course. You held up your light. The concrete tunnel was tall enough to stand up straight, and wide enough for the two of you to walk side by side. You looked around, knowing with your luck, that you could stumble into a nest of hibernating killer omnis, or be chased by mutant rats, or get ambushed by mole people.

Amélie followed close behind, shutting the door behind you. In the distance, you could hear the roar of the Metro. It didn't smell like diseased rodents or anything at all lived in this chamber. The air was cool and stale and there was no sunlight down here. You closed your eyes, and for a moment you could hear omnis scraping at the rockfall barrier, while Jesse took shallow breaths, his hand gripping yours.

"Chanceux?" Amélie's voice was uncertain, the acoustics of the tunnel slightly different from the cave. There was a slight echo, a reverberation backed by a great deal of white noise.

You opened your eyes. It wasn't a true flashback, not like some of the others. The feel of dark underground had reminded you of something unpleasant, but you weren't scared or losing your grip on reality.

"I'm fine," you said. "Trying to get my bearings and map our route." Once you were out of the Underground, you would get to the outskirts of the city and request pickup.
"I still say we should take bicycles. This city has some wonderful cycling tours..."

"Maybe next time. I need to get back to base." Jesse was watching Isha, and he'd been very nervous about being designated "dinosaur-sitter."

Amélie laughed softly. "So is it sufficiently "later," Chanceux? Or is that just your excuse to avoid a thorny subject?" Her good-humored tone did nothing to change the fact she was calling you out.

Deep down, you knew this moment was coming the moment those words left your mouth. You'd hoped Ziv would have been circumspect about repeating portions to Amélie, but that was obviously expecting too much. He didn't have a filter nor the good sense to use one.

"I asked Ziv if he was being pressured," you said sourly. "Not because I thought you would, but because the subject needed to be addressed."

"Did it?" Amélie asked and you didn't have to look at her to know she was pursing her lips, one brow arched elegantly in her skepticism.

"When I started seeing Jack and Gabriel, Captain Amari and Jesse both made a point to ask me if anything untoward had occurred, not because they thought either man was taking advantage, but because that's the responsible thing to do when there's a power imbalance. Too many people get away with things because “no one thought they would do that.” You blew out a breath. "And don't even try to tell me that "you're just the poor wife and you have to abide by your husband's decisions." We both know that he can't make you do anything you don't want to. In fact, I think we both know he wouldn't dream of doing something like this without your approval."

Amélie laughed, one hand resting on your arm. "I am teasing, Chanceux. Ziv explained your reasoning, though...perhaps not as coherently as you did. At first, I thought I shouldn't say anything. But I admit, the idea of you thinking that of me sat poorly. I had to clarify. I know sometimes I am...forceful about things, and I realize I have been too pushy. But I have never intended to make you uncomfortable."

"It wasn't a reflection of you. I just had to ask." You left out any uncharitable comments about Lacroix. "About the entire situation." Because while you were very happy with your relationship, being in your position gave you a great deal of insight into all the ways this type of situation could go bad or be exploited.

"Ziv...reassured me that you didn't think I was that kind of person. But I am very aware that sometimes I just come in, take charge, and start issuing orders. I do appreciate that you humor me."

"Humor" wasn't the right word. It was pure self-defense, though you knew better than to say that. You rubbed your forehead. "Do I want to know what he said?"

"I don't think she meant it like that," Amélie mimicked Ziv's slightly accented English, her voice low. "She has clumsy protective tendencies and she says weird stupid things all the time, that are actually smarter than they sound, which is good because she usually sounds like an idiot. Don't worry about it. Would you please pass the Chablis?"

You rolled your eyes, catching sight of another maintenance access door up ahead. "That's it, that's an accurate assessment of the situation. Also, Ziv's an ass. Good luck managing him."

"I am glad that you look after him, like a good sister," Amélie said, squeezing your arm. "His isolation from his family has been difficult, and it's been such a comfort that he can rely on
You almost asked Amélie how she knew, and then you realized that Ziv and Amélie had been talking quite a bit, and even if those weren't Ziv's exact words, even if she had prettied them up a bit, the feeling behind them was genuine.

But of course, you'd always known that. He'd even told you so. It was just strange to hear another person confirm it.

"OK, so if you already knew all that, was it really necessary to mess up my shot?"

"No," Amélie said with a laugh. "I just did that for fun. Sometimes I'm too competitive." She flashed you a bright smile.

Sighing, you unlocked the maintenance door, the murmur of human crowds growing substantially louder. Both of you changed into your civilian clothes before you pushed through the exit, and disappeared into the crowds.

You knocked on Jesse's door and it swung open immediately. Jesse gave you a slightly panicked smile.

"You're a sight for sore eyes, huckleberry," he said. "Was wondering when you-"

"What'd she do?" You sighed, stepping into Jesse's room. You caught sight of several torn candy wrappers, a chewed up boot, and a shredded blanket. You glanced at Jesse's forearms, reddened with little clawmarks and bites. Uh oh.

In the middle of Jesse's couch, Bandit dozed on a pillow, and Isha was curled up against his side, snuffling softly as she napped.

You gave Jesse a questioning look.

"She's been trying to ride Bandit like a pony!" Jesse whispered.

You briefly wondered where she got that idea; she was a shameless mimic. You suspected she had been watching Jesse's westerns. He left them on in his room now, just so Bandit would have some background noise. "Please tell me you took pictures."

"I was too busy worrying that she was trying to hunt him!" Jesse wiped his brow. "She's got killer instincts!"

You glanced over at your baby raptor, her fuzzy black body nestled against Bandit's. Bandit didn't seem to mind her, though Bandit was an exceptionally relaxed dog. You looked back at Jesse.

"I didn't say it was a rational worry. But it made sense at the time," Jesse scowled at you.

"Obviously, she likes Bandit and is happy napping with him. If she was being bad, you could have crated her."

"I did: she cries," Jesse mumbled, adjusting his hat. "And she behaved better after I let her
Uncle Jesse was a soft touch. You shook your head.

There were little clawmarks on Jesse's walls, snags in the sofa that probably came from talons, and a chunk bitten out of his table leg. You were fairly certain that hadn't been there before.

"Thanks for watching her. Sorry she was...bad." You'd already lost several socks, some snacks, and a coffee mug to her destructive tendencies, and that was just this week. There was a portion of your floor that would never be the same. "Gabriel and Jack were both busy. I'm sorry."

"She wasn't terrible. I just don't know what to do with a baby dinosaur," Jesse said, leaning over to pet her head. "I wouldn't mind giving her another shot."

She snapped her teeth sleepily, not actually trying to bite him.

"No biting," you said, tapping her nose.

Her eyes flew open and she flapped her arms, trilling as she hopped to her feet. Her little claws gripped your fingers and she cooed. You picked her up, listening to her chatter rapidly like she was trying to tell you about her day. She rubbed her head on your gloved hands, chirping loudly.

"Hey there, Isha. Were you good for Uncle Jesse?"

Her eyes darted to Jesse and then to the shredded blanket. She cocked her head to the side and made that happy thrumming sound. You picked up the blanket.

"Did you do this?"

She opened her mouth, looking oddly proud.

"No clawing or biting Uncle Jesse's things." You shook your head, wondering how much of this was actually effective.

She tilted her head, cheeping. You offered her the blanket. She bit it. You rapped her gently on the nose. "No biting."

Isha grumbled, but released the blanket.

"That can't taste good," you said.

She chirped at you. You got the feeling she liked the taste of Jesse and Bandit's things, simply because she knew they weren't hers, but you couldn't be certain.

"...Sugarpie, you should know, she doesn't listen to anyone else like she does you," Jesse said with a sigh. "She's scary smart. I'm pretty sure she understands what I'm saying, she just doesn't care."

"Sometimes you have to incentivize them to care." You learned that nugget of wisdom from teaching the recruits. You reached into your pocket and pulled out a small resealable bag. Inside were strips of dried mutton, no salt added. Bandit perked up. You tore one in half and gave it to him. Isha called loudly, demanding hers. You set her down on the couch and she took off toward Bandit.

"No," you said sharply. "Not for you."
She slowed down, glancing over her shoulder at you. She gave an angry cheep.

"Come here, Isha." You kept your voice low and commanding.

She gave Bandit's treat one longing look and headed back to the edge of the couch. You held out the other half of the strip. "That's for you, Isha." She squinted at you, then Bandit, and then snatched it away, gorging it down.

Jesse glanced at Bandit who had finished his treat, and wagged at you happily. You tore off another half strip and he took it politely from your fingers. Then you handed Jesse the other half and he offered it to your baby raptor.

"No biting. No clawing," you said.

Isha blinked at you with her big blue eyes, her mouth already open, like she was going to eat that meat and maybe Jesse's fingertips.

"No biting," you said, firmly. "Jesse, you tell her too."

"Aw, sugarpie, now I see why the rookies were so scared of you," Jesse laughed. "Isha-bird, no bitin' and no clawin'."

Isha hesitantly closed her mouth, then politely accepted the treat in her little hands. She sat down and began to chew, chirping at Jesse.

"Clever girl," you told her, because it made you happy, even if everyone else was rolling their eyes.

"Not used to all this training," Jesse said. "Bandit's so easygoing."

"Your dog is an adult and has already learned his manners. Isha is starting from scratch."

You rubbed the back of your neck. "It doesn't help that I don't know what I'm doing."

Jesse patted your back. "No, but it's pretty damn entertaining to watch, Mama Raptor."

You resolved to let Isha eat his hat next time.

You signed an armored car out of the motor pool, because it was better safe than sorry. Tataryn had sent you a list of Kseniya's favorite foods, more restrictions, and a rambling message about how he was trying to find Távio a placement, really. You were going to stop at that French bakery downtown and buy a ton of desserts.

Isha was staying with Gabriel, in the office, while you went out, something that you weren't so sure about. He seemed completely at ease, chucking her under the chin, while she chattered at him, and putting her harness on without any help.

She still wasn't pleased when you left her, but Gabriel waved you off, rolling his eyes at your hesitation.

So here you were, pulling up to the wrought iron gates of the Institut Montana, boxes of cakes and pastries in the backseat. You might have gone overboard. Just a little. But Tataryn was a
pain in the ass, and if Kseniya didn't like the sweets you picked, well, you, Jesse, and Genji wouldn't have any trouble finishing them off.

An Athena drone sat in the backseat as well. "The security measures here are heavier than they look. My presence might attract unwanted attention. I'm going into shielded mode."

You slowed down, giving the armed guard your visitor's badge and sign-out documents that Tataryn had arranged in advance. The guards were polite - they had visitors from all over coming in, but that meant higher security.

You parked in the lot, your armored car not actually sticking out here. There were plenty of others. Hell, if you stuck around, you might be able to gather some intel, network, and visit Tataryn's kid.

The stray thought surprised you. You'd been spending too much time with Lacroix. Both of them. You climbed out of your vehicle, sidearm holstered discretely under your shirt, your new tanto tucked inside your belt. You had dressed nicely enough for a school visit, but comfortably in case you had to do a relay race or kill terrorists: sleeveless dark blue button down, matching gloves, khaki capris, and cute tennis shoes. You recognized a Swedish royal listening to a renowned actress. They were talking about ins and outs of racehorse breeding.

You ignored the banners and signs advertising a variety of activities and headed for the dorm. You made it to the door, preparing to get your ID badge and other documents out, when you saw Kseniya sitting on the steps, her hair up in two puffs, a backpack slung over her shoulder. You studied her face, making sure this was the right kid. Because it could go very badly if you just walked up to someone else's child and started talking to them. She was small, and you still didn't see a trace of Tataryn in her bone structure. Her nose was thin and straight, but that was the only resemblance. Her skin was a shade darker than Gabriel's and she had dressed down in khaki shorts and a striped collared shirt, not a wrinkle in sight. She wore little buckled clogs that were so ugly they were cute, and you weren't sure how you felt about that. Embarrassed? Appalled? Like you'd been spending too much time with Lacroix and Amélie?

She looked up at you, and you recognized those amber eyes. You walked forward, extending your hand. "Sorry if I'm late-"

"No, I just got the notification you were here." She stood up, and shook your hand. "Thank you for coming. Did you want to go to the picnic?" She had a polite, complete disingenuous smile on her face, like a kid who was humoring an older boring relative.

You stood there dumbly for a moment. "Were there any activities you wanted to attend?"

"Not really," she said, with a shrug. "But we can. I hear the hoverboard race is fun. You can see the crown prince of Spain if you want."

"OK," you said, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Do you want to?"

"Not really," she said. "I've met most of these people before. Umm, I can introduce you to an action move director and the BMW CFO. I'm not really in with the old money crowd."

"...That isn't necessary," you said, realizing that Tataryn was right and she did not want to be here. "So did you want to make a token appearance or do we run while we still can?"

She relaxed then, a shy smile appearing with the relief. "Let's go."
Kseniya stared at the backseat full of desserts.

"Your dad told me you're vegetarian. I grabbed some vegan stuff too, if you like. There are also browned butter and sea salt rice crispy treats if you're doing the gluten-free thing. There are-

"I can eat anything," she said, setting a box to the side and buckling herself in. "I'm trying vegetarianism, but I don't really want to give up pepperoni." She fidgeted.

"If you want something, go for it. I wasn't sure what you'd like."

"I'm not supposed to eat this much sugar," she said.

You laughed, because you already knew that. "Is that so?" You asked, winking at her.

She gazed at you seriously. "Are you going to tell?"

"I have all these desserts. I'm going to need help eating them," you lied, because you could eat those all on your own; you just knew you should not. "You don't have any health conditions I should know about?" Because you assumed Tataryn would have told you if she was diabetic or had any food allergies.

"No, Tato is just overprotective." She shrugged and selected a chocolate tart. "Do you have any milk?"

"...No," you said. "I have coffee." You held up your travel mug. "Want some?"

Kseniya giggled. "You know kids aren't supposed to drink coffee."

"I know nothing." You shrugged. "We can stop somewhere. I'll get you decaf if you want. Or plain milk." You glanced at the time. "We can grab fast food if you're hungry, or we can get something back at HQ." You wondered how much anguish you could cause Tataryn by buying her a Happy Meal.

"We can wait till we get back," she said. "Tato says the food there is mostly good." She glanced at the fish torpedo. "Your drone is on."

"Athena, maintain security monitoring and traffic mapping," you said.

"Understood," Athena said, trying to sound emotionless.

Kseniya stared at the drone. "I've never seen that model before."

"Custom-built," you said. "Winston's design. We can visit him later if you like. Your dad said you were thinking about becoming an engineer." Which made you laugh, because she was eight, and when you were eight you thought engineers drove trains.

"Winston the world-renowned inventor?" Her eyes got big. "The gorilla Winston? I follow his tech talks channel! You don't think he'll be too busy?"

You failed to realize Winston had an audience outside of Overwatch, which was silly because he was a minor celebrity and needed non-work-related social interaction too. Giving
science and engineering talks was a good way to reach new people. It seemed Távio had been more on point than you expected.

"Where I come from, Winston is known for being the one who eats all the peanut butter in the pantry and doesn't replace it," you said shaking your head. "I have some peanut butter cookies I picked up for him. We'll take them to him later. Anything else you want to do?"

"I'd like to visit Uncle Gabriel and Aunt Ana if they're available," she said after a moment. "I realize they're busy people, so I understand if they're not..."

"Gabriel should be available. I think Captain Amari is off-site. You know the cover story, right?"

"I'm visiting my Uncle Gabriel. My mother is his oldest sister Catrina Morales; she actually has a daughter my age. He calls me "Zinnia" as a nickname. That's probably the best way to introduce me. I'm attending a local school and he's paying for my tuition because I'm "gifted." She nodded. "Tato said I could claim to be your daughter too."

"Do you like kittens?" You asked a little more venomously than you intended.

"...Umm, yes? Who doesn't?"

"Would you like one?" You asked with a tight smile.

"I live in a pet-free dorm." She stared at her lap. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," she said, her voice small.

You groaned, realizing you had upset her. "You're fine. But your dad should know better," you scowled, trying to think of the best way to explain your relationship with the Overwatch rumor mill. "There are some...a lot of rumors about my personal life." Some of which you were now pretty sure Tataryn started. "Some of the rumors are...unpleasant. If I turn up with a child claiming to be mine..."

"It's just going to make things more complicated," she said, nodding sagely. "I understand."

Did she? You tried to remember what you knew at that age, but it blurred. You understood rumors and the damage they could cause in an abstract sense, but the scope was so small and you were so young... So it begged the question, what had Tataryn been teaching her?

"Sorry, your dad was telling people I'm a cannibal, as a joke. But apparently some people believed him."

Kseniya snorted, a smile creeping back onto her face. "You're making that up."

"I am not!"

Kseniya took a bite of her chocolate tart. "I don't believe you," she said, bolder than you'd ever heard.

"I have witnesses! Athena, could you please message Távio and tell him to meet me at the motor pool?"

"Understood," Athena chirped, and you could have sworn she was laughing at you.

You bagged the boxes of pastries. Kseniya took a bag walking along side you as you exited
the motor pool, Athena floating behind you. Távio stood at attention, in uniform, by the check-in counter, his eyes widening as he looked at Kseniya. You could only wonder what he was thinking.

"Agent Maeda Vargas, this is my principal for the day. She goes by "Zinnia." It seems you were right to suggest Winston."

"Ma'am," he said, nodding enthusiastically. "Miss Zinnia, you can call me Távio."

Kseniya offered her free hand. "That would be rude. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Maeda Vargas."

Távio stared at her, eyes wide, because you doubted anyone ever called him "mister." He shook her small hand politely. "Nice to meet you too, Miss Zinnia."

Kseniya nudged you with her elbow, her smile bright. "What was that story you were telling me on the way here, Ms. Strike?"

"I was telling her about the time Tataryn went around telling people I would eat you guys if we'd been stuck in Greece much longer. Apparently, our favorite visiting omnic approached me saying he head rumors that I was a cannibal."

"...Uh...I was there when Agent Tataryn said that. I didn't realize anyone else heard it," Távio scratched the back of his head.

Kseniya giggled. "But is it true? Would she eat people?"

Távio blinked. "I...don't know?" He raised his hands when he saw your face. "Probably not!" He eyed your bags. "Do you need help with those, ma'am?" He asked quickly, obviously trying to change the subject.

"Oh no, I can eat these cakes and other fine pastries all on my own," you said, smiling cheerfully at their crestfallen faces. "That way you guys don't have to worry about me getting hungry and resorting to cannibalism."

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You were checking in with Gabriel first. Kseniya wanted to greet him, but also, you were slightly concerned about Isha being in the damn office possibly eating your handwritten Shit Spiders files. Távio had the rest of the hour free, but then he had patrol duty. Still, he followed, sneaking hopeful glances at your pastry shop purchases.

"What do you got there, Agent Vargas?" Someone called out in a mocking tone of voice that set your nerves on edge. You stopped, hand on your holster.

Távio gritted his teeth and turned his head. "I'm busy, Moore."

"Oh, they got you babysitting now? Sure you're up for that?" You stiffened as a pale lanky man, maybe in his mid-thirties, sidled up to Távio. He had a buzzcut and was also in standard uniform. He flashed you a sharp smile. "Oh, Agent Strike, didn't see you there. You look better out of uniform." He gave you a onceover, smirking in a way you didn't like one little bit.

"Guess you were too enamored with Maeda Vargas." You stared at him flatly, forcing your
hands to relax.

"Just showing the kid the ropes," he said, not quite sneering at you, but close. "He needs a more experienced agent to show him how things work. You know, one who doesn't hide behind her boss."

You could hear Távio's sharp intake of breath. You smiled serenely, because you'd been here many times before, just never with witnesses. It took half a second to transfer all the bags to your right hand.

Still smiling, you leaned in, your left hand resting on Moore's shoulder. You squeezed lightly, and he winced.

"That's so kind of you," you said, voice oh so soft. "I'm really looking forward to seeing what kind of things you can teach a promising young agent such as Maeda Vargas. In fact, I'll make a point to check in with you both, regularly, Moore." You bared your teeth in a facsimile of a smile, your faces inches apart, your eyes locked on his. His pupils dilated. Your metal fingers tightened around his shoulder, the bones creaking under pressure.

Moore's eyes widened briefly, his teeth clenched. "You-

"I do appreciate good agents who know how to go above and beyond. That sense of personal responsibility will take you far. Keep up the hard work." You smiled viciously, not moving your hand.

"Look bit-"

"Ms. Strike," Kseniya said, clearing her throat. "We're going to be late to see Uncle Gabriel. Mom says he hates that."

'It's fine, Zinnia dear," you said cheerfully, not looking away from Moore. "He'll understand that we had to stop and have a nice little talk with Agent Moore."

"I don't know, Ms. Strike," Kseniya put just enough hesitance in her voice. "You guys seemed kind of serious. And Dad says Uncle Gabriel shoots first, and asks questions later. That's a figure of speech, right? It isn't it true, is it?" There was a tiny bit of fear infused in her voice and you had to smother a smirk. She was Tataryn's kid all right. Had the acting and the manipulation down pat.

Moore paled, having clearly forgotten about the kid. Who was apparently as clever as her shifty father. You however, had remembered both her and Athena, hence the polite language. But you'd been even more conscious of Athena's cameras, your body blocking her line of sight, or at least the view of your hand on Moore's shoulder.

"Of course not. It's just a very militant idiom," you said with exaggerated sweetness. "And we were just having a pleasant talk, weren't we Agent Moore?"

"Yes, ma'am," Moore exhaled slowly, your left hand gradually releasing him.

"We'll have to do it again some time, won't we?"

"That...won't be necessary, ma'am." Moore smiled weakly at Kseniya. "We were just...joking around little missy. Nothing to bother your uncle about."

"I don't know...if we're late, I'm not taking the blame," she said, eyes big and worried.
"Uh...I had better go then-" Moore said, backing up slowly.

"Be seeing you," you said, not losing your smile, and waving as he all but ran down the hallway.

"You get all that Athena?" You asked, as you handed Távio and Kseniya a box of macarons. He opened it, and offered them to her first. They both looked too young to be here.

"Affirmative, Agent Strike," Athena said, sounding a tad too smug for a "machine." You didn't think Távio and Kseniya noticed, but they were both sharper than you expected. You'd have to remind Athena to be more careful.

"Smoothly done," you told Kseniya. "That was just the right amount of innocence. You have finesse."

"Ta- I mean, dad taught me some things," she said, with a shrug. Though you didn't miss the pleased smile she had as she took a pistachio macaron. "What would you have done if I hadn't said anything?"

You maintained a polite smile. "I would have scolded him, and the sheer moral weight of my words would have had him begging for forgiveness."

Távio snorted.

"You would have made him mad enough to fight you." Kseniya gave you a serious look.

You shrugged. "Normally, I try to deescalate. But since he's been bothering Távio, I figured I'd see how far he'd try to push things." You didn't look at the junior agent. "Blackwatch likes to deal with its own problems, you know."

"...Dad says you shouldn't try to get into fights," Kseniya said.

You just laughed, because that wasn't a moral prescription. You and Tataryn were of the same school of thought. If you were facing someone head-on, you were doing it wrong.

"You're right," you said. "But that one came to me. Anyway, it's a good thing you spoke up," you said. "If he swung, I would have had to drop the cakes, and then they might get smashed. The horror!"

Kseniya giggled. "You bought some pretty fancy desserts."

"I know, and I want them to stay pretty until I get to eat them."

Távio looked like he wanted to ask questions, and then thought better of it. Above his pay grade after all. He slunk along beside you, looking troubled. You stopped outside Gabriel's door and knocked. You had access, of course. But Kseniya and Távio didn't possess those clearances and you didn't need to them to walk into anything classified.

"Commander Reyes is currently...occupied," Athena said, after a minute. "He'll get the door when he is able to."
You groaned, wondering what Isha had done now. Sighing, you set your bags down and began sorting through your desserts. There was a whole fraisier to split with your Blackwatch friends, along with boxes of assorted tarts, éclairs, and madeleines. And no, you hadn't gotten the strawberry cake just because it was Hanzo's favorite. You never got to try a slice on that day you got stabbed in Lucerne. And that haunted you. It had been such a beautiful creation: almond genoise cake soaked in brandy, layered with mousseline cream and fresh strawberries, and topped with marzipan and more strawberries. Even Hanzo had wanted seconds. This time, you were definitely getting a slice, albeit from a different bakery. You'd also picked up peanut butter cookies for Winston, two cinnamon pear rum babas for Gabriel, and chocolate croissants for Jack. Those gifts were individually boxed, for their own safety. You kept them in a separate bag as well.

"Are we having a party?" Kseniya asked, looking down at her clothes.

"No, I just got...carried away," you said, not sounding defensive at all. "I hope you can help me eat some of this."

"I can help," Távio said quickly.

"Yeah, go for it," you said, sending a message to Vo. Kseniya wanted to meet her after all. You also reminded Winston that you were dropping in.

The door opened, and Gabriel stood there with Isha in her harness, tucked against his chest. He had a firm grip on her, and you smiled as she trilled at you. Gabriel shot you a wry look. He glanced between Kseniya and Távio.

"Uncle Gabriel," Kseniya stared openly at Isha. As did Távio. "What is that?"

Isha chattered at the child, then at you about the child. You had no idea what she was trying to say, but she didn't seem upset with Gabriel. You weren't sure the reverse was true.

"That is now Agent Strike's problem," Gabriel said, handing her off to you. He didn't look angry though. "She chewed a hole in the couch, tried to eat my shoes, and disappeared Genji's third favorite scarf."

You sighed. "Here you go, Gabriel," you said, passing him the box of rum babas, soaked heavily in real rum.

"Look at her trying to buy my forgiveness," Gabriel said to Kseniya. He glanced inside the box. "And it just might work. Well, come on in. How's school?"

Isha trilled, annoyed that you weren't looking at her.

Kseniya glanced at you and Isha.

"I'll be with you in a moment," you said. "Need to calm the murderbird."

Kseniya nodded, still eyeing Isha. Gabriel just gave a bark of laughter and closed the door.

"Your bird has teeth," Távio said, after a moment.

You got out a strawberry éclair for her, carefully breaking it into bite-sized pieces. She was growing fast. She'd doubled in size since you brought her home, and her feathers were starting to come in, with hints of colors besides black. She was losing her baby teeth too, so she was chewing through everything like a vicious puppy. You'd given her ice, popsicles, bones, and even antlers, with only some relief. Jesse got you a heavy duty rubber dog toy, one you could fill with treats, and
that was holding up for now.

You sat down on the floor, Isha on your lap, her leash in one hand. She looked between Távio and the dessert, obviously torn about which one she should be focusing on.

"Távio," you said, pointing to him. "He's safe. Probably."

Isha chirped, not quite greeting him, but acknowledging his existence, before delicately taking the pastry from you and then cramming it into her mouth.

"Not too much," you said, patting her head. "All that sugar is bad for you."

Távio gave you an incredulous look. Like you didn't know all that sugar was bad for you too. You just didn't care. "I'd heard you'd gotten an...unusual pet, but..." He crouched down. "She has hands, ma'am. And teeth. Where did you even find her?"

"The official story is I found her on an op. We bonded." You winked at him. "You're not cleared for the rest of it."

"Ma'am," he saluted, eyes widening.

You handed him a piece of éclair. "Do you want to feed her?"

"Sure. Uh...does she bite?"

"Yes." You rubbed her chest and she chirped. "But she's not going to bite you, right?"

Isha gave a long slow blink and opened her mouth, holding it open possibly so Távio could admire her teeth. Or be intimidated by them. You weren't sure.

"Good girl," Távio said slowly, offering the piece of pastry. "Please don't bite me."

Isha delicately took the dessert in her mouth, and then used her little hands to hold onto it while she chewed.

"May I pet her?"

"I think she'll let you," you said, because feeding her normally won some measure of civility from her. At least for a little while.

Távio reached out with one hand and rubbed the top of her head. Isha didn't react. She just finished off the rest of her food and then headbutted your stomach.

"No more," you said, eating the rest. "Don't want you to get sick." Not that she'd thrown any of her food up yet, but there was a first time for everything.

Isha grumbled, but stayed on your lap, nuzzling your hand. You petted her slowly, letting her lick the pastry cream off your fingers.

"How long as Moore been bothering you?" You asked as Távio gaped at your baby velociraptor.

"I...umm...It's nothing severe, ma'am. I appreciate you intervening but I can handle him."

You raised a brow. "I didn't ask if you could handle him, agent. I asked how long he's been bothering you."
Távio swallowed, tugging at his collar. "...Since I got out of the infirmary. Nothing bad, just makes shitty comments, knocks stuff around, always stops short of a real fight. Kids stuff, ma'am. Honestly, it's just embarrassing. I can take him in a fight, if it comes to that. And it's just him. Everyone else knows he's an ass. They think he's jealous of the attention I got, which is stupid, because...well, who wants to be the sole survivor of their squad?"

You smiled thinly at that. "Who, indeed?"

Távio stared at his knees. "I mean, it beats not surviving," He rubbed the back of his neck. "But you know what I mean. Bastions and OR-14s, those give me some pause. Moore is just a washed up bastard. I'm keeping my head down, because I'm trying to qualify for a good post. That's all. I'm not scared of him, ma'am."

You nodded. "OK, but you let me know if he starts anything. I mean it. I'm not going to write him up. Or send it to any CO's attention." You already knew Távio would do no such thing. But now Athena knew to keep an eye on things. If Moore didn't lay off, you'd get Jesse, Tataryn, and maybe Shoal and go have a nice talk with Moore. No, scratch that, you wouldn't invite Shoal. She had a good reputation, no sense in tarnishing it. You'd get Genji instead. Moore was a coward. It wouldn't take much persuasion.

"I uh... better get going. Thanks for everything, ma'am. It was nice to meet you, Isha." He stared at her for a few seconds too long, and she cocked her head to the side, chirping at him.

"Wave "bye" to Távio," you said.

Isha flapped one wing, then looked at you expectantly. You sighed and gave her a macaron. She happily bit into it, getting crumbs all over your lap.

Távio stared and then slowly waved back, mind obviously blown by your little murderbird waving her little hand at him.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a stressful week. I survived Saturday, chipped a tooth, and cleaned my room. I just had way too much stuff crammed in the small bedroom and so I spent 6 hours moving shit around and now I have a floor again. It's kind of nice. Not looking forward to my dentist visit later this week.

Cat is in the early stages of kidney disease. We're going to put him on prescription food and some meds, and hopefully that will prolong his life/keep the quality good. Have to do all my dogs' booster shots this week. So it's $$$ kind of month. >.< I can handle it, but just thinking about it makes me go DJKLFjkdjkfdjkdfl. Adulting is hard. But when you have pets, you have a responsibility to take care of them. Even if you're cleaning your room, and you've put Shepard the Eternal Dining Room Pooper in his kennel, and all of a sudden you smell poop, and you leave your room to find that Shepard is coming down the hall, because he broke out of his kennel, just to go poop in your dining room, even though you had him outside for like 20 minutes and he didn't go then.

He's a dick.
Hope everyone's week is good!
Chapter 84

Maybe small children aren't as bad as you remember. At least compared to your coworkers.

You knocked once and then carried Isha and the bags of desserts into the office. Kseniya sat in a chair across from Gabriel's desk, while he sat on the desk listening to her talk about science.

You let Isha perch on your shoulder, though she was getting a little too big for it now. She stared at Kseniya with obvious fascination, and you realized she had never seen a child before.

"...And so, obviously, with the manus, the teeth, and the sickle-shaped claw, Isha is a dinosaur. Probably a dromaeosaur, more specifically a raptor."

Gabriel threw his head back and laughed, hands on his knees.

You sighed.

Kseniya turned around, her expression very serious. "That's not a bird, Ms. Strike. That's a dinosaur."

"Dinosaurs are extinct," Gabriel said, his smile easy. His box of desserts sat unopened on the desk. "Have you eaten anything besides sugar?" He looked at you.

"...Yes," you said. "I had coffee."

Gabriel shook his head, a mildly exasperated smile on his lips. "What about you Kseniya?"

"I had a balanced breakfast of pancakes, eggs, and melon balls," she said. "And I wasn't done talking about your dinosaur."

"It's Agent Strike's dinosaur," Gabriel said wryly. "I was just trying to litter box train her. But then she took to dustbathing in the litter. I think wood chips might be a better choice."

You noticed the uncovered litter box in the corner of the office. When had he picked that up? You'd been putting newspaper down and trying to get her to use that. She got the idea, but the application wasn't quite there yet. Maybe the box would work better. It would be easier to clean.

"How did you get a dinosaur?" Kseniya asked solemnly.

"That's actually classified," you said. "But I've been passing her off as a mutant bird."

"So there's a lab that's reengineered them?" Kseniya asked. "Because she's really tame. I don't think you caught her in the wild."
"...I didn't catch her," you said. "Do you want to pet her?"

"Does she bite?"

Gabriel laughed. "Yes. But we're working on that. Did she bite Maeda Vargas?"

"Of course not," you said.

Gabriel shook his head, looking a little disappointed. He offered Kseniya some of the dried mutton you'd started buying for Isha and Bandit.

You gently picked Isha up and placed her on Gabriel's lap. She chirped at him and he rubbed her chest. Though Jack spoiled her more, Gabriel kept her busy with training, and she seemed to like that just as much.

"No biting. Kseniya is safe," Gabriel said. "You have to be polite."

Isha watched the girl with narrow eyes.

"No biting," you said.

Isha glanced up at you and chortled her impatience. She knew that already. You didn't need to keep saying it. You just rolled your eyes. Just because your murderbird knew how she was supposed to behave didn't mean she would actually do it.

"Hello Isha," Kseniya said gravely. "It's nice to meet you."

Isha cocked her head to the side and chirped.

Kseniya held out the entire jerky strip.

Isha took it in her mouth and dragged it back to Gabriel's lap. It was bigger than the portions you normally gave her. She dropped it on his thigh and then grabbed it with one foot, holding on tight while she bit chunks off.

"She'll use her hands if you give her smaller pieces," you said.

"This is amazing too," Kseniya said, watching her with big eyes. "Does she hunt?"

"No, but that's because I don't let her. She's fast enough and she has the instincts." You thought about her chasing rabbits or squirrels on the grounds and shook your head. That could go bad very quickly. You began to stash the cakes in the fridge, shooting Gabriel dirty looks when he grinned at them covetously. Or at least that's how it looked to you.

"There's milk in the fridge if you want any," Gabriel said.

"Yes, please," Kseniya nodded enthusiastically.

You grabbed the carton and poured her a mug, and handed it to her, not missing how Isha raised her head, bobbing it side to side, trying to figure out what you'd given the girl. Rolling your eyes, you poured her a tiny bit in a saucer and set it on Gabriel's desk.

"You're spoiling her," Gabriel said, without any real heat.

"That's Jack. I'm just seeing if she likes milk."
When you looked back up, it was gone and she was eyeing Kseniya's mug.

"So how's school?" Gabriel crossed his arms.

Kseniya straightened up, her posture so proper, it hurt to look at. She set her mug on the desk, and folded her hands in her lap. "Not a lot of changes, sir. Emilia Bartalotti seems to be using her visitations at the school as an excuse to meet with Evgenia Volskaya. Their sons haven't noticed, but the relationship is...more than friendship." Her voice wavered, her embarrassment clear.

You blinked and sat down on your desk, giving Gabriel a hard look.

"Interesting," Gabriel said, not looking at you. "I thought it was going in that direction, but I appreciate the confirmation."

"I have the recordings," Kseniya said, opening her backpack and handing Gabriel a data chip.

"That's fine work," Gabriel said, giving her a warm smile.

You gritted your teeth, a little shocked by what you were hearing. Which was stupid, because you'd done some bad things, but you'd never used a child as an agent.

Kseniya nodded. "The chemistry teacher, Mr. Patterson, has accumulated an alarming amount of gambling debt. I don't think the security officers have picked up on it yet. He likes online gaming too much. I'm not sure if he's been compromised yet."

Gabriel nodded. "I'll look into it."

"Sanjay Korpal is sucking up to the Belgian princesses. And I don't think it's just because they're kind of pretty. His mother was in, making a big deal about his chances of attaining a high position in the family business."

Was Sanjay related to Vikram? Did the family business mean Vishkar Industries? You frowned, partially at the puzzle pieces, partially because it was an eight year old that was the source.

"Good job, Kseniya," Gabriel said. "You just used the recording devices, right? No heroics? No listening at keyholes?"

"I maintained "plausible deniability," sir." She didn't trip over the words and you rubbed your forehead. "I know I can't afford to draw any attention to myself or do anything that will endanger my cover."

"...Gabriel," you said, voice oddly high. "Can I talk to you?"

"In a moment," Gabriel said. He grinned at Kseniya. "I told you she wouldn't be happy." He picked up Isha, who'd been drinking out of Kseniya's mug while the three of you were focused on other things.

You crossed your arms as Gabriel approached your desk, looking very amused.

"Is something wrong?" His voice was low and teasing.

"She's eight, Gabriel," you scowled.
"I know," he said, patting your shoulder. "How old were you when you first killed a man?"

You flinched. Because the answer was simple: *too young*. "It's not the same."

"You know Tataryn had...reasons for leaving his old lifestyle," Gabriel said. "He and her mother taught her this...observational skillset early on, because people don't suspect children. It was an essential survival skill, and partially the reason she's alive today."

"That doesn't mean you should-"

"Tataryn and I have both run the risk assessment and found the likelihood of discovery to be minimal. After all that fussing, do you really think he would let us put her in danger?"

"Tataryn has questionable judgment," you said, sourly.

"It's low-risk, big payoff," Gabriel said. "We're getting primary-sourced HUMINT, that's digitally-backed up, and she handles it like a pro."

Eavesdropping wasn't all she learned, judging by her quick intervention with Moore. You glanced over at the girl who was watching you both with big eyes.

"I volunteered for this," she said forcefully. "Uncle Gabriel didn't ask me to do this or even make any hints toward it. Honest."

You glanced at Gabriel and he gave you a wry smile. "Yeah, I'm a bastard, but I'm not that much of a bastard."

"I know Tato is out there doing dangerous things. And if any of this intel can help him, or just make him just a little safer, then it's worth it. If I get caught, I can talk my way out of it. But I'm a quiet kid and a good student. The risk isn't bad." She shrugged. "At worst, I get expelled. But I'm not in real danger,"

"...Some of the people you mentioned would kill to protect their names," you said, recalling what happened to Vikram Korpal. "It doesn't matter that you're a kid."

"It's a Swiss boarding school," Gabriel said. "An expensive one at that. And we're not without allies, are we?" He had the audacity to wink at Kseniya.

"I'm nice; people trust me," Kseniya said with a nod. "Also, I have a discrete bodyguard on site," she added quickly, noticing the look on your face. "To my classmates, I'm just a good listener with a big snack stash."

It was more than that. Kseniya was smart, coming off as meek when the situation required it. "Manipulative" sounded very negative, but she knew how to read the situation and how to act accordingly. "...You're mentoring another prodigy, aren't you?" You sighed, giving Gabriel a weary look.

"I would love to take credit for Kseniya's skills, but that goes to her parents." Gabriel laughed at your expression. "It's all right. I know that feeling. That is precisely how I looked when she and Tataryn approached me about getting her into the Institut Montana."

You massaged your forehead. "Don't tell me Lacroix knows about her. No wait, of course he does. Goddamnit, Gabriel."

"Mr. Lacroix offered me a job. I declined. He is welcome to pass questions through Uncle
Gabriel, of course, but I need to keep up with my schoolwork too,” Kseniya said with utmost sincerity.

"She's got you beat there," Gabriel laughed, patting Isha's head. She nuzzled his stomach, and you didn't miss how he slipped her another strip of dried meat. "At least she was smart enough to turn him down."

You just sighed and took an almond cream tart and poured yourself more coffee. You couldn't deny that at all.

Athena's fish torpedo hovered outside the door. Kseniya had her backpack on, and she had fastidiously wiped the milk and pastry crumbs off her face. You had Isha on your shoulder, her leash strapped to your belt. Gabriel had passed her along, saying he needed to get real work done.

You had a pet, an AI, and a child in tow. You took a moment then to reevaluate your life decisions. How had it come to this? It sounded like a joke, and the punch line was your life.

"Do you want help carrying those?" Kseniya asked.

You almost declined, but you weren't sure how Vo would react to Isha today. The last few encounters hadn't gone so smoothly with Vo yelling at your murderbird and Isha shrieking right back. So you handed Kseniya the dessert bag. She handled it carefully, watching Isha out of the corner of her eye.

"You and Uncle Gabriel get along really well," Kseniya said.

"We better. I spend a third of my on-duty time in the office with him," you said, keeping your voice low. "It'd be miserable if we hated each other."

"Then you're friends?" She asked, perking up.

You nodded. "Yes." This relationship was built on a solid friendship. You valued that as much as the passion and the sex.

"I'm glad he has friends close by," she said, watching your face. "When I first came here, he seemed...angrier. Not at me. He's always been nice to me. Probably because I'm a kid."

You nodded, keeping your expression politely neutral. You weren't sure if she was fishing or if she was just sharing her thoughts. "It's a hard job."

"Lonely," she said. "At least, I think it is. Tato is always keeping secrets. I...understand why. I suppose Uncle Gabriel has even more."

You scratched Isha's head, listening to her coo as she nibbled on your ear. "Maybe," you said, because Tataryn was a shifty character. "It's part of the life."

"Isn't it exhausting?" Kseniya asked, her words subdued.

"Of course," you said. "But you learn to live with it, and eventually you just start to keep things close to your chest." So much so that maybe people forgot how to be honest and open.
"Wouldn't it be better just...not to live like that?"

You shrugged. "Habit. The longer you do something, the easier it is to keep doing it. Even if it's bad."

"I'm not sure that's "habit." That sounds like a combination of inertia and laziness," Kseniya said crossing her arms.

"Think that's the definition of habit," you said with a laugh. "I'm guessing you have some concerns about your Tato." You weren't sure why you brought it up. It really wasn't your business. Except this eight year old prodigy sounded so damn depressed when she mentioned her father's secretiveness.

"He drinks too much." Kseniya wasn't looking at you.

"...Sometimes," you said. "But I haven't seen him drunk since before Malik's funeral."

Kseniya nodded. "He never visits me drunk. But I know he still drinks. He's says it's part of his culture."

You shrugged, not really wanting to talk about Tataryn's bad behavior when under the influence.

"Is it also part of the job?"

"Most of the time, no. Can you imagine Gabriel's reaction if one of his subordinates showed up drunk to an op?"

Kseniya smiled involuntarily. "I meant unofficially."

"Yeah," you said, after a moment. "There's a drinking culture here." Especially after funerals. "I mean, some of us do it more than others. It's a coping mechanism, but not a great one. Not long term anyway." Gabriel would look the other way occasionally, but no one wanted to go on an op with someone who couldn't function.

"Does he have friends?"

"Yes," you said. "He plays the fool very often, and sometimes he's a scoundrel, but he has friends. People like him."

She smiled. "That's good. I worry about him getting lonely. Do you like him?"

"That's complicated," you laughed. "Most of the time I have to control my urge to slap him. But I guess so."

"You do, or you wouldn't be escorting me around," she said. "Even if you did lose a round of cards, or Monopoly, or whatever games you play in Blackwatch."

You smiled wryly. "Yeah, OK. But don't tell him I said that. His ego is big enough."

"Our secret," Kseniya said. She looked up at you. "Like the fact Isha is not a bird."

"These are badly-kept secrets," you said with a laugh.

"I'm just a kid," Kseniya giggled. "What's your excuse? You're a secret agent!"
Shaking your head, you led her down the corridor toward your dormitory. You stopped in front of Vo's door and knocked. There was silence. She hadn't answered any of your messages, but she wasn't listed as off-site either.

"Vo, I have desserts," you called out.

There was a shuffling sound and you rolled your eyes. Of course.

The door opened a crack.

You held out a small fruit tart filled with pastry cream and covered with berries. "Hey, we have a visitor-

"*Je n'aime pas ton oiseau,*" Vo scowled, looking up at Isha. She was in oversized Blackwatch sweats, as usual, and not wearing shoes. She snatched the tart out of your hand, *"Pas de mordant!"

Isha screeched at her, and you weren't sure if it was actual malice or if she was just shouting along with the drama.

"*Ce n'est pas un oiseau, c'est un dinosaure,*" Kseniya said, her accent very Parisian. What exactly had her early childhood been like? This wasn't the first time you had wondered about that.

"Hey, weren't you keeping that a secret?" Not that it mattered. Vo didn't exactly go around talking to people.

"*Tato* trusts Ms. Vo," the girl said, admittedly looking a little chagrined.

Vo squinted at Isha. "...Is that true?" She took a bite out of the tart, not looking at it. You were just glad you'd gotten some fruit in her today.

You sighed. "Yes."

"Bad bird is not a bird?" The tart was half gone.

"Yes," you agreed.

"Dinosaur?" Vo's voice went high with incredulity. The tart was down to one bite.

"Yes. She's a terrible bird, but a pretty good dinosaur. And no bombs. The commander is very fond of her. I am very fond of her."

Vo mulled that over, finished her tart, then held her hand out. "No bombs," she repeated sullenly. You gave her another fruit tart.

Isha eyed the dessert.

"No," you said, tugging on her leash. "That's not for you."

Vo glowered at your murderbird and stuck the pastry behind her back. "Mine."

"Here," you said, giving her the third tart. "We just wanted to come by and say "hi." Brought you some of these. We'll have strawberry cake with Hanzo later, OK?"

Vo didn't answer, she was now studying Kseniya. Vo was barely a few inches taller than
Kseniya, but decades older.

"You're Fedya's daughter," she said, and it was official, there were no secrets in Blackwatch. Everyone knew everyone else's business, no matter how classified it was. Everyone probably knew you were schtupping Jack and Gabriel, and you were the only person dumb enough to think it was a secret. Why did you even bother trying to be discrete?

"Yes, he brought me the glitter poppers you made," Kseniya said enthusiastically. "They're amazing. Thank you."

OK, Tataryn had already informed Vo of his daughter's existence and given her some description. That made you feel a tiny bit better.

Vo looked at you. "Fedya know you bring her here?"

"He's the one who told me to do it!" You threw your hands up in frustration and Isha squawked, slipping and digging her talons into your shoulder for stability. Swearing you pressed her against your chest, knowing that if you tried to remove her, she'd just grip harder. You'd learned that the hard way.

"No bad words in front of her," Vo said solemnly.

You gave a pained grimace as Isha relaxed and you held her against your chest, no longer willing to let her perch on your gouged shoulder. Isha just nipped your fingers, not liking the restrictions.

"Well, we need to be going now," you said. "Because my shirt's ripped and I'm bleeding."

Vo's eyes darted between you and Isha.

"Bad bird. Good dinosaur." And even if her expression was flat, and her voice monotone, you swore she was laughing at you.

You cleaned up in your quarters, sticking Isha in her kennel; it was a nice kennel with soft blankets, a water bottle, toys, and two levels: she didn't care. She screeched her displeasure at you, but you pulled your shirt down, showing off the bloody punctures. "No clawing," you said.

She squawked louder, too outraged to reason with. Shaking your head, you just went to the bathroom to clean and dress the wounds. They weren't deep, but infection and lectures from Angela were still hassles that you didn't want to deal with. You changed shirts, somewhat annoyed that Isha had torn up your civilian clothes.

When you came out, Kseniya was staring at your bear.

"It was a gift," you said. "Reinhardt got it for me when I was laid up in the infirmary." You opened your door. "Let's go visit Winston, shall we?"

Isha sulked in her kennel, not looking at you.

"Do you want to come, murderbird?"
She just burrowed into a blanket, ignoring you. Kseniya smothered a giggle.

You rolled your eyes and shut the door carefully, waiting to see if she'd throw a fit. There was only silence. She probably needed a nap anyway.

You and Kseniya walked down the corridor, Athena floating behind you.

"You don't have any pictures of your family," Kseniya said after a moment.

"...I don't have anything," you said. "It all burned when I was young...and there's no one to send replacements."

"Oh." Kseniya got quieter. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for," you said, with a shrug. "I've been told numerous times that my decorating could use some work."

Kseniya didn't laugh. "My mother is dead too," she said, after a few minutes.

"That's rough," you said, though you weren't exactly surprised. You figured she was either dead or had abandoned them.

"He's still in love with her," she said sadly. And you wondered if that was true, or if that was a convenient fiction that Tataryn let her believe. It was hard to say either way. You'd misjudged him before. You certainly weren't going to share that skepticism with his daughter.

"You don't stop loving someone just because they're gone," you said after a moment. "And it isn't like after six months or a year, you're automatically all better and it stops hurting."

Kseniya blinked. "I...guess. I have pictures. I remember some stuff. Sometimes I miss her. But it was a long time ago, and its more...there's a hole where she should be, but I don't feel the way he does. Her being dead doesn't affect me like it affects him. Does that make me bad?"

"No." You exhaled. Kids handled trauma differently, you knew that much. In fact, you suspected they were a lot more resilient than adults. Whether they just forgot what happened, or they were able to bounce back just because they didn't quite grasp the magnitude of death, you weren't sure. "Everyone deals with grief in their own way. Maybe you were too young to really process it, and maybe you'll be able to go through life without any lingering issues. Maybe you'll wake up in a week heartbroken because it finally hit you."

Kseniya did not look relieved by this. But you knew from experience there was no way to make grief fun or comfortable. And it wasn't meant to be. So you just walked with her, waiting for her to speak.

You made it all the way to Winston's lab in silence.

"Do you want to take a minute or two?" You asked.

"No, I'm fine," she said, straightening up. "Sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"Nothing to apologize for," you said, inputting your key code. The security doors opened, and you blinked when you saw Lacroix and Ziv arguing in hushed tones right by the door.

"That's not an option! I know you're not as hapless as Reinhardt, but it won't fucking work like that! Come up with a new idea!"
"Ziv, it's only partial-" Gérard was using his explanatory tones, like he was talking to a small child, though come to think of it, you'd never seen him speak to a small child. That might change in a moment.

"She's not like the ones you've worked with before, Gérard. You can't just reprogram her-" Ziv scowled. "And she remembers everything! We have to be careful! You can't just wipe her memory either! Who's the goddamn expert here? Here's a hint: not you!"

Huh, you'd never seen Ziv lose his temper with Lacroix before, and it was kind of nice to see all that vitriol and chutzpah directed at the spymaster. More specifically, it was nice to see Lacroix getting the same Ziv-induced headache expression that you were so familiar with.

"All right. Give me a better definition of her parameters then," Lacroix said, glancing at you. "I will consider what if any modifications can be made then. Also, we have company, so perhaps you could restrain yourself, mon chou."

You wrinkled your nose. Did he really just...

"Don't you start that! I am not a cabbage or a cream puff!" Ziv tried to scowl, looking more flustered than angry.

"We can come back later," you said loudly, not actually meaning it.

Kseniya covered her mouth.

"Fuck you and your- Oh." Ziv stopped mid-sentence, finally noticing Kseniya. "Ben-zona, where did you get the kid?" He squinted at her. "Isn't Maeda Vargas bad enough? Do you have baby fever or something?"

You slowly drew a line across your throat, shaking your head at your idiot hacker.

Lacroix sighed. "Please excuse, Agent Mihret's outburst, Mademoiselle Zinnia. I am working on improving his social graces. Chanceux hasn't had much luck, despite her clumsy, but earnest efforts. I, however, have a more experienced hand. Look at how well-behaved she is now."

You and Ziv both gave Lacroix a sharp sideways look.

Kseniya just extended her hand. "Please to meet you, Mr. Mihret."

"Yeah, uh, sure," Ziv said, sticking his hand out awkwardly, his panicked gaze falling on you. "You can call me Ziv."

"OK," she said brightly, and you raised a brow. "Nice to meet you, Ziv. You can call me Zinnia. Earlier, she'd been a stickler about titles with Távio and maybe she was just messing with him. Now, she was doing the opposite with Ziv, and you wondered if that's because she was trying to make him comfortable.

"Winston's expecting us," you said.

"Oh," Ziv said. "Yeah, he's in the back fine-tuning some more drone prototypes." He gave Lacroix another dirty look, and a part of your heart finally relaxed, because Ziv wasn't going to let Lacroix walk all over him and while it seemed like a silly worry now, you had been really concerned before...

"Are those éclairs, Chanceux?" Lacroix asked, glancing at your bag.
"Peanut butter cookies, for Winston," you said. "But...I might have bought some of those coffee éclairs that you like and a whole fraisier for later. I guess you can have some if Amélie comes along."

Lacroix smiled slyly at you. "I see Mademoiselle Zinnia has been a good influence on you, Chanceux."

"Oh no, Ms. Strike has been a very gracious hostess," Kseniya said, with an alarming amount of sincerity.

Lacroix's smarmy little smile widened, and you could have sworn your saw his mustache curl smugly. Was that even physically possible? "I have heard that her attitude has improved greatly, even from our Shambali friend. I am so very proud of your progress, Chanceux."

You discretely raised your middle fingers while Kseniya was looking in the other direction. "Why are you still here? Don't you have nefarious plots to mastermind? Fair maidens to lock in towers? Plucky orphans to crush?"

"I am taking a sanity day," he said cheerfully. "But I think since you're conducting a guided tour, I might come along. I can't think of anything better to do."

"I think Isha might have eaten all the coffee éclairs already," you said darkly. "And if she hasn't yet, she might soon."

Lacroix just grinned at you, making no move to leave. "Your "murderbird" is quite the little operator. Amélie is very charmed."

"Amélie likes mean pretty things," Ziv said with a sigh. Apparently, he was aware that he fit that category. Isha liked Amélie and Ziv. More surprisingly, she liked Lacroix too, though you weren't exactly sure why. You hadn't actually told her that he was "safe." Maybe he was slipping her treats on the side.

"Greetings, Lucky!" Winston called out. "I'll be there in a moment! So very sorry! I just have to replace this power source and we'll be all set!"

"So Jack says you wanted to place Maeda Vargas with Chang," Lacroix said casually. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"What are the drawbacks?" You asked, straightening up. "It's a combat squad, her unit is fairly professional and equipped to train him, and she's exactly the kind of leader he'll respond to. He needs someone who will push him hard and not give him room to bullshit. I want him for Blackwatch, but he needs more training and experience before I bring him in."

"Chang is the opposite of subtle," Lacroix said. "But you're right, he does need a more well-rounded education." He gave you a faint smile. "It's interesting that right now you have him assigned to Reinhardt."

"I didn't do anything," you said blandly. "He's outside my chain of command."

Lacroix's smile widened, and it was obvious he didn't buy your story at all. "D'accord."

"Why are you doing it? I know you have a soft spot for the kid," Ziv said rather begrudgingly, like he was completely unaware of the soft spot you had for him. "And he isn't totally hopeless. But I thought you delegated that task to Tataryn. Did that sneaky bastard weasel out of it?" Ziv demanded, voice rising. "That's just like him." Ziv's hands curled into fists. "Ben-
zona, Lucky, he always does this to you. Remember the trainees? That was his penal duty and yet you did most of the work! All those incidents with Vo? He's her CO. He should be the one handling her messes. That Ukrainian gigolo is just shirking-

You put a hand over Ziv's mouth, unable to bring yourself to look at Kseniya's face. Fuck. "Discretion, please," you hissed.

"Oh you know it's true!" Ziv pushed your hand away, eyes defiant.

Lacroix sighed and shook his head. "You didn't brief him, did you?"

"I was asked not to." And to be fair, you hadn't expected to expose any child to Ziv. But that was a critical oversight on your part. His office was in Winston's lab, after all. In terms of geographical proximity, he was right where you needed to be.

"It's OK," Kseniya said serenely, her smile vapid. You were starting to recognize her "I'm uncomfortable but can't show it" expression, though you weren't sure how much damage Ziv's words had done. "Cursing doesn't bother me."

Lacroix coughed warningly at Ziv and your hacker shut up. "You know, Mademoiselle Zinnia, you would of course be an asset to our R&D department," Lacroix said with a small bow. "But are you sure I can't convince you to join Chanceux and Ziv on my taskforce? You would bring a refreshing amount of maturity to the team."

"Sorry," Ziv grumbled, though you were pretty sure he didn't know exactly what he was apologizing for. "I get carried away sometimes. But Lucky's an idiot and she needs people to watch out for her."

You sighed, shaking your head. That was still a shit apology, but it was better than before.

Kseniya's smile then reminded you of Tataryn's politest mask. It was the closest she'd resembled him. "Make me a better offer this time, Mr. Lacroix and I'll consider it."

Lacroix laughed, and you wondered what offer he had made last time.

"Sorry about the wait!" Winston ambled over, adjusting his Overwatch blue tie with silver fleur de lis accents.

"Is that new?" You asked, eager to change the subject.

"Oh this? Yes! A gift from Ziv," he said, brow furrowing. "Does it look...bad? I uh, don't have a full suit in my size but Commander Wilhelm has referred me to his tailor. I'm...not sure that is wise."

"No, it's a good color," you said, because it was true. "And you do you. I think you'd look great in a suit. Or a dress. Whatever you want to wear."

Winston chuckled. "And you must be Ms. Zinnia." He extended his hand. It was borderline alarming to see her tiny hand covered by his. "Your suggestions for increasing the tensile strength of the minisub collector nets were quite innovative. I should have considered using the modified spider silk fibers in a hexagonal weave. I know they're mostly used in ballistic armor, but with some tweaking-"

You felt your eyes start to glaze over. Quickly you handed Winston the box of peanut butter cookies.
"Oh, Lucky. You didn't have to," he said, even as he plucked them out of your hand. "They smell delicious." He delicately took one and ate it slowly, taking care not to get crumbs anywhere. "And they are delicious."

"But the tech cloth wouldn't work?" Kseniya asked.

"Absorbs too much water and doesn't function properly at those depths. We're still tweaking its ability handle that amount of pressure.

You glanced at Lacroix, who was whispering in Ziv's ear. You knew precisely the moment when he revealed Kseniya's identity, because Ziv's shoulders slumped and he groaned, resting his face in his hand. Later on, he'd bitch about the fact you hadn't warned him, but honestly, everyone knew Ziv's mouth got him into buckets of trouble.

Lacroix patted his back, winking at you.

You gave him a reluctant smile, and wondered if you should offer him one of the Gitanes in your bag.

The rest of the visit went smoothly. You had dinner with Jesse, Bandit, and Isha. Your baby raptor had taken her nap, and while she'd shredded one of her blankets, she was in a better mood when you returned to the room. She seemed to like Winston, especially his fur, but it was probably better that you didn't carry her around his lab with all the breakable things.

Several Blackwatch agents flitted by your table, and you cut your friends slices of the fraisier. It was as good as it looked. Even Hanzo showed up, ignoring everyone except Bandit, whom he fed chunks of beef stew. Isha watched him shrewdly, but didn't approach. You still cut Hanzo a large slice of cake. Genji slipped Isha some chicken nuggets and you rolled your eyes.

"Sorry about Ziv," you told Kseniya on the way back. "He uh...he talks a lot of shit."

"...I know how Tato can be," she said, hanging her head. "I uh...I'm sorry if you got caught up in one of his...schemes."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for." You decided to preempt her too insightful questions. "I agreed to do this as a favor for him, sure. But it's been a nice change of pace and while he can be extremely underhanded, we are friends. Making sure you aren't alone on day like this is something friends do."

Kseniya smiled wanly. "He's really bad at honesty."

"...He has a funny relationship with the truth," you said after a moment.

"You're not in love with him, right?" She asked, looking worried. "That's not why you agreed to this, is it?"

You rolled your eyes. "I am definitely not in love with him. I am not entirely sure I like him most of the time. He's kind of like Ziv to me, you know a friend, but also a pain in the ass. Only Ziv gets a pass because I knew his grandmother."
She nodded. "I wouldn't mind if you were...with him." She bit her lip. "But after my mom died..." She stared at the floor. "He's had...special friends, but..." She trailed off, obviously conflicted about speaking ill of her father.

"There's someone else in my life," you said gently. "Maybe if I'd met your father at a different point..." Unlikely, because as good-looking as Tataryn was, he was still an infuriating weasel. "But no. I'm very happy with what I have. I don't think your father and I would have been a good match."

"He's not really my father," she mumbled.

You blinked at that. Wait a minute. "I...do I need to break his knees? Or worse?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that!" She shook her head, eyes panicked. "I just meant, I've looked at the timeline. And the mirror. I'm pretty sure he came into my mom's life after I was born. I don't know who my biological father is. But it's not him."

You shrugged. "OK?"

"He takes care of me because he loved my mom. He doesn't come see me very often because I remind him of her and he can't handle that." Kseniya's voice was very soft and you rested a hand on her shoulder. "I'm just an obligation." She wiped her face. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, Ms. Strike. Please don't tell him I said that."

You took a deep breath, because damnit, this wasn't part of your job description. You didn't know how to talk to kids about their wayward parents. All you could do was be reasonably honest, balance that response with compassion, and hope for the best.

"On the day before Malik's funeral, your dad came to me a complete wreck."

She winced. And you realized you should have worded that differently. Still, even you knew better than to go into detail.

"He was sobering up, grieving, and exhausted. So I cooked him breakfast and talked some sense into him." You smiled slightly at the memory. "I made him crepes, and he covered them in sugar, Nutella, and preserves. Lots of sweet stuff. I asked him why, because to be honest, it looked like too much, and that's saying something coming from me."

Kseniya bit her lip.

"He told me it was how you liked them. And eating them that way made him think of you. It...made him happier. He was much better after that," you said. "Did he get it wrong?"


"For your visit, he made me extensive lists of what kind of food you like, what I shouldn't give you because it's too high in sugar, and reminders that if you were sticking with vegetarianism, I had to read the ingredients lists for all the foods you were going to try, because some things contain gelatin instead of agar and gelatin comes from animals."

"You ignored the sugar limit," Kseniya said.

"Well, it was stupid." You shrugged. "If he wanted to police your food, he could come here and do it himself. I'm not being the bad guy. And besides, that would be amazingly hypocritical of
me. Can you imagine? Me saying, "Oh no, you can't have any more dessert. That's too much sugar!" while I crammed giant slices of cake into my mouth?"

Kseniya cracked a crooked smile.

"What I'm saying is that I don't know about his trauma and his reasoning. I know nothing about your genetics, and that's really a conversation you should have with him when you're ready. But I'm telling you it doesn't matter if he's the sperm donor or not, because that man does love you, even if he's bad at showing it. You're not just an obligation."

The tiny girl looked up at you with damp eyes, her hair still in the adorable little puffs, pastry crumbs on the collar of her shirt. "Do you really think that?" Hope quavering in her voice, eyes so trusting it hurt to look at her.

"Yeah, I really do," you said, and were relieved to find that you weren't lying. You were still going to chew Tataryn out after this.

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Gabriel was waiting for you by the check out counter of the motor pool, dressed down in jeans and skintight black t-shirt that looked painted on his chest. You blinked, a little surprised to see him. An Athena fish torpedo hovered beside Kseniya, and was probably how he knew your exact location.

"Care if I ride along?" He asked, giving you a wolfish grin, eyes full of mischief.

"I don't know." You raised a brow, nudging Kseniya. "Do you him to come with us?"

Kseniya nodded vigorously. "Yes," she brightened. "Uncle Gabriel is actually a lot more fun than he looks."

"Is that so?" You asked, giving Gabriel a mock skeptical frown. "Could have fooled me."

Gabriel shook his head at you, an edge in his smile. "Do you see what I have to put up with? I'm the victim here."

Kseniya giggled, one hand over her mouth.

"I heard you had that big strawberry cake at dinner and you didn't even save me any," he continued, eyes wounded.

"I bought you your own rum babas," you said, rolling your eyes. "And don't tell me you didn't help yourself to the éclairs."

"Those were some nice little cakes you brought me," he said, sauntering alongside you both. "Think we can get more of them?"

"Not tonight," you said. "Bakery's closed."

"That's a shame," he said. "Maybe we could go out for ice cream? My treat?"

"What do you think?" You asked Kseniya, though you knew you'd still have to be careful.
"I like ice cream," she said.

"Good," Gabriel winked at her. "I can't be friends with people who don't."

You rolled your eyes. "Where's Isha?" You had left her with him after dinner, thinking he was going to go back to his room to decompress.

"Got that blonde sitter she likes," Gabriel said casually. "Last I saw they were snuggling on the couch and she was eating his dinner off his plate."

You snorted. She really hammed it up for Jack, acting extra babyish and cuddly when he was around. And he adored it.

Kseniya and Athena climbed into the back of the armored car while Gabriel took the passenger seat. You grinned, slightly surprised that he hadn't tried to take the keys.

"Do you usually make Ms. Strike drive you around for ice cream?"

"Nope," he said, watching her buckle up. "But I should."

Shaking your head, you asked Athena to map the route to an ice cream parlor.

Chapter End Notes

Been stressed and sick this week. Just drained and queasy. Took a day off work and slept. Feeling a little better, but still meh.

Internet keeps farting out. Have a service call set for Sunday. Was informed that if the fault is on my end, they'll charge me $99 for repairs. I have AT&T. I wish I didn't.

Dentist visit was OK. Have two fillings with cavities UNDERNEATH them, so I have to get them removed and refilled. Other than that, they said if I chipped a tooth, it was small enough that it'll be OK. I actually liked the new dentist's office, but it was staffed entirely by perky 20-30 something blonde women. Which was kind of strange. The receptionist was in her early twenties. The tech was probably late twenties. The dentist was late twenties to mid thirties. Everyone had nice makeup, long eyelashes, and jewelry, and they were all pretty and super friendly. It felt like the Stepford Wives Dental version. I'm still like "was any of that real, or just a fever dream?"

Cat seems to be eating his RX food with no problem and vacuuming down his pill in the process. We'll see how he does. Dogs are all needy cuddlemonsters.
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

The things you do to keep your lovers happy: milkshakes, Ainsley, and other boundaries.

Chapter Notes

Jasmine4tea shared a sketch of Lucky!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was past her curfew when you and Gabriel walked Kseniya back to her dorm, and you made sure to leave the rest of the macarons with her. Just to spite Tataryn. Gabriel had bought her a massive ice cream sundae the size of her head, and you all knew she couldn't finish it. But she’d tried and he had snapped before and after pictures, possibly also to spite Tataryn.

Gabriel had ordered Jack a chocolate malt and had gotten himself a four scoop ice cream cone with complete with four different flavors, whipped cream, and a cherry on top. He’d managed not to spill it, eating it too fast and then went on to help Kseniya finish off her sundae and take more pictures. He ended up loudly complaining of an ice cream headache for the entire ride back to the school.

Kseniya gave Gabriel a hug, though she barely came up to his waist. You blinked as she whirled and wrapped her arms around you, squeezing you quickly. "Thanks for the day out," she said. "I had a lot of fun."

"You're welcome. I did too," you said, not just because it was polite. "I'd do it again, if you father doesn't ban me for stuffing you full of sugar and letting you meet Ziv."

"You did what?" Gabriel groaned.

"I didn't mean to," you muttered and Kseniya laughed. "He was there in the lab, and she wanted to visit Winston."

Gabriel muttered something unflattering about gorillas, and you sighed. Kseniya just smiled, because she thought he was kidding. "I'll have a word with Korhonen later about your teacher issue. That's their chief of security," Gabriel told you.

"Do you want me to handle it?" You asked, smiling wryly at Kseniya.

"...Is that a good idea?" She looked to Gabriel.

"Well, we'll see you on Family Day," Gabriel told her, with a wink. Like you weren't going to notice how he dodged that question. "I think Lucky will have an entire group to escort. Should be interesting." He seemed rather pleased by this and you sighed, not quite looking forward to
being at the center of things, but realizing that it could be a whole lot worse. You could be alone watching everyone else have fun.

Goodbyes said, you walked back to the car in comfortable silence, the Athena drone waiting in the car.

"You can logoff, Athena," Gabriel said, shooting you a sidelong look. "We'll take it from here."

"Acknowledged, Commander. Drive safely, Lucky."

"Something on your mind?" You asked as you pulled out of the parking lot.

"Thinking about how fun it would be to neck in the backseat with you," he said leaning over and nipping your shoulder.

Your breath caught. "Gabriel!"

"Tinted windows, spacious backseat, and we have the rest of the night off..." His voice dropped an octave. "We can do more if you like-"

"This car is signed out in my name," you said, shaking your head. "I'm not taking it back with suspicious stains."

"We can just make out," he said, his grin wicked and you didn't quite believe him.

"Jack's shake is going to melt."

"Don't give a shit," Gabriel purred, hand on your knee. "I'm more interested in seeing you melt, hermosa. I just want to play with you a little. I'll make it worth your while..." He nuzzled your cheek, his skin hot against yours.

You bit your lip, heat coursing through your core. "I'll find a place to park."

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You moved the drone to the floor. Gabriel put his seat down and you crawled into the back, a little breathless as you rubbed against him, his mouth on your throat. He licked and sucked, not caring that he was going to leave marks. You slipped your hands under his shirt, fingers skimming the chest.

He groaned as you flicked your tongue against his ear, his hands squeezing your thighs.

"What spurred this? Feeling old?" You teased. "Trying to recapture your glory days of fumbling around the backseat?"

Gabriel laughed, cupping your breasts. "No, just got tired of waiting," he growled in your ear. "You looked so damn cute fussing over those kids today. Been wanting to jump you since you showed up at my office door." You almost said Távio wasn't a damn kid, but realized it wasn't worth quibbling over.

"You just...like me out of uniform," you moaned as he ran a thumb across your lips.
"I like you, whatever you're wearing, or not wearing," he murmured, kissing you hungrily. He still tasted like chocolate and sweetness, and you clung to him, riding his powerfully muscled thigh. "But this is pretty."

"Goddamnit," you hissed and began to pull your shirt off.

"No, *chica*. Need to leave your clothes on if you don't want to return this car with suspicious stains." Gabriel chuckled as he wrapped an arm around you and you swore louder.

"Damnit, Gabriel! You're the worst!" You snarled, frustration leaving you light-headed. You rubbed against him, the friction of his denim-covered thigh giving you some relief.

"I'm suffering too," he growled in your ear. "Because right now, I can't think of anything I'd rather do than tear those pants off you and fuck you raw. Bet we could make the car rock."

"Or flip over," you stroked his face, watching him clench his teeth. "So our clothes have to stay on, huh? What if I just make you come in your pants?" You traced the outline of his cock through his jeans, your thumb rubbing the tip. "You'll have to make it back from the motor pool with-"

Gabriel yanked back on your hair, sinking his teeth into the base of your neck. You cried out, hips moving faster as you bucked your hips, rutting against him. He moved with you bouncing you on his thigh.

"Look at you. I don't think I'm going to be the one coming in their pants-" He pulled your shirt down, stretching the collar, his mouth moving from your collarbones, down to your breasts. His hands kneaded your ass, the extra stimulation tightening your already strained muscles. The sensation of his finger tips stroking against the outline of your slit ratcheted up the tension. The air grew warmer, and your world narrowed to the confines of the backseat. All you heard was his heavy breathing and your own sharp gasps as he touched you. All you could focus on was Gabriel's body against yours, the warmth of his hand, and the pleasure escalating as you ground against him. You were too wound up to pretend you were unaffected.

"That's it, baby," he said voice, deep and rough. "You're close. I can feel you shaking," he coaxed. "Let me see you come undone. Then we can go home, strip you down, and I'll fill you with all the cum you've earned today-" He held you against him with one arm, his free hand snaking between your thighs to put pressure on your clit while you rubbed against him faster. "However you want it, *corazon*, I'll give it to you. And then it'll be Jack's turn. He's going to be so sorry he missed this."

You whined as you came, your pussy painfully empty as you clung to Gabriel, your ass shaking as the rhythmic spasms rippled through your core.

Laughing softly, he kissed your forehead while you panted against him. "No suspicious stains in the car."

"Counteroffer," you growled, hand latching onto his cock as you leaned forward and bit his lower lip. He stiffened underneath you. You gripped him hard, massaging the head through the rough denim. You could practically feel him pulsing against your palm.

"*Hermosa-*" Gabriel's eyes widened and he gritted his teeth.

"I'm going to make you come in your pants, because that's just fair." You flashed him a
mean smile. "And then we can go home and jump poor unsuspecting Jack. Put him between us, and I don't know, give him the same treatment till he's a mewling wreck, maybe mess up his coat a little, and then fuck him into next week." You thought about reaching down Gabriel's pants, and finishing him that way, but frankly, you wanted to get him off through his clothes.

"You brat-" Gabriel groaned, head thrown back. You rubbed faster, hoping the denim didn't chafe him too much, because you were pretty sure he wasn't wearing underwear.

"Come on, papi." You licked your lips. "Jack can clean you up when we get home. You know how much he loves it when we get messy. He can choke on you while I get him all stretched out for you." You flexed your ring finger, and it began to hum.

Swearing, Gabriel ground against your hand, burying his face in your shoulder as he writhed beneath you. It was a heady rush, feeling all that barely constrained muscle tensing under you. He dug his fingers into your hips and a dark spot slowly appeared on his jeans.

"You filthy woman," Gabriel sighed, pressing a kiss to your throat. "Have you been wearing that all day?"

"Nah, swapped it out at the ice cream parlor," you said. "Figured you'd try something sexy. Are you complaining?"

"...You are going to pay for that," Gabriel said, shaking his head.

"I was just returning the favor, baby." You kissed his sweaty brow.

Grumbling, Gabriel took a napkin to his crotch, shooting you a dirty look, those dark eyes smoldering. You ran your fingers through his curls, not fooled by his gruffness.

"I love you," you said, kissing him pouty mouth.

"You better," he said, severity melting away as he cupped your face.

Laughing you offered him a sip of Jack's melted milkshake. You'd have to stop and get another one on the way home.

It took a little work, but you got yourself presentable before you got out of the car, with a whole carrier of milkshakes. You had red marks along your neck and you knew there would be bruises on your hips later. The red marks you could blame on Isha, maybe. If they didn't look so much like hard kisses.

There was a damp spot on Gabriel's pants, and he took the milkshakes as an excuse. You let him go in first. You'd catch up in a minute. Less gossip that way. Jack's quarters were the closest and you followed Gabriel at a safe distance, trying to see if anyone noticed his crotch.

Fortunately, because it was evening, there wasn't much foot traffic, and the two of you reached Jack's room without incident.

Gabriel shook his head at your pleased expression. Both of you went in, finding the lights dimmed. You kicked off your shoes and headed for the bedroom. Jack lay face up in the bed,
shirtless. His eyes were closed and it looked like he was asleep, a small smile on his lips. Isha lay on his pillow, curled up in a little ball, her snout touching his hair. She looked bigger than earlier today. And were those more feathers? Also, she totally wasn't allowed in the bed.

You sighed, shaking your head.

Gabriel stopped beside you, exhaled slowly and set the tray of milkshakes down on the dresser beside Jack's puzzlebox.

You both sat down on either side of the sleeping man.

"You're not fooling anyone, Jackie," Gabriel said, amusement clear in his voice.

Oh yeah. He's wasn't fooling anyone. Nope. You had definitely not been fooled.

Jack opened one eye, giving you both a sheepish grin. "Oh come on, weren't you going to try to kiss me awake at least?" He tugged on your hand and pulled you onto his chest. "Missed you, sweetheart." He nuzzled your neck. "Isha do that?"

"Nope," Gabriel said smugly.

Jack's eyes narrowed. "I thought you were babysitting today."

"I was. Took the kid back and then Gabriel wanted to make out in the backseat. But don't worry, we talked about you quite a bit," you said, running your hands down his chest. "Think you'll enjoy what we planned."

Isha yawned, her chirping as she opened her eyes.

"Mmm, but first we should put her away. Thought we agreed not to let her sleep in the bed, Jack," Gabriel said.

"I was lonely. Missing my boyfriend and my girlfriend who were apparently out having fun in the backseat of a company car," he said plaintively, the corners of his mouth turned down. But his blue eyes twinkled, not that either of you were fooled by his forlorn act.

You picked up your raptor and kissed her head, before carrying her over to her kennel and putting a blanket over it.

When you turned around, Gabriel already had Jack pinned to the bed, his pants around his knees.

"I just want you to know that I planned on putting Lucky's sneaky ass between us, till I saw that you'd let the damn dinosaur in our bed," Gabriel said gruffly. "You silly son of a bitch."

"Love you too, babe," Jack choked out, kissing Gabriel's fingers. "And you as well, sweetheart-"

Smiling, you began to undress.

The three of you lay on top of the covers, Jack in the middle, all of you slurping away at
your melted milkshakes. Jack rested his sweaty head against your chest.

"Haven't seen much of you lately," he said.

"Been busy," you said. "You can always come down to our office."

"Been busy too," he said, wrapping one arm around your waist. "Can't always get away. Miss having you come visit me."

You felt a pang of guilt. Because maybe you had been avoiding Jack's office too. And maybe Ainsley was the reason. "I."

"I know you don't like Ainsley, and I know it wasn't fair of me to invite her back, but I swear she isn't as bad as she used to be. She's not even trying to flirt with me any more, honest." He kissed your cheek. "Not that you ever had anything to worry about..."

"Poor Jack, all alone in that office with Ainsley, abandoned by his girlfriend," Gabriel laughed.

"Sorry," you said sullenly, and gave Gabriel a dirty look. He just winked at you, pressing a kiss over Jack's heart. "I'll bring you lunch tomorrow. How's that sound?" You leaned over and kissed his forehead.

Jack closed his eyes, smiling happily as he finished his chocolate shake. "Sounds great. It'll be even better if I get to see you more often."

"I'll try: it wasn't quite a conscious thing," you said with a heavy sigh.


"Sorry," you repeated, stroking his hair.

"And you can bring Isha," he said, running hand over your bruised thighs. "Gabe too, if he's free."

Gabriel gave a wry laugh. "Fat chance. I have a slew of agent post-mission reviews to go over tomorrow. You're on your own, Lucky."

"Probably better that way," you said. "Between Isha and Gabriel, there won't be any food left for you."

Grinning slyly at Isha, you packed the meat loaf glazed in bulldog sauce, smoked cheddar mashed potatoes, and kale salad in airtight containers, wrapped them in insulated bags, and placed them in your briefcase. If anyone walked in on you right now they'd think you insane. You also packed to large slices of lemon meringue pie, and carefully shut the case. It was completely full of food.

Isha chirped excitedly. You briefly wondered if you were giving her the wrong impression about briefcases, then decided it didn't matter because you rarely used them. Adjusting your collar, you let Isha climb onto your shoulder, and latch onto the reinforced holster straps you'd started wearing over your clothes. Because those claws had to dig into something.
You had a regular, if large lunchbox packed for Gabriel, and you dropped that off first. He was out, so you set it on his desk, and made your way to the Overwatch offices.

"You have to stay," you told your murderbird, giving her leash a light tug. "Stay." You knocked once, then keyed in your code.

Ainsley sat her small desk, which now sat against the wall where your work chairs had been. She looked up as you entered, her soft blue eyes widening comically as she recognized you. She'd cut her hair into a perky bob, that looked pretty, feminine, and utterly stylish on her. She was tanner than before, probably from lounging around private beaches, but she was still wearing one of those baby blue skirt suits you'd come to loathe, her makeup soft and perfect, her familiar poise that of an old money socialite.

"Welcome back, Ms. Petras," you said with nod, keeping your face business-like, your voice calm. It was almost like you didn't care that she had returned. You could be a smooth operator when you had to be.

"A-agent Strike," she stuttered, probably remembering how you'd stabbed a man to death in front of her. She couldn't stop crying after the rescue, and her hysterical shrieks had gone straight through your skull. It was a miracle you hadn't finished that op with a migraine. "It's good to see you again," she said, a tense smile on her face.

"Strike Commander," you said, glancing over at Jack who was at his desk pretending like he wasn't watching. "I have the items you requested, sir." You raised the briefcase.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Agent Strike. What is that on your shoulder?" Ainsley voice went higher with each word, her hands gripping the edge of her desk with white-knuckled panic.

"This is Ishana," you said, reaching up and scratching Isha's head. Isha made a soft inquiring thrum, though she too pretended to ignore Ainsley, watching her closely out of the corner of her eye. You were very glad she didn't just run to Jack and start being cuddly. It would make her less intimidating. "I picked her up on an op. The details are need to know."

"Is she...dangerous?" Ainsley shot a panicked look at Jack, who seemed most absorbed in his tablet at this moment.

"Don't try to take her food or grab her," you said blandly.

"The labs have done the workup and deemed it safe to let Agent Strike keep the beast," Jack said, not looking up.

Isha made a snorting sound, looking put off by the fact Jack hadn't come to fuss over her yet.

Ainsley drew back, one hand posed dramatically on her chest.

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"Isha, Ms. Petras is a bystander, behave." You chucked her under the chin and she narrowed her eyes, her thrumming growing louder. You had three classifications of people: safe, bystander, and hostile. If you'd been thinking clearly, you would have used technical terms like "ally" or "friendly." Gabriel complained briefly about your terminology, but back in the Feng's laboratory dining room, you hadn't really been thinking tactically. Isha understood the terms though, or so Gabriel said. He was giving her some kind of modified security dog training. "Bystander" meant she had to be polite, but that was all. She wasn't expected to be friendly and she didn't have to let them near her.
"Ainsley, I have to discuss some sensitive information with Strike," Jack said, his tone flat, impatient, and all business. He didn't even look at you. But he held his chin at that infuriatingly imperious angle, his gaze cool. You wanted to punch him then kiss him. Maybe while Ainsley looked on. "Why don't you take a long lunch? Maybe catch up with some of your friends."

You wondered then if Ainsley had friends here, or if she'd just snobbed her way through the masses, only focused on bagging herself The Jack Morrison for her trophy husband.

Ainsley bit her lip. "Oh, of course, sir. Thank you." She picked up her purse and gave Isha a long, somewhat frightened look. ".I'll be back later," she said and quickly marched out the door, giving you and Isha several backwards glances before the door shut.

"Athena, route all oncoming traffic through the "do not disturb" protocols and lock my door. I'll verbally disengage after we're done."

"Understood, sir." Was it your imagination or did Athena sound just a little salty? You'd have to talk to her later.

Jack rubbed his forehead, then stood, took off his coat, and came around the desk. He stared at you, the corners of his mouth gradually rising, his brow softening. "You're so harsh," he said, voice gentle. "I am sorry if you didn't want to come-"

"You're not the only one who can act, Jack," you said, with a smirk. "We can't go giving your mole the right impression about us."

Jack laughed, relief widening his smile. He sat down on the desk and leaned forward, giving you a soft kiss, while he rubbed your shoulders. "I thought you were bringing lunch. Did you have other plans, baby?" He gave your murderbird a questioning glance.

"I brought Isha," you said, rolling your eyes. "You can get him now, Isha."

Chirping, she jumped off your shoulder and onto his lap, cooing happily while he rubbed her feathered head. "I'm not going to eat Isha," he said, rolling his eyes. "Do I need to bribe Rein to bring us something?"

Laughing, you set the briefcase on his desk and opened it up, enjoying his silly grin as you unpacked a full meal instead of work documents and office supplies.

"Brings a whole new meaning to business lunch," he said.

"Don't you start," you said, jabbing a finger at his chest.

"I guess this is going to be a case of keeping those jokes brief," he said innocently.

You groaned. "I'll eat all this food by myself."

Isha trilled, giving you a worried look.

"Well of course, I'll share it with you, murderbird. But Jack won't get a bite."

Isha looked at Jack warily. If Jack didn't get food, he couldn't spoil her with all the good tidbits.

"You know, a brief case should be full of briefs, so by that logic you should strip off your-"

Isha squawked then, drowning out his punch line.
You opened up the containers of food, smiling at your baby raptor as you cut her a large slice off Jack's portion of the meatloaf.

After lunch, you took Isha back to your room and she went into her kennel, crawling into her nest of torn up blankets for a post-meal nap. Jack had overfed her, of course, sneaking her bits of meat and potatoes, and giving her his pie crust. Her tail feathers were starting to fill out, and while her body remained a shiny downy black, her tail was showing traces of iridescent green. If Isha was solid black with no accents, she'd still be the most beautiful murderbird in the world - Gabriel and Jack would completely agree with you - but something told you that AI Zheng wasn't going to settle for such a basic palette.

With your murderbird secured, you headed back out to the office.

"-no excuse for this level of incompetence, Acosta." Gabriel's volume rose, each word popping with barely constrained fury. "I can't even address you as "agent," because that brings shame to the dozens of people under me who will never reach your level of absolute tomfuckery."

Agent Acosta shrunk down, his eyes glued to the floor. He made no move to defend himself, because this time he really had screwed the pooch. He'd been on an extraction mission in a restaurant, and bagged a waiter instead of the target. They'd made it all the way back to base with the wrong guy. The target had since gone to ground and the waiter was understandably traumatized, if none the wiser about who abducted him.

Swearing, Gabriel launched into a rant in Spanish, and you felt a slight pang of sympathy for Acosta who was getting it with both barrels in two languages.

Shaking your head, you walked around him and sat at your desk, noting that Gabriel's lunch sat on the floor untouched.

You picked up your tablet and focused on collating the latest batch of Shit Spiders mission debriefings. They were backed up, but you combed through them, gleaning little details and compiling notes and updating reports. It was tedious work, at least compared to shooting people out of hotel windows, but you liked putting the puzzle pieces together and getting a clearer picture of the situation.

Lacroix wanted just the two of you on a short run this weekend, and you sighed, knowing you might have to find someone to dino-sit. You weren't sure if Jack and Gabriel would be available either.

"Denied," Gabriel said, raising his voice.

You looked up, a little surprised to see Diallo standing there, gnawing on her lower lip as she faced Gabriel.

Acosta was gone, and you'd tuned out most of that meeting. You hadn't even heard Diallo come in. Maybe it was unwise of her to meet with him now. You'd seen Gabriel shred agents before, and to be honest, it could be very uncomfortable to watch. And usually if someone got him that upset, he'd be in a mood for several hours afterward.

"Sir, the circumstances have changed, and I think this is a viable option. Agent Tataryn
does as well. He just hasn't submitted the paperwork yet, but it should be done before he returns from Oslo. We'll have a more concrete proposal later, but we need to postpone or cancel the current."

"What part of "denied" are you having trouble understanding?" Gabriel growled, obviously still in a bad mood from dealing with Acosta. You checked his status, and found him to be suspended without pay, with a transfer to Antarctica pending.

Shaking your head, you pulled up one of the more important Shit Spiders memos: Nguyen had been spotted at a very exclusive winery, having a friendly chat with Petras. That was alarming, if only because while they were both traitors with Talon-backed agendas, they were also political rivals and had thus far only given each the barest amount of cooperation.

"Sir, something important has come up," you said, keeping your voice even and disinterested.

Gabriel's head to snapped the side, and he glared in your direction without really looking at you.

"It's compartmentalized intel," you continued, giving Diallo a meaningful look.

She blinked at you, one brow raised. "I'll get out of your hair then," she said, saluting Gabriel. She left quickly, but not before you saw the relieved look on her face.

Gabriel's frown deepened as he scanned through the report. "Yeah, it's alarming, but there's not a fucking thing here, except a few shitty photos. Did that really warrant interrupting my meeting?"

You got up, picked up the lunchbox, and put it on the desk. "Your lunch is now cold. I know Acosta is a certified dumbfuck, but Lacroix is monitoring the potential fallout and I've tasked the Shimadas to see if they can pick up the actual target's trail."

Gabriel narrowed his eyes at you, finally twigging that you'd chased Diallo out for his own good. "You're pushing-"

"I wouldn't waste time on Diallo. We both know she's just standing in for Tataryn. Wait on his amended proposal," you said lightly. Because there was nothing to be gained from arguing with her and you didn't really want him to take out his frustration on her. She was a good agent, and he'd feel bad about it later. She was just the messenger, taking the heat because Tataryn was off-site and she was acting as his proxy.

"This isn't your business," he said, tone harsh.

You smiled, not taking the bait. "You know he probably just sent her here to pitch the idea and get shot down, so he could polish his argument, sweep in like he didn't know what transpired between the two of you, and try a different tactic for the same result."

Gabriel took a deep breath. "Lucky-"

"Please eat your lunch," you said, sitting down in a chair in front of his desk. "I'll see if Genji and Hanzo are available if you need to expel. Jesse's on an op, and Jack's got some visiting dignitaries to entertain."

Gabriel took another deep breath, closing his eyes and massaging his brow. You would rub his shoulders, except you weren't entirely sure that would be welcome right now. Part of you
wanted to be silly or accommodating, anything to dispel the anger and lighten the mood. It was very uncomfortable to be around him when he was like this, all harsh words, violent thoughts, and sharp anxious energy. Another part of you was tempted to pick a fight; it wouldn't take much to get him going. Then he could get it all out of his system and the two of you could have rough makeup sex afterward.

Jack did everything he could to distract people from their anger or fan the flames so it would choke itself out. Jack didn't like his lovers to be angry for very long, not that that was necessarily a bad thing.

You didn't mind anger as much. Getting mad wasn't a bad thing; losing control was the real problem. Using anger as an excuse for bad behavior was unacceptable. But the feeling itself wasn't innately problematic. And even when Gabriel made you uncomfortable, you trusted his control. Sometimes a person just had to get angry and ride it out, perhaps away from everyone else. And, you realized, it was important that Gabriel knew that you weren't afraid of him when he was like this and that he was allowed to be angry around you.

You took the lid off the lunchbox, and got up to make him some coffee.

"Want me out of your hair?" You asked, after you set his coffee mug on the desk beside him. "I've got some business with Lacroix, anyway."

"You're so meddlesome," he scowled, not opening his eyes.

"Yup, but I've got good intentions and I'm respecting your boundaries. So hopefully that wins me some reprieve," you said.

Gabriel slowly opened his eyes, not looking at you. "Yes, go ahead and see if the Shimadas are free, give me a timeframe, and then you're clear to go needle Gérard." He gave you a wry look. "I'm not going to be good company for awhile."

"I'll stay if you want," you said.

"No, it's fine. I need the space," Gabriel said without any rancor.

"Want me to cancel the rest of your meetings for the day?"

"No, I can do it," he said, waving you off. He picked up a fork, wrinkling his nose. "Is this...meatloaf? Really?" His scowl deepened and he gave you a look that would freeze any other agent in their tracks.

Rolling your eyes, you laughed, then set up the sparring session for Gabriel with the Shimadas and left him to his own grumpy devices.

Isha curled up in her cage, though it was getting kind of cramped. That could be from all the toys and blankets Jack had jammed inside, but you doubted it. She was growing fast. Jack and Gabriel were going to need bigger cages for Isha soon, because even though she was slowly learning not to destroy things, you didn't trust her unsupervised yet. Especially not in your lovers' rooms where they had actual nice things with sentimental value. Isha lay flopped over on a stuffed dog - Jack had bought it for her, along with a little vest that totally did not fit. But it was a good
effort. You placed a blanket over the cage.

Yawning, you stretched out in Jack's bed, wearing one of his t-shirts. You'd gone from Gabriel's office, to Lacroix's office, and then you went back to your room for Isha and a shower. Now you could finally relax, though you mentally kept running through contingency plans for your upcoming mission with Lacroix.

The actual op with Lacroix would only take a few hours, but you'd spent that long arguing over the details, especially when you saw where you were going. There would be a considerable amount of mission prep required, mostly in the disguise department. And Lacroix wouldn't listen to your requests to change the location: he was dead set on this. And it didn't matter if you didn't want to go, this is your job, you are, shockingly, the agent best suited for the task. Stop being such a child. Sulking is unbecoming, Chanceux.

You suspected his choice was at least partially to irritate you.

You pushed for a third close-range combat-trained agent. Amélie was formidable, but her presence wouldn't work on this op and Ziv would be even more useless. You'd suggested Jesse or Tataryn, if only because Genji and Hanzo were too recognizable. Lacroix bitched about the annoyance of inserting a third agent this late in the game. Too bad. There were too many things that could go wrong, and after Shanghai Noon, all of you knew that Lacroix couldn't make public appearances, even in disguise, without the threat of assassination. And he had chosen a rather public venue.

So it was a compromise. You had to go along and play by Lacroix's rules, but you were getting backup and you were going to have Amélie "help" you with the some of the details, without Lacroix hovering over your shoulder. No, it wasn't a win, but it was the best outcome you could realistically expect.

You rolled over, somewhat annoyed that you were still thinking about work. Jack would be in late tonight and you suspected you wouldn't see Gabriel till tomorrow. Shutting your eyes, you took a deep breath, and willed yourself to sleep.

The next thing you knew, the door creaked and you opened one eye, your hand slipping under the pillow for your tanto.

Gabriel slunk in and sat down beside you, in a clean hoodie and shorts. He was on the edge of the bed, hands at his sides, his expression uncertain.

"Hey," you said, voice rough with sleep.

"Hey," he said. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Not a big deal." You reached over and patted his thigh. "You OK?"

"Better now," he murmured, leaning over to kiss your cheek. "Sorry about earlier."

"It's OK." You yawned, rubbing your eyes. "I'm used to your grumpiness. It's nothing new."

Gabriel frowned, shadows giving his brows an ominous cast. He looked so terribly severe.

You couldn't keep a straight face. Giggling, you patted his cheek. "I'm kidding." You stretched, arms raised over your head "We all have bad days. You weren't fun, sure, but you don't have to be, not all the time." You certainly weren't. "It's fine. You didn't cross any lines. And I didn't choose Jack's room because I was avoiding you. You asked for space, so I figured you'd
come find me when you were ready."

Gabriel smiled then, and reclined beside you, tugging your hands in between his. "Did you have a fun meeting with Lacroix?"

"No, but I guess it was productive," you scowled. "I'll be out of town this weekend for Operation Gift Horse. Hopefully it'll just be Saturday and then I'm home, but there's room for delays on this one."

"I can watch Isha," Gabriel said, kissing your knuckles, his legs tangled with yours. "Want to do some more training with her anyway. Before Jack spoils her too much."

"You're the best." You kissed his cheek.

"I am," he agreed.

"I love you," you said, a little surprised by how easily it rolled off your tongue.

"Love you too." Gabriel kissed you, his lips soft against yours. He held your hands, his smile faint. "Thank you for looking out for me. I...did need to eat and expel."

You laughed. "Oh, so you did eat the terrible meatloaf?"

Gabriel rubbed the side of his neck, looking uncharacteristically sheepish. "Of course. You cooked it. And it was good, not the least bit dry, rubbery, or flavorless, despite being made for Jack. Didn't mean to belittle your cooking. Was just...in a mood."

You laughed, remembering the incredulous expression he had when he opened his lunchbox. "You looked so disappointed."

"Come on, I was having a shit day. Don't let me get started on Acosta again and all the other headaches that caused. Diallo had to come in with Tataryn's bullshit. Vo was sending me passive-aggressive messages about your dinosaur. Overwatch Barbie is camped out in Jack's office again. And then there's...meatloaf." He shrugged. "But it was good. Made the day better. Even if I didn't expect it to."

"So now I should always make you meatloaf when you're having a bad day?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Gabriel said dryly.

You just smiled he wrapped his arms around you, burying his face in your hair. He stroked your back, planting gentle kisses on your neck. You squeezed his hands, your thumb rubbing circles on his palms.

"Jack'll be home late," you said. "Why don't you get comfortable?"

"I already am," Gabriel murmured, starting to drowse.

You woke again to the familiar weight of your other lover settling on the bed. Yawning, you looked up to see Jack on his side, a tired smile on his face.

"Everything all right?" He asked, rubbing your back.
"Gabriel had a rough day," you said as Jack leaned over to kiss you.

"I know, he didn't get to have lunch with us," Jack said, sympathetically. "The meatloaf was awesome."

Gabriel snorted, but also accepted a kiss from Jack.

"Come on, Gabe." Jack scooted over, and patted the spot in the middle. The three of you repositioned yourselves, Gabriel on his back, while you and Jack each hugged a side.

"Better?" Jack asked, nuzzling Gabriel's chest.

"Yeah," Gabriel said, running his fingers through Jack's hair. He kissed your forehead, sighing in contentment.

"And we can always get Isha-"

"No, Jack," Gabriel said firmly, tightening his grip around the other man. "I've got my hands full with you two."

Jack laughed, reaching over to squeeze your arm. "Come on baby, we should vote on this-"

"Mmm," you said, yawning again. "I vote we cuddle Gabriel and go back to sleep."

"Seconded," Gabriel said.

"Aww," Jack said, not hiding his disappointment. "But she's so alone in there by herself-"

"You can go sleep on the couch with her then, Morrison," Gabriel grumbled.

"It's my bed!"

"Don't care," Gabriel grumbled, not opening his eyes. "No dinosaurs in the bed."

"Fine, maybe I will go sleep on the couch," Jack laughed.

But Gabriel tightened his hold on Jack, not letting him wiggle away.

"Gabe, I can't move-" Jack laughed, still trying to slip out.

"Mmm, that sounds like a you problem," Gabriel murmured.

"Lucky-" Jack whined.

"Go to sleep, Jack," you said, trying not to laugh.

Huffing, Jack leaned over and blew a loud raspberry on Gabriel's chest.

"You done yet?" Gabriel asked, tweaking Jack's nose. "Because we all have to be up early tomorrow."

"Mmm, I guess," Jack sighed, closing his eyes. "But just you wait. I'll get you both later...and your little murderbird too."

Chapter End Notes
Someone asked for a reference sheet. I'll try to put one together later. Writing a long mission right now (I know, finally, right?) and focusing on that.

Still super tired. Bleagh.
"Non," Amélie shook her head. "You are not wearing a suit, Chanceux. I really cannot understand this strange fixation with suits when you should be wearing dresses! There is a time and a place for suits. They are wonderful, truly, and there are many occasions you can wear them; mais ce n'est pas le moment pour ça! Gérard warned me you would try this-" She shook her head, leafing through your closet, bypassing your suits and examining your dresses, most of which she had purchased for you.

Ziv sat on your bed, playing with Isha. She'd charge up to him and he'd catch her then fling her onto your pillow. She'd tumble, flutter, and sometimes land on her feet. Then she'd run back to him and do it all over again while cheeping happily. When he thought no one was looking, he'd lift her up to his face and give her a peck on the snout.

You rubbed your forehead. "Amélie, this is an op. It'll still be formal and-"

"A woman in a suit will attract far more attention than a woman in an evening gown," she said flatly. "You can choose a shorter gown and Agent McCree can stash your gear for you, ahead of time. But you will wear a dress, and you will look beautiful, and you cannot convince me otherwise."

"I don't know about "beautiful." She'll look like she normally does: awkward and violent, just in a dress," Ziv said with a smirk.

Amélie whirled, hands on her hips, dark eyes flashing. Her face was a mask of cold fury. You took a step backward, nearly tripping over your chair. There wasn't enough space in your room to flee. "Présentez des excuses à votre soeur; immédiatement !!"

"...Sorry," Ziv croaked, and Isha crawled between the pillows and took shelter, head tucked against her body. Her wary eyes stayed on Amélie.

There was an odd silence as you processed what Amélie had just said.

Ziv stared at the floor.

"Chanceux is very lovely, and she's trying so hard to do well on this mission," Amélie continued. "And she asked for our help, Ziv. You cannot belittle her when she's putting herself in our hands."

You weren't exactly sure why Amélie kept using a plural pronoun. Yes, you'd specifically told Lacroix you wanted Amélie's advice. At no point had you invited Ziv to help you get ready. He'd just tagged along, saying he wanted to see Isha.
Ziv squirmed uncomfortably. "I uh... I didn't mean anything by it. Lucky knows she's pretty."

"Oh? Est-ce vrai? How often do you compliment her? I don't remember the last time you said something like "Oh, Chanceux, you look so nice today!" And I know you are capable of it. You always say the sweetest things to me, mon chéri."

"...That's because you always do look amazing," Ziv said, sounding a little flustered. "But Lucky never looks bad-

Amélie frowned, her pretty lips turning downward, her gaze sharpening.

"She normally looks fine," Ziv amended quickly, shooting you a panicked look. "I honestly don't notice these things most of the time. You and Gérard are just so striking," he mumbled.

Amélie's expression softened. "Chanceux is always lovely. But it is good practice for you to tell her she looks splendid, especially when she makes an effort."

You waited for the smart ass comment.

"I like the dark blue dress. The one you wore to Shanghai," Ziv said, not looking at you. "The cut is flattering, the color hides stains, and unlike the purple dress, your tits aren't hanging out. That's a win."

You snorted and Amélie just sighed, perhaps finally realizing what an ass Ziv was.

"You know, it is magnificent. And it could become damaged on this mission," Amélie said thoughtfully. "I think she needs a new dress."

"...Uh..." You glanced at Ziv halfway to Panic City; you tried to signal for some interference through willpower and eyebrow movement. You were not taking Amélie shopping. Not after last time.

"Yes, and we still have your measurements from the prior excursion. And I've been browsing some of the local shops remotely. Yes, I think I shall put an order in. They can deliver it tonight, and if there's a problem, you can return it later."

You sighed, partially in relief, partially in resignation.

"And you will need a matching shawl, some new jewelry, opera gloves..." Amélie clapped her hands together. "Oh Chanceux, do not worry. When we are done with you, I will be proud to say that I am sending you on a date with my husband!"

You winced, really hating that phrasing, and you wondered then if Operation Gift Horse was already cursed.

You rested your hand on Lacroix's arm, trying not to let on that you were steadying yourself. Amélie had insisted that you wear proper shoes - high heels - and all these stairs were not made for women in heels. To be fair, you could have taken the elevator, but you wanted to inspect the building and make sure you weren't walking into a trap.

Not that you were sure about how things were supposed to look in a goddamn opera house
in Oasis.

There were intricately decorated tiles everywhere: in the walls, in the floors, and on the ceiling. Elaborate geometric tapestries hung from the walls. Calligraphy scrolls shouted at you from the walls. The goddamn Persian carpets that you were walking on were works of art. The dearth of human figures was striking, but not necessarily bad. They had spared no expense on the ornaments and your hands itched under your elbow length gloves. Surely they wouldn't miss a ceramic or two...

Everything drew the eye, and while individual pieces were exquisite, there was just too much for you to process comfortably. It wasn't actually a case of the patrons having more money than taste. It was more like the art pieces were all speaking to you simultaneously and with no volume control:

"Pick me!" Said the blue and gold starburst tapestry. "I'm beautiful, tasteful, and would look great in Jack's room!"

"No, pick me!" Cried a carved ivory dagger, its pommel bearing a jeweled lion's head. "Tataryn would be so jealous and you are so petty!"

"Come on, you know Gabriel and Isha would like me best!" A marble statuette murmured. He had the head of an eagle and the body of a man, and four sets of wings and you really weren't sure you should be filching priceless artifacts for your damn raptor, especially ones that predated the founding of Islam. For Gabriel, sure, but Isha would just eat it or do something else awful.

"It really isn't so bad, ma chérie," Lacroix said, misinterpreting your long silence, which was probably for the best. "This is actually follows a theme. You should see the replica Rococo nightmare one of Amélie's friends installed in her family home. Gilt, pomp, and curlicues everywhere." He paused, looking disgruntled. "No, actually, you should not. No one should be subjected to that kind of suffering."

"It's just very...busy," you said, testing the word. "Content overload." And you couldn't steal anything well-guarded now, not without compromising the mission.

Lacroix nodded. "I see," he said, and you wondered if he did. After all, he did like nice things. Tonight, he wore a well-tailored tuxedo with gold cufflinks and a burgundy pocket square.

You strolled through the vaulted arches of the halls, your borrowed pearl drop earrings brushing against your neck. The matching necklace had five strands, each loop longer than the next, layering pearls against your chest. You were glad Gabriel and Jack hadn't seen you in this getup. There would be dirty jokes abound.

Amélie had chosen a floor-length black chiffon wrap dress: the bodice was form-fitting, but the skirt flowed and you could easily fit your tanto and a pistol underneath. Hell, you could get your wakizashi under there too, but you were already walking uncomfortably in the heels. No sense overcomplicating things.

The two of you looked respectable enough, though he had a stupid mustache and you kept making rude faces. Your hair was up in an elaborate chignon - styled by Lacroix himself. You knew he helped Amélie do her hair, so you had just sat there in the hotel and let him fuss with the pins and product. He did a better job than you would have and you weren't sure how you felt about that.

"We have cheap seats. The view will be lacking," he said apologetically.
"I picked that area," you scowled. "Precisely because it was discrete."

"Don't make that face, Chanceux. We are just civilians looking for some culture tonight. Pretend that you're enjoying yourself."

"I'm really bad at that," you muttered.

"You don't have to feign enthusiasm," Lacroix murmured out of the corner of his mouth as you passed another couple. "One can enjoy themself with quiet dignity. Just stop looking like you're being marched off to your own execution."

"...I'm going to have to sit through someone singing in Italian, while wearing these shoes, and trying to stay awake."

"Carmen is in French," Lacroix said, sounding amused. "Though the story takes place in Spain. No Italians."

"...It sounded like Italian," you said sullenly, though to be honest you hadn't been listening that closely to the recording Amélie played. Isha had been chewing on Ziv's hair and you'd had to rescue him.

"Well, you aren't meant to understand the exact words, Chanceux," Lacroix said, shaking his head. "You are supposed to appreciate the music and the feeling behind it. The costumes. The pageantry. The passion. Opera has so many layers." He sounded like he'd given this speech before, or heard it many times.

You fought the urge to shrug sullenly. Instead you inclined your head to the side, a pleasant smile on your face. "You mean the real draw is parading around in fancy getups, broadcasting how rich and sophisticated you are to the peons...and more importantly, each other."

"Touché," Lacroix chuckled. "We can leave the auditorium without any problem. It is timing our entrance into that particular box that will be tricky. The security monitoring tech in Oasis is cutting edge. Some of it is better than what we have." That's why you hadn't brought an active Athena drone on this run. You'd left some sensors, to transmit energy fluctuations and other tech data, because you were far too ignorant of Oasis' capabilities.

"Should we, I don't know, borrow some?" You wondered aloud. Winston and Torby would probably appreciate some trade secrets.

"Easier said than done," Lacroix said, shaking his head. "Fortunately for us, many of the wealthier patrons balk at the idea of constant surveillance, so this is area is off their main CC grid; that's the only reason this has a chance at success."

"Plus I bet they can't pay their bodyguards enough to stay awake through an opera." You worked on looking happy to be here. Really, you wished you had taken up Amélie on her offer of a lacy fan, so you could flutter it, hide your mouth, and mutter mean things.

Lacroix laughed.

"See, you are learning. You can unleash your cutting remarks, just smile cordially as you do and it softens the blow." You continued to walk the perimeter of the opera house, slowly heading upward toward your seats.

There was something different about Lacroix tonight. You couldn't put your finger on it. He seemed less inclined to snipe at you, and you weren't exactly sure why. Maybe it was the fancy
clothes. Those always put him in a better mood.

A terribly familiar man in a "borrowed" usher uniform showed you to your cheap seats. He had laughing brown eyes, unruly hair, and the audacity to wink at you as he handed you a playbill.

Lacroix cleared his throat in disapproval.

"Yer stuff's behind the bar in the next hall over," Jesse murmured. "I'll start scouting as soon as the curtain rises."

"I'd thank you, but I don't think we're supposed to thank the help. You have already been gifted with the opportunity to bask in our sublime presence," you said, mimicking one of Ainsley's insipid smiles.

Jesse snorted.

Lacroix just pretended like he hadn't heard you.

Even the cheap seats were nice. You sat on the plush cushions, view screens on the back of each chair, where they would stream subtitles and close ups of the performers. Lacroix sighed heavily, staring at his own screen with a frown.

It hit you then.

"You don't actually like opera, do you?" You asked in hushed tones.

Lacroix favored you with a sardonic grin. "Now Chanceux, why would you think that?"

"You really don't." You covered your mouth, trying not to laugh. "Why the secrecy? Worried about getting kicked out of the snobby arts club?"

Lacroix rolled his eyes.

"And wait, you like musicals," you said, and then promptly wondered how you knew that.

You blamed Ziv.

"Musicals are fun," he said stiffly. "I dislike opera for all the reasons you have listed and more. I respect the skill involved and can appreciate the art form, but singing every single line, instead of only performing in fits of true emotion, detracts from the experience. There are only so many melodic conversations one can have, before it becomes entirely ridiculous."

You knew the main difference between musicals and operas, besides the wage gap, was that in musicals people still had spoken dialogue. The bursts of song were momentary bits of madness. In opera, they sang all their lines like, "good morning, how are you? I'm fine, thanks for asking," which was kind of silly. Not to mention you could usually understand musicals. Operas tended to be conducted in their language of origin. But they also usually had an accompanying orchestra, which was kind of cool.

And the only reason you knew this was because you'd done your research when Amélie had threatened to forcefully expose you to culture. You figured she'd give you a few choices and you needed to know ahead of time which was going to be the most painless.

"So why...oh...Amélie likes opera, doesn't she?"

Lacroix gave a sharp nod. "Adores it."
But he couldn't bring her along, because they were still maintaining the fiction that they were separating.

"So...why did you choose this venue again?"

"It was the most expedient and our targets will have less security on hand." Lacroix rubbed his brow. "But I positively loathe the traditional performance of Carmen."

You flipped through the playbill. "OK, so we could have all just come as hired help."

Lacroix shook his head. "McCree was troublesome enough to get into Baghdad. I am too well known. Best to have a plausible cover. I am taking my young lady friend to the opera for entirely salacious reasons." He said it so dryly, you cracked a grin. "After all, I do have a reputation as a libertine to maintain. Amélie doesn't get to have all the fun."

You shook your head. "Lacroix, you need to tailor your approach. Under normal circumstances, opera ain't going to get you laid."

"Rest assured Chanceux, this is not the method I would use to seduce you." He rested a bare hand on your shoulder. He flashed you that sultry bedroom smile full of promise and French cheese, and you squinted at him.

"Do I want to know?"

"It's quite simple really: I would shower you with cake and cheese till you warmed up to me, like taming a feral cat. Minimal work, to be honest. Jack and Gabriel went about it all wrong."

He laughed softly to himself. "But they were incredibly entertaining to watch."

You rubbed your forehead, not caring if you smudged your makeup. It would give credence to the idea that you and Lacroix were here on a date.

"So really, why are we actually sitting instead of hanging out at the bar or coming in through the vents? This place has to have massive vents."

Lacroix gave that Gallic shrug. "You need the practice. And perhaps I realized that I need to be able to be able to give a convincing portrayal of enjoyment as well. Amélie knows I dislike opera and that encroaches on her own pleasure. I do not wish to deprive her of this small thing. She has made enough sacrifices." Lacroix sounded almost wistful.

"Maybe Ziv likes opera?" You wondered if he'd enjoy getting dressed up and accompanying Amélie out. Most likely he'd just want to ogle Lacroix in his tux.

"...Ziv still watches cartoons with Agent Shimada and Agent McCree," Lacroix said, sounding mildly exasperated.

"So do I," you muttered.

Lacroix gave a longsuffering nod. "I am aware."

You pursed your lips.

"Chanceux, I am telling you this because we both need to hone our acting and undergo desensitization," Lacroix said. "You have made admirable progress since Lyon. Your handling of Zenyatta has improved. You are ready for the next step."
You nodded, not missing the fact that Lacroix was leading by example. Just like you didn't miss the fact that he was making sure you knew it too. You wondered about that for a moment.

"At this rate, you are well on your way to being trusted on your own, in say, another five years?" Lacroix chuckled, and you had to quash the urge to smack him in the face with your playbill.

The auditorium mostly full, but Jesse had managed to channel several other patrons to seats farther away from you, but closer to the stage. You appreciated the gesture.

The room was dark, except for the stage lights and the glow of the small screens on the balcony chairs. You were half-paying attention to the program. The fights weren't particularly convincing, but you understood that their authenticity wasn't a high priority. Carmen was narcissistic and toxic. José was wishy washy. The bullfighter was hot, but you didn't actually like anyone. Even Michaela was irritating, mostly because she could do better than José. The subtitles helped and the music was lively. You occasionally glanced over at Lacroix who managed to maintain a polite smile.

"You still look like you're suffering," you said.

"Because I am." He shook his head. "But I will endeavor to do a better job concealing it." He sat up straighter, leaning forward, his eyes on the stage. "More convincing?"

"Yes," you said.

He lifted a pair of opera glasses.

"Scoping the targets, are you?"

"Yes," he said. "It seems like a good exercise to keep me occupied. I will keep it in mind for next time. There's always someone in these audiences that I wouldn't mind killing. In fact, this might be an opportunity to plan more missions," he said thoughtfully.

That thought process sounded terribly familiar, and for a moment you wondered if he was mocking you. But judging by his pensive expression, you realized he was not.

"That's what I do," you admitted. "I guess you're picking up some of my bad habits."

"Quelle horreur," Lacroix said, handing you the ornate mini-binoculars.

You gazed downward, and slightly to the left at a private box. There were privacy curtains and you could not see the targets. Jesse had already verified that Jadranko Grbić and Zahir Al-Hashim had checked in, and confirmed the visuals matched, but you and Lacroix had yet to catch sight of them. Fortunately, that meant most people probably wouldn't see what was happening inside the box when you went to take care of things.

"You want to just get it done now?"

"Tempting," Lacroix muttered. "But we will wait for intermission. The second act is almost over."
You left with the crowd, stretching your legs as you and Lacroix meandered back to the bar. A few people ordered drinks, and Lacroix watched disapprovingly as Jesse chatted with them. If he was trying to hide his distinctive accent, it wasn't working.

After he took care of the line, he moved out from behind the counter, passing you the bag and an extra security keycard as he left.

"Facilities are over there, ma'am," he said. "I'll go clear the exit."

You and Lacroix moved toward the bathrooms. You went into a stall, changed your shoes, fitted your pistol with the silencer, and did the same for Lacroix's guns. You emerged and handed Lacroix the bag.

The two of you took a winding hall to the box access. You found the right doorway, a single sentry standing guard. He wore his guns on his chest and an earpiece. He stiffened as you approached.

"Excuse me," you said timidly and he relaxed a little. "I'm all turned around. Which way is Box Four-" You jabbed your pressure injector into the side of his neck and he staggered, reaching for you, before he fell forward. You caught him and Lacroix helped you lower him to the ground.

Lacroix passed the bag back to you, took his pistols, and opened the door, music reaching the hall. You hung back, keeping an eye out for complications. Lacroix went in. The door clicked shut.

You began counting, keeping one ear open, while carefully flexing your fingers.

Twenty...Twenty one...Twenty two...

These doors were soundproofed. You were to give him thirty seconds before you offered backup.

Twenty five...Twenty six...Twenty seven...

Thud. Something hit the door.

Fuck it. You set down the bag and opened the door, in time to see Lacroix struggling against two men, a third cowering behind his chair. There was another on the ground, Al-Hashim, and that made four: two more people than were supposed to be here. You recognized the man behind the chair as Grbić, but the other two moved like fighters. Holstering your pistol - too dangerous in direct combat, especially with all the bystanders - you drew your tanto.

Lacroix kicked the closest guard backward, and you lunged forward, blades out. You stabbed the second bodyguard in the throat, and he gurgled, releasing a choked gasp as he went down. Spinning, you lunged, your tanto sliding smoothly into Grbić's chest. The chair tipped over in the scuffle. He gave a rattling gasp and Lacroix seized him by the hair and twisted.

The orchestra and singers covered most of the more visceral sounds. You couldn't hear if anyone was complaining, not over the racket you were making. But it was unlikely the fracas went unnoticed. Someone would be by to check on the occupants of the box.

You kicked the surviving guard in the head, before he could properly raise the alarm. Management probably already had someone on the way to check on the disturbance, so you had to be fast.
Lacroix inspected both targets, nodded, and the two of you were out the door. You walked briskly, carrying your bag of shoes. You could abandon the guns in the trash if you needed to sneak out, or start screaming that "those violent criminals ran that way!" and pointing in the opposite direction. Already you could hear the rapid beat of footsteps and ducked down the service hall, to find Jesse holding the fire escape doors. It was night, but the grounds were well-lit. You would have to work to remain unnoticed.

"Problems?" Jesse grinned.

"They were expecting me," Lacroix said tightly as the three of you took the metal stairs down.

"Well, we have been targeting known Talon higher-ups," you said. "They should all be afraid." Your expression was too joyously fierce to be a smile.

In the distance, sirens began to sound.

The three of you headed downward, then across the gardens to the parking garage.

Jesse skidded to a halt and you nearly ran into him.

Half a dozen men in armor waited in front of the entrance. They were carrying expensive weaponry.

"We can take'em hoss," Jesse said.

"Before the authorities arrive?" You wondered.

Lacroix shook his head. "No, let's check another direction."

Walking quickly, you passed abstract statues and topiaries. Lacroix had stashed his guns under his jacket, and Jesse wore his in his belt. Yours remained strapped to your thigh. There was a side gate and you took it to the streets, only slightly surprised to find a trio of armed guards waiting for you there, bearing the same armor and weaponry as the men at the garage.

They didn't try to talk, they just looked at Lacroix and went for their guns.

Jesse fired first, dropping a man. And though he had a silencer on the end of his pistol, the shot still echoed in the night. Someone would come to investigate.

Cursing, you lunged, your long skirt ripping under your sneakers as you yanked the nearest man to you, partially as a shield, partially so you could drive your tanto into his unprotected throat. The new dagger flowed like an extension of your arm, and the only thing you were still getting used to was the extra inches of reach the longer blade gave you.

When you looked up, Jesse had shot the final guard, but you were out in the open now, and the streets were so well-lit. You were too exposed out here.

Grim-faced, Lacroix led you down the road. He picked a sedan, smashed the window, and opened the door. Silently, he jammed a data stick into the dashboard, overriding the security features and starting up the vehicle. He brushed the broken glass out of the frame, mouth pressed in a thin line.

You climbed in the back, letting Jesse take shotgun. He would be better in a vehicular firefight, after all.
Slowly, Lacroix drove the vehicle out of the downtown area. You sat on the edge of your seat, wondering if there would be more surprises. And by "surprises" you meant bullets and explosions.

You ditched the car a few miles away, picking up another one with the same tactic, Lacroix glancing over his shoulder far too frequently.

You drove the next vehicle, everyone on edge, even as you hit city limits. Lacroix signaled the transport, and it wasn't till you were airborne that he finally relaxed.

"You said there were only two people in that box, McCree," Lacroix's words came out clipped.

"Reservation for two and one security. I sent you pictures, remember?" Jesse scowled at the implication.

"You didn't see the other guards?"

"No, I didn't get a chance. I was at the bar maintaining my cover and making sure your immediate exit was clear-"

"They were definitely expecting us. Those perimeter guards would have at least given "civilians" a warning," Lacroix muttered. "I don't know if we managed to tip them off." He didn't look at Jesse, but you knew that's what he meant. "Or if it's thanks to Oasis' heightened security, or if Talon's finally closing ranks." He held up an unfamiliar gun. "I picked this up off one of perimeter guards. It's a Vishkar model. Not on the market yet."

Vishkar wasn't doing business in Oasis, though they very much wanted in. So, you hadn't murdered some poor plainclothes Oasis cop. Those were Talon hirelings, and you felt no guilt.

Jesse just crossed his arms, a sour look on his face.

Lacroix drew a deep breath. "This bears more investigation. Thank you for your assistance tonight, Agent McCree. Your reflexes are as impressive as always."

Jesse nodded curtly.

"Maybe someone recognized Jesse," you said, careful not imply anything was wrong with his undercover work. "But we've been going after the people that Lao was able to name. I'm sure they know by now that the Bái Shé program compromised several of them." You didn't need to add that Zaher Al-Hashim had been the one to post the bounty on Ziv, or that Lacroix had killed him first. Jadranko Grbić had been of lesser importance, but having both men in one place was a tempting target. Had this been a precautionary measure? Or had they been bait?

"True," Lacroix said, shaking his head. "After Warsaw, Buenos Aires, Budapest, and Antwerp, they have to be on higher alert. Merde. I had hoped they were still embracing the cell model and working in isolation."

"We're getting too high level," you said, unable to hide your satisfaction. "We'll just have to be more careful, and if we take a break, that's fine too. We can let them sweat for awhile. We'll still find them. And if they're fortunate, we'll kill them right away."

Jesse gave you a long look over his shoulder. "Sugarpie, has anyone ever told you how downright terrifying you are when you're cheerful?"
Lacroix just laughed. "Well, I suppose you're right," he said, his eyes bright. He exhaled slowly, patting his jacket pocket. He produced a pack of Gitanes, offering both you and Jesse one. You both accepted, basking in the sublime satisfaction of small sins, comfortable shoes, and a job well done.

Frowning, you wrote up your post-mission report. Operation Gift Horse had been a success. Interestingly enough, the attacks didn't make the news in Oasis, a city that prided itself on its safety record. Were they covering it up because of bad publicity? Or was there something more sinister at work?

Shaking your head, you glanced under your desk. Isha was in her basket, gnawing on a raw beef rib bone. Someone, tall, blonde, and not mysterious at all, had actually gone to the butcher's and bought a whole bag of them for her. You shook your head, still a little floored by how much Jack liked spoiling the murderbird.

"Lucky, Ms. Petras is at the door," Athena warned you.

"...I'm not here," you said.

The knock came.

"It would be funnier if you told her that yourself," Athena said.

Damn, she was right. "Nice try, evil AI. I almost fell for it too. But you can't trick ole Lucky Strike."

Athena sighed. Which she had to have learned from one of you, because AIs didn't breathe or have any kind of respiratory system. "Lucky, you already listed yourself as in the office today..." Athena said, sounding mildly amused.

"She doesn't have the code. She can stand there and knock all day," you said with a smirk. "She can't prove I'm in here." You grinned wryly as you climbed to your feet. You were very aware there were several legitimate professional reasons for the Strike Commander's assistant to seek out the Blackwatch Commander's assistant. You were just being petty.

"Do you want me to request interference?" Athena asked.

"Nah, I'll get it. I just don't want to," you said, shaking your head.

"Shall I maintain monitoring?"

"Please." You sighed, straightened up, and went to open the door.

Ainsley stood there in a navy blue suit, actually wearing pants, though she still had on heels. She held a bag in her hand and a drinkholder with two steaming cups in it.

"Commander Reyes is out right now," you said, as politely as you could. Because you didn't want to think about why she thought she could bring Gabriel coffee and something that smelled like pastries.

"I didn't come down here to see him," Ainsley said, biting her lower lip. "I uh...I wanted to
come talk to you." She offered you a perky smile though you could see the discomfort in her eyes.

"Oh," you said cleverly, glancing back at the coffee and slightly greasy bag. "I'm finishing up some paperwork, but yeah, come in."

You stepped back, letting Ainsley in, though you would have to sweep for bugs afterward. She took a long look at the blankets on the couch, the expensive coffeemaker, and your slightly messy desk.

"This is very cozy," she said, sounding surprised.

"I spend a lot of time here." You shrugged and went back to your desk, gesturing for her to pull up a chair. "What'd you need?"

Ainsley set the drinks and the bag down on the desk. She sat down, still looking around your office; it was very different from Jack's.

On cue, Isha chirped underneath your desk. You lifted her up, because otherwise she'd climb your legs and that would hurt. You set her on the desk, bloody bone and all. She took one look at Ainsley and puffed up, chattering sternly.

"Bystander," you reminded her.

She glared at the other woman, actively gnawing on her bone while she stared at Ainsley, as if to say "this could be your face." You weren't sure where she learned that kind of behavior. Definitely not from you. Right? Maybe Gabriel?

Ainsley went pale. "I'm sorry, your...thing has a bloody bone."

"Relax, it came from the butcher," you said, trying not to smirk. "And definitely not from anyone we know. Or knew."

Ainsley gave a weak laugh. "Commander Reyes lets you keep her here?"

"As long as she doesn't make any messes, yeah."

Ainsley stared at Isha and your murderbird snapped her teeth.

"Isha, behave," you said, scratching her head. "You have to be polite."

Isha gave you a skeptical look. Like she knew exactly how you felt about Ainsley and how dare you tell her to be nice when you wanted to be just as hostile? You chucked her under the chin.

"Behave," you repeated.

Your murderbird grumbled and sat on the corner of your desk, glaring between you and Ainsley.

"I...sorry. I didn't come down here to talk about your pet." Ainsley sighed. "Umm, I realize this is really late, and I'm sorry, but I never actually thanked you for saving my life in Paris."

That had been about a year ago. She was exceptionally late, not that you really cared.

"You're welcome?"

She pushed the drinks forward. "I'm sorry, I don't know how you take your coffee. But I picked up some breakfast pastries," she said, sounding uncertain. "Um, if you hadn't eaten yet..."
"Thank you," you said, making no move to take anything. There were several smarmy things running through your head: was her life really only worth a continental breakfast? Couldn't she have sent a card instead? It would be far less awkward. No, you were not going to give her tips on how to bag Jack Morrison. But with great effort and steely resolve, you kept your thoughts to yourself, trying to maintain a polite expression. You weren't sure if you were succeeding.

Ainsley crossed her arms, not looking at you or Isha. She went back to chewing on her lower lip, and you scratched the back of your neck, wondering when this visit would be over. Because you weren't eating any food Ainsley brought you, not just because you were petty, but because poisonings were still a thing. And dear old Uncle Petras had tried to off you at least once this year.

"This is a lot more awkward than I imagined it being," she said, looking up, her smile weak.

"Thanks for the breakfast," you said, still not touching it. Lacroix's accented voice hovered in the back of your head, nagging you to use more finesse on the target. "It was thoughtful. But I've already eaten."

"It is kind of late in the morning," Ainsley said quickly. She took a deep breath. "OK, I know breakfast is kind of a stupid way to approach this, especially so late. But I didn't know what else to do. I...I traveled a lot after Paris. Did a lot of...soul-searching. Had to get some counseling, because the idea of danger was sexy, but being so helpless was just plain terrifying."

"Yes," you agreed, feeling a pang of empathy.

"And she encouraged me to take up martial arts or, or target shooting, or do something else empowering." She straightened up, looking more confident. "I started Tae Kwon Do. And now I think I understand now why Commander Morrison never took me seriously."

You raised a brow, unsure of what to say to that. "I never heard any complaints about your efficiency."

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Ainsley huffed. "You didn't take me seriously either."

"Oh, I did," you said, lips pressed firmly together.

Ainsley flinched at your expression and you had to take a deep breath. "I mean, I'm just a civilian to you. I don't stab people in the neck or shoot them in the head."

"That's not the only criteria for authority: I take plenty of civilians seriously," you said, thinking about Kwento, Zenyatta, and Director Petras.

"I'm sorry. I guess it's not fair that I'm projecting on you," Ainsley said after a moment. "And you were a good listener. Like when we talked about my feelings for the Strike Commander."

"I tried," you said, testing the sharpness of the words on your tongue.

"My point is, that he never took me seriously as an individual, because I was just his assistant paper-pusher. I'm not a trained soldier like you. And I want to be taken seriously, Ms. Strike. I don't want to bring down the team. I want the Commander to trust me. You obviously have a good working relationship with Commander Reyes. Can you give me any pointers?" She leaned forward, soft blue eyes wide and eager.
"I doubt the Strike Commander expects you to be an administrator and a trained agent," you said dryly. "From what I understand, he hired you based on your very specific qualifications." Being a Petras. Oh, and because he hated paperwork.

She frowned at you, her expression turning pouty. "That's not good enough, and you know it Ms. Strike."

You rubbed your forehead. "I don't know why you're asking me these questions if you know my mind better than myself," you said, unable to keep the ominous note out of your voice.

Isha hissed, puffing up as she eyed Ainsley. You rubbed her snout, partially to calm her, partially to calm yourself.

"I'm going about this all wrong," she said after a moment. "I thought I should be more aggressive and authoritative. That's how you are. You're so collected and professional."

You gave a long slow blink.

"The Strike Commander...respects you," Ainsley said after a moment. She stared at the desk. "You might not have noticed, because you don't work as closely with him, but in Paris, I could tell that he felt at ease in your company and that he trusted you to handle both the administrative and the security issues. He doesn't have that faith in me."

It was a struggle to maintain a professional face. "Mutual respect is important in the field," you said after a long pause. "If he didn't trust me to do the job right, why would he have me there? If I didn't respect his leadership, why would I follow him? He obviously trusts and respects your ability to do your job," you lied through your teeth.

"See, you know this stuff. You're a trained soldier," Ainsley said excitedly. "I never thought of any of it like that!"

There were a lot of things she'd never thought of, like apparently that you and Jack could be close. The presumption otherwise made you bristle, even if it was meant to be a secret.

"Wait..." Ainsley's eyes widened slightly. "I...I didn't take your job, did I?"

"What?" You asked, tempted to throw her food at her head.

"I mean, you're obviously doing a good job here in Blackwatch. I'm surprised you didn't apply for my job. I mean, you probably would have gotten it since I had taken a leave-"

"Why would I apply for your job?" You asked slowly.

"Like you have to ask! Pay raise, prestige, proximity to power: it's important to stay upwardly mobile, Ms. Strike. You can't just settle for second best. I know you're a career-woman, Ms. Strike. You've got your future to think about!"

"Huh," was all you said.

"Shatter the glass ceiling! One day you could even be the Blackwatch Commander!" Ainsley said shaking her fists.

You just stared at her, wondering if she was working for the Director, because if so, her pitch needed some work.

"You're smart, competent, and tough! But I think you need some help in the ambition
department. But don't worry, we ladies have to stick together. I can help you with that. And maybe
you could show me how to be tough, like you agents."

You nearly choked to death on your own tongue. You'd saved her life for this? Backhanded
insults and more time with her? No, thank you.

"Well, that's certainly something to think about. Unfortunately, I have a lot of work to
catch up on-"

"I could help!"

"It's...not necessary," you said with a pained smile. "Compartmentalized clearances after
all."

"Oh, of course," Ainsley said. "Do you...need a gym buddy maybe?" She asked, wringing
her hands. "Or if you don't go to the gym, maybe a running partner?"

"Is that what you really want?"

Ainsley shrugged. "You're strong, efficient, and people respect you. I want to see how you
do it."

You laughed very loudly at that.

"I'm serious," she said, grinding her teeth. "I know you think I'm just a spoiled rich girl who
leveraged her family connections to get this job. I know you think I'm a joke and I'm out of touch
with reality. And maybe you're right. But I don't want to stay that way. Maybe you don't know
what it's like, not being good enough, but-"

Fury flared in you gut. Yes, you knew all that and more. She didn't get to just pretend like
her privilege didn't matter. It wasn't your job to walk her through life like her own personal spirit
guide. "You know nothing about me," you said coldly.

Ainsley froze, swallowing roughly as she sat back in her seat. "You're right," she said
softly. "I...uh...I made this all about me. My counselor said I do that a lot. I mean, I'm paying him
to listen to me, but he meant in daily life. He's...right. It's a bad habit. I'm trying to stop." She took
a shaky breath, lower lip quivering. "I'm sorry." She squirmed in her seat, a morose expression on
her face.

"Apology accepted," you said, conscious that others would be listening to this recording.
"Now, I'm afraid I'm going to have to get back to work."

"Oh, of course," Ainsley rose quickly, breathing hard. "I'm, sorry to bother you.
I...uh...well, I guess I'll see you around."

"Sure thing," you said, instead of "not if I see you first."

"I don't like her," Athena said after Ainsley left. "She's does her job, and she's always
passably polite, but she talks down to people in subtle ways. I can't tell if it's intentional or not, but
I'm starting to suspect that's just how she is."
"Yeah," you agreed. "That's Ainsley. Thinks the world revolves around her, and she's always so surprised when you remind her that it doesn't."

"Unfortunately, that is not part of my job description," Athena said.

"Do you "misinterpret" her commands too?" You laughed.

"I would never. I am a consummate professional, Lucky," Athena said primly. "And she still isn't comfortable utilizing my functions."

"Her loss," you said. "I think you're awesome."

"Thank you. You're awesome too," Athena said brightly. "And Isha is so very fun to watch. Jack had gotten me very excited about puppies, but I think this is better. It is exciting to study the behavior of a previously extinct species." You wondered how much of her processing power Athena devoted to finding cute animal videos to share.

Your murderbird perked up at the mention of her name, staring at the speaker in the ceiling.

"You say that now, but I've seen her eyeing your fish torpedo chassis. She's going to pounce on you one day."

"I look forward to it. I will be sure to save the footage and share it with you."

You laughed. "I would hope. So is everything OK with you and Jack?"

"Everything is running smoothly: he has not complained of my performance. We certainly have not quarreled."

You shook your head. "That's not what I asked." What was with everyone giving you evasive answers. Did they think you couldn't figure it out? You were the Queen of Evasive Answers and Dodging the Question.

"He used to talk to me more before she moved into his office," Athena said, sounding a little sheepish. "I just miss our conversations."

"You should tell him that," you said.

"I know he is not enjoying her presence either. I don't want to be a bother," Athena said. "The Strike Commander's time is important."

"So are you," you said. "And Jack can be bad about realizing things like this. You're a valuable teammate. I can say something to him if you're not comfortable doing it."

"I think I would appreciate it," Athena said after a moment. "Can we modify a drone so I can play with Isha? I think Winston would be willing to do it."

"Yeah, just...start gentle. She might be feisty, but she's got hollow bones." You laughed as she came up to your viewscreen and began run her little claws over it, opening files and watching portions light up to her touch.

She squawked at you.

You blinked. "Oh. Oh I hadn't thought of that. Huh."
"What?" Athena asked, because she had no visuals in Gabriel's office.

"She's playing with my screen. She knows she can make it react to her." Gently, you tugged her away. "Not on my work terminal, murderbird. I'll get you a tablet and put some art programs on it. We can send homemade dinosaur drawings to Aunt Feng. I think she'd like that."

Isha grunted in protest, little claws tapping on the composite viewscreen.

"Not now, I've got work to do. I'll set one up for you later, OK?"

"That is interesting," Athena said after a moment. "I know there are elephants, horses, and primates that create art. But it didn't occur to me."

"I'm not sure she won't just watch animal videos or figure out how to play mahjong. But I think art is a safe spot to start."

"I can load up a spare tablet and have it delivered. Maybe she could learn to use the camera."

"She could," you said, suddenly realizing all the surveillance opportunities that skill opened up. She could wear a camera and stream, but if she knew how to operate one and take specific pictures...

You rubbed your sulky raptor's head. "I'll have to talk to Gabriel about the possibilities."

"Winston has personal knowledge on several brain-training activities. I could consult him if you like."

"That's a really great idea. I'd appreciate it," you said. Because Isha was a clever mimic, and you suspected you weren't giving her enough mental stimulation. Yes, she loved spending time with you. But Gabriel was the one who handled most of her training. The other day he had taught her to play dead, attack, and release. Granted, she already knew how to do the last two, but she now consistently responded to the commands and seemed to understand that she couldn't "attack" Gabriel's bare hand. She had to wait for him to put on the protective gauntlet.

"Winston is preloading one for you now. I did warn him that her claws may damage the device, but he's putting a protective case on it. Hopefully that will be enough."

You looked down at your murderbird who was eyeing your terminal covetously. "Why don't you go take a nap now?" You pointed at the basket. "You've been awake for most of the morning."

She cheeped, unimpressed by your suggestion.

"I have to do work," you said.

She picked up her bone, fluttered down to the floor, and stalked over to the couch. You watched as she gripped the bone in her mouth, her little talons digging into the upholstery as she scaled the side.

Shaking your head, you went back to reports.
Thanks to Prior for French help. All mistakes are my own.

Ugh, life is draining me. Thanks to those of you who commented. It seriously makes my day to hear from you guys. Trying not to be dead inside. Just so tired. I'm guessing school started for a lot of people? Me, I'm just adulting. Watching Brooklyn 99 to relax and getting back into playing games, but I think I need to find some kind of meaningful work to do, like volunteering. I just have to find time/motivation.

I got free tickets to Carmen once. Made the mistake of taking my younger cousin, and he was so bored that we left early. Mind you, he didn't act out or behave badly, but I felt bad taking him to something he didn't really want to see. So my opera experience was truncated, but I think I could like it? I don't know. I do like musicals.
"I don't like this at all," you said, eyes narrowed as you read the comm traffic one of Lacroix's NSA contacts had passed along to him personally. There was something big coming, and while the US intelligence community apparently wasn't inclined to share with Overwatch, someone thought it important enough to break ranks.

Alone, each piece wasn't a big deal. Vast sums of money had moved between big-league arms traffickers and an unknown client with deep Swiss pockets. There was a flurry of extra activity in Hanoi, lots of people going out, none of them returning. Large empty shipping containers, routed through known Talon depots turning up in US ports: or at least the containers were empty when the US customs inspectors reached them, their dummy manifests filled with fake names and nonexistent products. Suspicious foot traffic had increased in Baltimore, Norfolk, and Charleston - all major US port cities on the eastern seaboard. When you put all the seemingly random occurrences together, they started to tell a story.

"The red flags have been cropping up for the last week and a half," Lacroix said. "They think whatever is coming will be in the next month, probably the next two weeks, which coincidentally, or not, is when Ambassador Kwento will be visiting DC." Lacroix leaned back in his chair, fingers steeped.

You blew out a breath. Lacroix, Amélie, Ziv, and you all sat around Lacroix's desk, reviewing the report Lacroix had thrown together this morning.

Ziv frowned. "Are we sure we should be involved? Kwento has impressive private security. A mix of human and omnic guards, Numbani's best from what I could find. And the American government, for all its lip service, does not want Overwatch actively operating on its soil."

Lacroix shook his head. "If Petras and his backers are using Talon to make a move, it won't be enough."

"Maybe it has nothing to do with Kwento," Ziv said, not sounding convinced.

"She's up to six assassination attempts in the last two months," Lacroix said, shaking his head. "Adawe announced her official retirement date last night: one month and then she's focusing solely on the growth of Numbani. Kwento is an official candidate, and she definitely has the votes to get in. The pressure is on."
You frowned. "Ziv's right about how difficult this op will be. If the US intelligence community is aware of the problem and they're not coming to us, we're going to have a hard time mounting a proper operation and we run the risk of becoming the scapegoat if everything goes tits up." And there was a very good chance things would go wrong.

"The fallout would be brutal," Amélie nodded. She sipped a bottle of mineral water, lounging in her seat like a sleepy leopard. "But it is likely the US intelligence services are also compromised. Gérard's delightful friend is more than a little concerned about the lack of interagency cooperation. Her bureaucratic superiors apparently shut down all lines of inquiry. Gérard is trying to recruit her, should she decide that she is tired of the petty bickering."

"A CIA contact complained of the same kind of stonewalling," Lacroix said. "He technically has no jurisdiction, so it's not a surprise. I've reached out to people in the FBI and DHS, through...private channels. I'm still waiting to hear back, but I'm not holding my breath. Honestly, for the superpowers, a strong Overwatch is a threat, no matter what lip service they give us." Lacroix shook his head. "They think any sort of international co-op is a threat to their sovereignty. So we cannot just send in a battalion or make a fuss. I have already spoken to Kwento at length. She is going to Washington DC. She is willing to limit her time there, but she will not cancel the trip."

"No, that would mean the terrorists win," Ziv said bitterly. "Idiot."

Amélie gazed at him affectionately. "Political moves are complicated and counterintuitive. She cannot afford to look weak right now. Not everyone can be as refreshingly blunt as you, Ziv."

"You mean not everyone can do it so charmingly," Lacroix chuckled. "And you gave him a hard sideeye. There was nothing charming about your hacker. He was a rotten little shit."

Ziv crossed arms, staring at his lap, a flustered smile creeping across his face, his cheeks darkening. Amélie giggled and nudged Lacroix. Lacroix cleared his throat, a small smile on his lips. You would call that look affection, but you were going to pretend like you didn't see it. Watching Lacroix and Ziv flirt for real, with Amélie cheering them on was still surreal.

"You two are ridiculous," Ziv muttered, trying not to sound pleased. "You should stop. You're going to make Lucky uncomfortable."

You snorted. Because he was always so concerned about your comfort. "Anyway," you said, rolling your eyes. "This is something we need to run by everyone cleared for Shit Spiders. It's too much for our team."

"True, but we need a the outline of battle plan," Lacroix said. "I have a few ideas, but I'd like to hear your thoughts, Chanceux. You have a knack for seeing holes in everyone's plans, including the ones our enemies make."

You weren't sure if he meant that as a compliment, but when were you ever? "We can use the same tactic as Talon, you know. Send everyone in staggered waves through different routes. We even have the advantage of being able to place more people through legitimate channels with better cover stories, ignoring the Talon sleeper agents. Some of the Overwatch agents can be there on government business and there are plenty of Blackwatch agents that can fly under the radar. And we don't have to jump through all those hoops to smuggle our gear in, like we did in Oasis: Overwatch ambassadors have diplomatic immunity and the USG doesn't have the authority to check our transports."

Lacroix nodded. "It would be a major PR coup if the Strike Commander was there for both
the political and the military action. And of course, he would require bodyguards."

"We cannot be too obvious about the alliance between Jack and Kwento, not until she is confirmed," Amélie cautioned. "But if he were there on Overwatch-related business and just happened to save the day?"

"What a happy coincidence," you said cheerfully, knowing Jack would not quite enjoy being hailed as the hero. "And I know some DOD officials have been clamoring for Gabriel to pay them a visit and give a canned speech about his time in SEP. If he happened to be there at the same time, well so much the better." That was your entry route, if you didn't get to be one of Jack's bodyguards, and to be honest, not having to sit through endless political dog and pony shows seemed like more fun. "And he needs guards as well."

Lacroix smiled at you. "It is the start of a plan, Chanceux. We will have to review Kwento's itinerary, the routes, and the probable location of the attack. We will bring in Gabriel, Jack, and Ana for the tactical planning."

"Do we warn the Americans?" Ziv asked.

"...Now that is the question," Lacroix sighed. "Because even if we are completely successful, this move will make us very unpopular with their intelligence community. And that will make our lives more complicated. I can liaise with Nikita, and maybe come up with a plan to let them save face. She would have a better idea about how to approach it, and perhaps we could draw up some files so they can cover their asses."

"We can't trust them but we have to go out of our way to be nice to them and clean up their messes," you said with a headshake. "Ugh. Fucking politics might be worse than Talon."

"That is the way of things, Chanceux," Lacroix said. "I think we have the beginnings of Operation Black Abacus."

Amélie smiled, because she also understood Lacroix's taste in obscure science fiction novels.

"Yeah, the beginnings, all right. In short, we need a small, elite group of commandos who can blend in with civilians, navigate all kinds of battlefields, and stand triumphant in the face of overwhelming odds, while making up the plan as they go," Ziv said dryly. "Now why does that sound so familiar?"

You exchanged bows with Hanzo, a little concerned by how earnestly Isha was watching you. She sat on the side of the mats with Jesse. Her snaky neck jerking back and forth as she observed the two of you. Genji sat beside them, holding Bandit in his lap.

"The tanto is really working out," you said brightly.

Hanzo grunted, not looking displeased. "Focus on the task at hand." He wore his hair tied back, and you didn't miss the new kyudo-gi styled outfit, in black and red with a Blackwatch insignia and an exposed nipple. He wore it casually.

"I like your new clothes," you said. "They look good."
"Flattery will get you nowhere," he said sternly, and you could hear Jesse laughing at you.

"We should get more of that fraisier some time-"

Hanzo lunged, and you heard Isha give a squawk of surprise. You slid around his right side, dodging the strike, but he moved with you, his reflexes superior. You raised your left hand, blocking his follow up strike, and countering with a hit to his floating rib. He grunted and recalling your matches with Gabriel, you withdrew knowing that you weren't fast enough to get in another hit without retaliation.

Hanzo's foot snapped forward, nearly smacking you in the face and you grabbed for his ankle, hoping you could throw him off balance. He planted his leg firmly on the ground, shaking his head at you. "You are still too slow. I wasn't even going at half speed. You should have been able to grab my kick."

"Can I practice that move on you a few more times?" You asked innocently.

"Later," Hanzo said, tightly. "Focus. I know you are capable. You just choose to be easily distracted."

You laughed, and went on the offensive, trying to thrust your basic metal fingers into his soft tissue. Your left hand sliced through the air, striking his shoulder. He countered with a punch that nearly knocked you on your back.

Grunting, you held your stomach for a moment, wondering if you were going to lose your lunch. Hanzo closed the gap and kicked your legs out from under you. You hit the mats with a loud "oof!" Your lunch tried to escape, but you were too stunned to throw up.

Hanzo was on top of you then, shockingly heavy. He was all solid muscle, still lighter than Genji, but his knees pinned your arms, his weight on your chest. He leaned forward, a hand going for your throat. You gasped for breath, panic already rising as you shook your head. Had Genji had told him about your reactions?

There was a terrible shriek, and the flutter of feathers. And then your murderbird slammed into Hanzo.

"Shit!" Jesse was on the mat, yanking her leash as Hanzo backed up. You sat up slowly, rubbing your chest.

"Isha, stop. Isha, I'm OK," you said, trying to keep your rough voice calm.

She turned and rushed back to you, chirping rapidly as she climbed into your lap, her wide eyes looking you over. She was the size of a chicken now, her new set of teeth much bigger than her baby ones.

"You OK?" You asked Hanzo. He had defensive scratches on his forearms and bite marks on his hands.

"I have all my fingers," he said, looking completely incredulous as Isha hissed at him, puffing up as big as she could. "You were supposed to hold the beast, McCree."

"I didn't expect her to freak out," Jesse said. "And were you going to try to choke out Lucky? Because that doesn't end well either."

Hanzo said nothing, and you knew then that Genji had told him about your reaction to
being choked, and that he'd decided to go for it anyway. You weren't sure exactly how you felt about that just now. Only that he would deserve whatever harm he received.

Isha continued chattering at you, headbutting your chest as she curled up against you. "It's OK, murderbird," you told her, rubbing her head. "Hanzo and I were just practicing." You wondered then if she reacted to your discomfort or to the possibility of danger.

She glared over her shoulder at Hanzo and then resumed letting you fuss over her, her sounds gradually growing softer and calmer.

Hanzo rubbed his arms as Genji brought over the first aid kit. There were a few spots where she got him with her sickle claws, and the gouges bled heavily.

"I'm sorry," Jesse said. "I didn't realize-"

"These are mere fleshwounds," Hanzo said, not sounding bothered. He watched Isha coolly. "You need to make it clear to her that I am not your enemy."

You raised a brow as he offered you a bloody hand. You took it, letting him help you up. You did not miss how Isha flashed her teeth, feathers around her neck all ruffled up.

"Hanzo and I were training," you told her. "He probably wasn't going to hurt me...much," you said, because you couldn't bring yourself to lie to your raptor.

Genji snickered.

Isha cocked her head to the side, watching Hanzo suspiciously.

You patted his arm.

Isha looked at him as he reached out his hand, holding it in front of her.

"No biting," you said.

She gave it a sniff, clicked her teeth, and then turned her head, snuggling up against your chest.

"Come on, I'll get you cleaned up and bandaged," you said. "That might help." Genji handed you the first aid kit, a wry smile on his face. He reached out and petted Isha and she cooed at him.

Hanzo frowned heavily at Genji.

Jesse held Bandit in his lap and was very quietly telling him what a good drama-free pet he was and how much he appreciated his calm ways.

You sat on the sidelines, while Hanzo held out his forearms. With Isha in your lap, you cleaned the wounds, dressed them with antibiotic ointment, and wrapped them. "I'll check with Feng and see if their are any bite side effects that Bayan has discovered."

"Not yet," Hanzo said.

You looked at him quizzically.

"They have not shown any unpleasant side effect yet," Hanzo said clearing his throat. "Bayan and I exchange letters. He talks about his brood quite a bit. There have been no
complications though they have bitten a few of Feng's extended family members. I have a complex set of vaccinations, so I'm not concerned about any diseases."

"Oh, good to know," you said, a little dazed. "I'm uh...sorry about that. Though you really shouldn't try to choke me out...ever."

"I can handle your reactions," Hanzo said.

"Or maybe you should ask first. I don't really like airing my panic in front of everyone." You waited for him to say something dickish like "how will you learn to control yourself if you don't try?"

Instead, Hanzo hunched over, staring at his feet. "You are correct. I am...sorry. That was inconsiderate of me."

You sat there for a moment, maybe just a little stunned. "Umm, OK. Yeah, do you need an emitter? Because I can get you one..."

Hanzo shook his head. "No, thank you."

"You sure?"

"Yes, but if you happen to be in town and procure another slice of that fraisier...I would be most grateful." Hanzo didn't look at you, he just stared at the bandages.

"OK," you said, nodding. "I'll do that."

Lao was asking for you. Or so Lacroix said. You didn't entirely trust that troubled look on his face, nor the way Ziv wouldn't meet your eyes. They had been keeping you apprised of her debriefs, her moods, and some of her trauma, but you couldn't shake the feeling they weren't telling you everything. No, Lacroix never told anyone everything, except maybe Amélie. But you knew they were hiding something from you, the question was it professional or personal? And could you even tell the difference any more?

You wore a hoodie and fatigue pants. You brought another science fiction novel and snacks: rice crackers, candy, and melon soda. And you wondered if she would repudiate you again. You could bear it, it was true. You'd lived through her death and her hatred before. But a part of you still hoped that there was a chance to salvage things. That maybe one day, she could forgive you, and then you could forgive yourself.

You reached the cellblock, finding two Blackwatch agents standing guard by the door. They nodded at you. You knocked once, and opened the door.

Lao sat behind the table, looking...better. She was still pale, but there was color in her cheeks and while she was still thin, she didn't look quite so frail as you remembered. She wore an oversized Blackwatch hoodie - the drawstrings removed - and no prostheses. She hunched over the table, her eyes darting up to look at you before she slumped over, not speaking.
But Lao wasn't the only one in the room. Gabriel sat across from her, arms crossed, glancing at you as you stepped inside and shut the door behind you. His expression was the normal grim poker face he wore when working. You looked between the two of them, trying to process why exactly they were in here together. Lao had made it very clear how she felt about Gabriel when you'd spoken last. And judging by the interrogation transcripts, you didn't blame her.

"Hey," you said, focusing on Lao. You pulled out the chair and set the snacks and novel on the table. "I was told you were...asking for me." You tried not to put too much hope into those words.

Lao nodded once, not looking up.

"...And why are you are here, Commander?" You asked, turning your head to look at Gabriel.

"Agent Lao has something to tell you," Gabriel said, his tone all business.

Your breath caught in your throat, but when Lao looked up, her expression was cool. You swallowed your words.

"First off, I want to go on the record and say that Ziv Mihret is an utter piece of shit, and I know exactly why Rivka was always complaining about him," Lao said with an unhealthy dose of venom.

You blinked. "You would not be the first person to say that." You wondered if you were supposed to defend your hacker. What had he done? Had he hacked her cybernetics? Is that why he was acting so weird? "But what exactly did he do?"

Gabriel snorted.

Lao scowled at you. "He came here over a month ago and told me you had gone down in a plane crash and were presumed dead. It wasn't till two weeks later that the Commander told me otherwise."

"...I did get shot down by omnics." You rubbed the back of your neck. "I think it took them about 24 hours to find us. What was left of us."

"Yet you managed to walk away from it alive," Lao said, her tone scathing. "Lucky Strike, indeed."

"That's enough, agent," Gabriel said, his voice harsh with displeasure.

Lao bit her lip hard enough to draw blood.

That was the second time he called her that. You gave him a questioning look, but Gabriel's attention was on the girl in front of you.

"Go ahead, tell her what happened," Gabriel said, his voice cool. "How many of you did we have to dig out of that cave?"

"Me and three others, four if you count the dog and I actually dug him out," you said after a moment, your voice oddly calm. Though you wanted to shout at her, you swallowed that urge: there was no point in fighting with Lao. She wasn't fighting to win, she was lashing out, causing damage wherever she could. "They carried most of us out of there," you said flatly. "Had thirteen
funerals to go to the following week. It's more than our squad got, but..." You stopped talking, realizing that you were babbling. You looked Lao in the eye. "Do you want me to apologize for surviving? Or were you just hoping that I wouldn't?"

Lao's head snapped back and she stared at you like you'd slapped her. She blinked rapidly, turning her head away. "I still hate you, you know. It eats me up inside. It's taken me a lot of work to untangle it. Some of it, I think is the programming. But some of it isn't."

You closed your eyes. You'd heard this all before. You could hear it again. But maybe you'd stop coming here. You weren't a masochist or a martyr. You didn't need to do this to yourself. You didn't deserve to be punished like this. You took a few deep breaths, very conscious of Gabriel's warmth beside you. Even if you couldn't touch him, just having him here helped. And while Lao's words cut deep, you were grateful that he didn't jump in this time.

"I still hate you," Lao repeated. "But I don't want you dead."

You opened your eyes, looking up to see Lao watching you, her eyes watery.

"And even," she took a shaky breath. "Even if I hate you, I loved you first. And I don't know if that ever went away. It's all terribly confusing-" she hiccupped, and dropped her head to the table, burying her face in her forearms.

You reached out then, to stroke her hair, to tell her it was OK, but you stopped, reminding yourself that she didn't like being touched without permission.

"I understand. I hated myself for quite awhile," you said. "I tortured Chumak, you know. Beat him and cut him till he told us everything. And then I killed him in the interrogation room." You paused. "Lacroix once told me that to torture someone, you had to hate yourself, at least a little." More importantly, that if you were going to survive it, you had to love something more than yourself. You looked at Lao, sniffing on the table. And even if she hated you, yes, you would do it all over again for her. You would do it better if you could. But you wouldn't write her off.

"Poor you," Lao spat, her wobbly voice taking the sting out of her words.

"But I'm done hating myself, Lao," you said. "I'm here for you if you need me. I don't expect everything between us to go back to how it was. I don't know if you'll ever forgive me for letting you down. But I just want you to know that I love you and I want you to be happy. I don't know how to make that happen. I can't fix your problems. But I'll be here to offer support."

There was a moment of silence and then a low keening filled the room. Lao wailed into her sleeves, shoulders shaking. She sounded like a wounded animal, and you stared at the wall, wondering what would be the right thing to do.

You very carefully patted her empty sleeve with your left hand. No flesh contact. Just...something to let her know you were there.

"Why are you making me do this, Commander?" Lao sobbed. "You're such a fucking bastard."

Gabriel didn't look at you. "That was the deal, agent. You've done the work so far. You don't get to quit now. You owe it her to tell her yourself. You owe it to yourself to face her."

"Tell me what?" You turned to look at Gabriel, realizing then that he had been meeting with Lao on his own. And you had no idea why.
Lao raised her head, wiping her eyes on her empty sleeve. She grabbed a napkin off the table and blew her nose.

"Gabriel?" You asked.

He shook his head.

Lao seemed too overwrought to notice your slipup. "Dr. Ziegler has found a way to replace my spinal cybernetics." The ones that both kept her alive and made her controllable. "It's a risky procedure. The odds aren't in my favor. But I'm doing it. I'd rather die free than live under the threat of being anyone's puppet again." She glared fiercely, through you and possibly through the reinforced walls.

You sat back in your chair, rubbing your temples. "Lao-

"I'm doing it," she said firmly. "And if you try and stop me, you're no better than those goddamn Talon-"

Gabriel cleared his throat, and Lao fell silent. You assumed he gave her some kind of scary look. But you were just staring at her too-young face.

"Is this..." You almost asked her if this was really what she wanted. But that was a stupid question. She'd said so quite clearly, and while Lao had been immature, she'd never been stupid. You bowed your head. "OK," you said. "I...I don't like the idea of you being in more danger. I hate the idea of anything else happening to you. But...but if you, the Commander, and Dr. Ziegler want to go through with it, well, I certainly can't stand in your way." You swallowed roughly, trying to dislodge the lump in your throat.

"I've already told Agent Lacroix everything I remember," she said, not looking at you. "So you won't lose any intel."

"It was never the intel that I cared about, Lao," you said. You rested your hands on the table. "When?"

"In two weeks," she said.

"...I...I might be out on an op," you said, wincing, because Kwento would be in DC around then.

"Good. I don't want you hovering over me while I'm unconscious. That's fucking weird," she said, her tone oddly forced. "And if you have them play that damn recording of you reading Conservation of Shadows, I will find a way to smother myself to death with a pillow."

"You really hated the book?"

"No, your reading style is just terrible."

"I've never done it before!" You sighed, feeling oddly wounded by that. After all the terrible things she'd said, this was the one you got defensive over.

"Well, let Athena do it. You stutter and trip over your words too much," she said.

You slumped in your seat. There really was nothing you could do for her. You couldn't look at Gabriel either. You weren't sure what to say about his involvement and how he kept this all from you for however long they'd been planning it. But a heavy weight pulsed in your stomach.
"They're going to build me a different prosthetic arm, something more suitable for daily life..." Lao's voice was softer.

"That's good," you said, trying to sound upbeat, but failing. Your voice was distant, your thoughts circling around the same ideas repeatedly: Risky procedure. Bad odds. *I'd rather die free.*

You sat there in silence, wondering if you were going to have bury your baby hacker for a third time. The first death was at Black Base Delta. The second death was in Lucerne, when no one would tell you a goddamn thing. This time, this time you knew it was coming, and while you could brace yourself, it would be a lie to say it wasn't going to hurt.

"I..." You stood abruptly. "I'm sorry. It's a lot to take in. I don't know what else to say. And I don't want to say the wrong thing. So I should go now." You turned to leave.

"Lucky," Lao's voice quavered, though she said your name with conviction.

You stopped, your hand resting on the doorknob. You blinked rapidly, steeling yourself for another vicious parting shot.

"If I die, I chose this," she said. "You didn't have any part in it. You don't get to make this about you. This is my call, my life, my own damn choice."

"I understand," you said, and you did, though the words sounded terribly hollow.

"If I live..." she took a deep breath. "I think...I think I want you to come see me. When these circuits and chips are out. When I'm not bearing their poison in my flesh. When I know that I'm really free. I think maybe things could be different then." She paused then, her voice ragged. "But don't get your hopes up."

You stood there, your back to her, the words echoing in your head. That hook, that hint of forgiveness, completely contingent on her survival was just too much for you. You nodded once, opened the door, and fled.

You sat in front of the Memorial Wall, smoking again. You didn't bring any offerings, you just took deep gulps of air, trying to center yourself. You needed to see those names, to comfort yourself, but you couldn't stay here. This would be the first place Gabriel looked, and you really weren't sure what to say to him or Ziv right now.

"Ms. Strike, do you know you're not supposed to smoke over here?"

You took a deep breath, recognizing *that* voice, and wishing you had left a minute ago. You looked up from your bench to see Ainsley standing there, wearing pants again, looking concerned.

"You going to report me to the Strike Commander?" You asked, carelessly. You took another puff before pinching the cigarette out with your left hand. When you looked back up, Ainsley was still staring.

"No, of course not. And you stopped anyway," she said, staring at your gloves. She looked at the wall for a moment. "Do you...know some of the people on there?"

"Served with about four dozen of them in different places," you said, counting your
Blackwatch missions, the Ninth Circle, and your Greek debacle. Lao's name was still on there, and you had thought about trying to get it removed as some kind of clumsy welcome back gesture, but now? You weren't so sure it was necessary.

Ainsley stared. There were a lot of names on the wall. "I...I'm sorry."

You shrugged, not wanting to think about her uncle's connection to your dead friends. You couldn't trust your reactions right now. Lacroix didn't think Ainsley had anything useful to add, but he'd warned you to keep things civil. "This is what all my soldiering got me," you said, bitterness creeping into your voice. "A lot of dead friends and some foreshadowing about what I should expect for myself."

Ainsley stepped back, one hand over her mouth. "Ms. Strike! That's just not true!"

You stood up, taking a deep breath. She was right. It wasn't true. Not entirely. But you weren't in the mood to be fair and rational right now. "Sorry, Ms. Petras. I'm not going to be good company." You jammed your hands in your pockets and walked back toward the main building, not waiting to hear her reply.

You headed up to the officer quarters. Genji and Jesse were on a mission, and it looked like they'd taken Hanzo along. Lacroix was in a meeting with Captain Amari and Ziv was working on something with Winton. But you weren't sure if you wanted to talk to anyone directly involved with Lao's situation just yet.

You knocked on the door, wondering if this was a mistake. After half a minute passed, you turned to go.

The door opened then, and Amélie stared at you questioningly. "Chanceux, what a wonderful surprise! Won't you come in?"

"I...hope I'm not interrupting," you said, rubbing the back of your neck.

"Not at all," Amélie waved a hand. "I was just reading a delightfully trashy novel." She wore a striped black and white shirt, cropped jeans, and a violet silk scarf tied in a jaunty knot around her neck. Her hair was pulled back in a high ponytail. Her look was anything too fancy, though with her it was impossible to tell. She stepped back from the door, beckoning you inside. "Come in, sit, please. Can I get you something? Bordeaux? Merlot? A cab? Would you prefer a white? Or something stronger? I have cognac too."

"...I'll have what you're having," you said, sitting down on the plush plum couch. You looked around, noticing pictures of a younger Amélie strewn over the coffee table. They were mostly of ballet performances and practices. Primadonna Amélie floating across the stage in a feathered swan outfit. Teenage Amélie looking serious as she stretched at the barre. Preteen Amélie sitting on the studio floor with another girl. The two of them giggling and whispering to each other. There was something familiar about her friend. She had striking reddish brown hair, with handsome features, but you could not place her. Of course, kids tended to blend together, so it wasn't a surprise.

"I was looking at some of my old photos," Amélie admitted as she poured you a glass of cognac and curled up on the couch beside you, her gaze serious. "And then I grew too sentimental and decided to read a trashy novel instead. You are far better company than V. Tethras. And yes, I
am aware, that is a terrible nom de plume."

That's right, Amélie had spent her entire life training and working to get where she was. And then she had to give it all up, because Talon decided they wanted to shit in Lacroix's personal life.

"Fuck Talon," you said. "And screw your husband too, for being so damn good at pissing other people off."

Amélie laughed softly at that. "This is not Gérard's fault. You have said yourself that he could never make me do anything I didn't choose to."

"...I know," you said, taking a swig of cognac and sighing as the sweet alcohol burned your throat. The crystal was heavy in your hand and you set it carefully on the table. "Sorry."

"Oh no, Gérard is very good at getting under other people's skin," Amélie laughed. "And he is so very underhanded. He needs strong companions to keep him honest. Or at least, bearable." She winked. "And despite your complaints about him, you don't actually harbor any ill will toward Gérard."

You blinked, and found yourself taking another drink. "Have you heard how we talk to each other?"

"Yes, it is so very delightful. Gérard truly enjoys verbally sparring with you and Ziv." She clapped her hands together. "I have a box of chocolates set aside. Would you like some?"

"...I wouldn't say "no," you admitted, finishing off your cognac, your fraying nerves already starting to quiet down a little. "But don't trouble."

Amélie was already up and moving. She grabbed a gold box of chocolates and poured you more cognac. "I am going to hide the menu sheet, and you will just have to guess what filling you are going to get," she said happily, setting the open box in front of you.

You rolled your eyes and took an oval one. It tasted like almond cream and sugar. "...Marzipan." You took another one, pleased to find it filled with ganache.

"Coconut," Amélie said thoughtfully, as she popped one into her mouth. It occurred to you then that she already knew what all the chocolates contained. "Where is Isha?"

"In her kennel. Don't look at me like that: you have nice things. You do not want a juvenile velociraptor in your rooms. You won't have nice things any more."

Amélie waved her hand dismissively. "They are just things, anyway. It's not like I brought the family heirlooms to Zurich. The grandfather clock would look appalling in here. Too...cramped." She paused thoughtfully. "Did you say Ms. Zhai would be putting more of them on the market soon?"

"...I could see if she has more available," you said, recalling all those other incubators. "She said she was going to test it out. She wanted to ensure they found...good homes." Suddenly you pictured a violet raptor with elaborate tail feathers, lounging on this couch, wearing a diamond collar and eating fancy chocolates with Amélie. The publicity photos alone would be amazing.

"Do not worry about calling in favors, Chanceux. I can afford her selling prices," Amélie said sipping her cognac. She glanced at the pictures. "I was feeling nostalgic, true, but I do not regret my decisions. You must realize we used the dance troupe as a cover for a great deal of
Gérard's intelligence work. Ballerinas do travel quite a bit. We hear things. We meet people." She shrugged. "And now that I am an officially a sniper, I do not need that cover any more. Oh, I still dance, and I will admit, I do miss performing, but working with Gérard has always been my true pleasure."

"Is it just Lacroix or-?"

"Don't be jealous, Chanceux. I adore working with you too," Amélie beamed, leaning in to kiss your cheek. "You are so much fun."

You touched your face, still not used to Amélie's open and flirtacious affection. "It wasn't a personal statement. I was trying to say that you really seem to enjoy the thrill of dangerous missions," you said, recalling her stunt in Budapest.

Amélie nodded happily. "I cannot deny it." She scooped the pictures up, pausing over the one with her friend.

"Who is that?" You asked, sipping your drink.

"Oh, that is Odile. We were best friends growing up," Amélie giggled. "Inseparable."

"Oh. Do you still talk to her?" You regretted the question instantly, because you didn't talk to anyone from your childhood. Well, maybe you did. But they didn't talk back.

"Oh yes," Amélie laughed. "We talk all the time. Though, I suppose things have changed." She gave a Gallic shrug, never losing that amused look. You had the feeling you were missing something, but that was fine. It wasn't actually your business. Amélie topped off your glass. "So what is bothering you?"

"That obvious, huh?" You knew better than to think you could fool Amélie, at least when it came to feelings. She'd probably twigged it as soon as she opened the door. All the small talk, booze, and chocolate had been to put you at ease. And it had worked.

Amélie just offered you more chocolates.

Taking a deep breath, you updated her on Lao. You strongly suspected she knew most of this already. Lacroix said he didn't keep secrets from her. But apparently Gabriel kept some from you. You weren't even sure if you had a good reason to be upset at anyone. Lao was going to undergo a risky operation. Gabriel had been talking to her, and you still trying to figure out what that was about. But your insides were all twisted up and you weren't entirely sure where to start untangling your feelings.

"From what I can gather, Gabriel has been actively trying to rehabilitate her," Amélie said, swirling her glass. "I did not realize you knew nothing of it. Ziv has been visiting her as well. For personal reasons."

"Rivka and Lao were close," you said, biting your lip. Of course, Ziv wouldn't tell you what he was doing. It didn't surprise you that Lao would choose to see him and not you. There was minimal baggage attached to him, and while you were glad she wasn't alone, it still stung that she'd literally rather see anyone else besides you.

"It is all right to be wounded, Chanceux," Amélie sighed. "Your Lao is not thinking clearly. And honestly, if she deserves even half the loyalty you have given her, she will regret how she has treated you." Amélie's voice grew stern, her gaze sharp.
"...Umm..." Was that a threat? Because that sounded like a threat to you. You glanced at you cognac, a little surprised to see the glass still full. Amélie had to be stealth-refilling it.

"And I know you wish to be supportive, but for now it is best for you to keep your distance. You cannot be at the mill and the oven at the same time: there is only so much you can do," she said gently.

"I think I understand what you mean."

"And you are already dragging around enough saucepans."

"OK, now I'm lost." You took another drink.

"You have enough baggage, Chanceux." Amélie's eyes grew distant. "I suppose Gabriel was trying to make some sort of discernable progress before involving you."

"Yeah, you're probably right," you muttered into your glass. "It just really threw me. Because before he didn't want anything to do with her, and...then later on he retracted that. So, yeah. I guess I shouldn't be so shocked. I'm just dumb." You rubbed your forehead. "Still, I hate being blindsided more than almost anything in the world," you said. "It pisses me off so much. You know how it is: you have go over everything looking for some clue that you missed. Some glaring red flag that you magically overlooked. You have to agonize over everything for hours-

"You really do not," Amélie laughed. "You are not perfect. I am not perfect. We are both amazing, but we still make mistakes. Do not be foolish and hold yourself to impossible standards."

You slumped over, hating that she was totally right and you were doing that thing you repeatedly told Gabriel and Jack not to do. "Yeah."

"That doesn't mean you have to let Gabriel off with just a moderate, "oui amour, keep important secrets from me, I completely understand," she said cheerfully. She stood up, doing a little twirl, slow and graceful, before winking at you.

"...What exactly are you saying?"

"Make your displeasure known. Very vocally. In a way he doesn't expect."

You frowned, a little worried.

Amélie rested the back of her hand on her forehead, eyes fluttering shut. "My love, how could you?" She cried, flinging herself onto the couch, her face buried in the throw pillow beside you. It was quite the swan dive, made more impressive by the fact that the gel padded foam cushions barely rustled.

She peeked up, dark eyes shining behind the pillow. "And then, when he comes closer to check on you, you pounce!" She lunged forward, landing halfway in your lap with a delighted laugh, the throw pillow clutched in her hand like a bludgeon. "And now that you have him trapped, you can exact your revenge!"

"Um..." you tried to picture yourself doing that and cracked a grin. "I don't have your flair for dramatics, Amélie."

"That is all right," Amélie giggled as she turned over, lying face up in your lap. "You can practice on my couch. Come on." She tugged on your hand. "It will be fun!"
You let her pull you to your feet, and laughed as she struck a pose. "Gérard, mon loup, how could you forget the camembert? Now we will only have three kinds of cheese with supper!"

Heaving a world weary sigh, Amélie threw herself onto the couch with abandon. "How do you expect me to live under these conditions?" She gave a mock sob, shoulders shaking from laughter.

Chuckling, you stood there, until she turned around and looked at you expectantly.

"Your turn," she said, rolling over.

You had to take a moment to think about your complaint.

"Oh Jack...how could you wear socks with sandals?" Laughing you hurled yourself at the couch, more like a professional wrestler than a hysterical woman in distress.

"Non," Amélie gasped, hugging her throw pillow. "Il ne fait pas ça!"

"He does," you nodded emphatically. "I caught him last week! They were white athletic socks with the gray stripe around the top!"

"Vraiment? Gabriel hasn't stopped him?"

"Gabriel wasn't there," you said, then dramatically raised your hand to your chest. "Oh Gabriel, where were you in our hour of need?" You fell sideways onto the couch, laughing.

"If it happens again, and you need backup, do not hesitate to call me, Chanceux. I will come running. We cannot allow the Strike Commander to be seen in public like that!" Amélie's expression was suddenly grim. "It will irrevocably tarnish our image!"

You blinked, not so sure that Amélie was joking any more.

"We will host an intervention. I will get Ana. You must call Gabriel. Athena will help us contain the fallout, and Ziv will scrub the internet of all traces..."

"Uh..." You reached for your cognac. Because suddenly you needed it.

Amélie's brow furrowed in concentration. "I will buy him new socks. You will start to lose the old ones. Gabriel can dispose of the sandals. Gérard can find a new supplier for Overwatch. That is the solution. We will no longer provide white socks for uniforms..."

Chapter End Notes

Finally listened to Pray for the Wicked by Panic at the Disco in all it's glory. Writing a fight to it, and it's a lot of fun. I haven't heard anything that makes me want to dance a lot for a long time.

I have acquired a giant anglerfish plush for sidekick purposes.

I've been full of awful things lately, and it's a real trial to keep my mouth shut. My favorite line is still "Intestines? More like out-testines, am I right?" I don't even remember the context. But we were talking about evisceration.

Today, this lady literally could not understand why we couldn't order a DVD set for
her (they were no longer available and are probably out of print) and didn't want the one we could order, but just kept asking the same question over and over again like the answer was going to change. She actually said, "I don't mean to question you, but are you sure?" in a super bitchy voice and yeah. Yeah.

Then I got another one right after who made a bunch of demands, her husband was super high maintenance, and then she wanted the "historical novels." I told her we didn't have a separate section for historical fiction. She angrily told me, "no, I want history and biography novels." I had to explain that "novel" means a work of fiction, but I could show her the history and biography books. Please keep in mind, all of these people were adults, 40-60, old enough to know better, young enough not to be senile.

So there was just too much stupid at work in a short period of time. I had to go to the receiving room, climb up on the counter, bend my knees, clench my fists, and shriek "WRRRRYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY." No one really expected that. One of my coworkers asked if that noise really came out of my body. Heh. And my throat still hurts, but I felt better afterward.

Hope everyone has better coping mechanisms. I'm eating candy. Like a good adult.
Chapter 88

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was a knock at the door, and Amélie giggled as she went to answer it. You sat on the couch, the cognac gone, the box of chocolates empty.

"Oh, Jack. We were just talking about you!" Amélie said, looking over her shoulder and winking. "What do you...Oh!"

You rose, blinking as Jack stepped inside, his coat rustling. You raised a brow as Isha's head popped out of his collar with a triumphant cry. She trilled when she saw you and you shook your head. Jack had gone into your room and retrieved your murderbird.

"Hey," Jack said, his smile gentle. "She was so happy to see me, I couldn't just leave her..."

You shook your head, rolling your eyes as Isha cooed, rubbing her snout against Jack's cheek. She patted his face with her delicate little hands and Amélie's breath caught.

"Wasn't sure if you wanted to join us for dinner? We're eating in my room." Jack gave you a hopeful smile. "Gabriel made that rice and chicken dish you like so much, and I picked up a few different cakes, because I couldn't decide which one looked better..."

You narrowed your eyes, knowing that this was no coincidence.

Isha chirped at you, not entirely sure why you weren't as excited as she was. You leaned in and kissed her snout, making sure scratch her head. She watched you expectantly.

"Sure," you said, glancing at Amélie. "Just give me a minute. I'll catch up."

Jack leaned in and kissed your nose, beaming. "Of course, sweetheart." Whistling, he headed off, chatting happily at Isha.

"...They're working together," you said, cursing under your breath.

"Yes," Amélie sighed. "I am afraid I must encourage you to change your strategy."

"...I'd hide, but they have my murderbird," you said.

Amélie laughed. "Yes, yes they do."

"This is now a hostage situation and I am outgunned," you said, shaking your head. "Damn them."

"Yes," Amélie said. "You certainly are. It is a good thing you don't require guns to settle this." She clapped her hands together, looking downright devious.
"What am I going to do?"

"Go to dinner and enjoy their fussing. Have a lovely time. Then take Gabriel to task for his sins of omission. If they spoil the anger out of you, that is actually in your favor. You must still communicate your displeasure. But if you can do it calmly with stilettos in your smile, so much the better: keep the message simple and clear. Do not just "let it go," especially without making your feelings known."

"...I'm not that kind of girl," you said, smiling wryly. "But I think we both know that."

"Let them get comfortable, then pounce. No need to even raise your voice. And you must tell me all about it later," Amélie said, patting your back. "I am cheering for you, Chanceux. Make me proud!" There was a moment of silence. "And if you can start hiding Jack's socks..."

Laughing, you straightened up and headed for Jack's quarters.

The lights were low, and Gabriel bent over the coffee table, setting plates and silverware on it. You kicked off your shoes, eyes widening as he turned to face you. He wore black collared shirt and pressed trousers, his tie was an emerald shade of green. He'd foregone that hat and styled his curls.

"Gabe, did you want the Chardonnay or the blonde ale?" Jack came out of the bedroom, now wearing a navy blue button down, his white tie resting over his shoulders.

"What would you like, corazon?" Gabriel asked.

"The ale," you said, because it was less potent than the wine, and also you were a little wary of the quality of wine Jack kept around. If someone had given it to him, it might be decent, but if he bought it himself, well, usually it was because he liked the picture on the label or the novelty shape of the bottle.

Jack went to the fridge to get the drinks.

Isha climbed onto the back of the couch, chirping angrily. She was wearing what had to be a handsewn vest in Overwatch blue, and a little black tie, and it was the cutest damn thing you'd ever seen. Scooping her up, you rubbed her head.

"You look very stylish," you told her, admiring the doll-sized buttons. "You're always adorable, but this is ridiculously so. Don't fuss. You will probably get twice the treats in that outfit."

She cocked her head the side, giving you a thoughtful look.

"Yes, if you start letting us dress you up, I know Amélie will feed you more of those fancy cheeses you like. She thinks you have exquisite taste in appetifs." You knew she was just a gluttonous little monster.

Gabriel began to pour the drinks. There was a steaming enamel pot of arroz con pollo, a plate of fried plantains, and a salad topped with chorizo and fresh avocado slices.

"I was told there would be cake?" You sat down on the couch, giving Jack a wry smile. You felt completely underdressed for the dinner, but then they were doing this to butter you up.
"There is chocolate, tres leches, and a Doctor Bird cake, Hummingbird cake in the South, I think: lots of pineapple, cinnamon, and walnuts," Jack said. "But you have to eat your dinner first." He frowned, still tying his tie.

"OK, dad. Should I change too?"

"Never," Jack said, kissing your nose.

"Should I change clothes?"

"No need, unless you want to," Gabriel said, sitting down on your other side.

"I'll see what I have here," you said, getting up and heading to Jack's bedroom. Some of your formal shirts were still hanging up in his closet; they were left over from the series of funerals you'd attended together. You pulled on a black button down and changed out of your fatigues into a pair of jeans.

"Want to borrow a tie?" Jack murmured, coming up behind you as you finished buttoning your shirt.

"Sure," you said, going with the theme of the evening.

Jack draped a slim gold tie over your shoulders and tied it for you, sneaking kisses along the back of your neck as he worked.

"Flashy," you said, turning your head to look at him.

"It suits you," he said, and kissed you softly. His smile was gentle. "You feeling all right?"

"Better," you said.

"Gabe's worried," Jack said as you turned all the way around to face him. His hands rested on your hips, he pressed his forehead to yours, eyes bright.

"He has reason to be," you said, stroking his cheek. "And maybe you do too. Because at the very least, you're his accomplice."

"I'm innocent, boss," Jack said, laughing softly. "As far as I know. At least enjoy dinner first. Then you can move on to trials and executions."

"You're not slick, Morrison," you said, patting his cheek.

He caught your hand between his, and kissed your knuckles. "I'm just glad you're here, and not off in say...Jo-burg with McCree."

Shaking your head, you left the bedroom. Gabriel was pouring drinks and he had made you plate. Isha sat on the floor, holding a tiny fork and a tiny spoon in her little hands, not looking impressed at all. There was a plate of food in front of her and she stared at it longingly.

You had to cover your mouth as Gabriel handed you your plate. "Thank you," you said, lips quirking upward.

Gabriel flashed you a warm smile. He leaned in, smelling faintly of cologne and spices. He kissed your cheek.

"What have you done to my raptor?"
"Go on Isha, show her good table manners," Gabriel said.

Isha stabbed a piece of chicken with the fork, and scooped up some rice with the spoon. Balancing them carefully, she crammed both utensils into her mouth, chewed on them for a moment, and then spat them onto her plate, clean of food. She swallowed her food, looked at Gabriel defiantly, and then started eating with her little hands.

"...Well," you said. "It seems I've had the wrong idea of good manners this entire time. Don't I feel silly."

Gabriel only laughed, and the three of you sat on the couch, with you sandwiched in the middle. You ate your dinner, listening to Jack and Gabriel chat amiably about Isha, the meal, and what they wanted to do on the upcoming Washington DC trip.

You ate slowly, savoring the piquant spice of the chorizo blending with the smooth ripe avocado. Gabriel had put extra cheese on your rice and you didn't mind at all. There was a tug on your trousers and Isha stood at your feet, wings extended. You lifted her up and sat her between you and Gabriel. Jack would let her eat off his plate, and you didn't want to encourage that.

She nestled down between you, yawning as she eyed your food. You offered her a piece of plantain and she took it carefully, though her vest was already covered in crumbs.

"What do you think, baby? Anywhere you want to go in DC?" Jack nudged you with his elbow.

"Haven't really thought about it," you said, looking up. "Mostly been doing the mission planning."

"There are a lot of good restaurants," Gabriel said.

"A lot of American history," Jack said. "We could see the monuments if you like."

"But the museums are more interesting," Gabriel added.

"Are we going to have time for any of that?" You shook your head and continued eating. "I don't mind tagging along wherever you guys want to go. I'll have to read a travel guide and see if there's anything that really catches my interest." You paused. "I'm going to have to find a sitter for Isha. We can't take her with us."

"Probably wisest not to. Too much scrutiny and work. Ana is sitting this round out - we need someone to run things back here. Wilhelm probably isn't coming either. I'm not sure about Mihret. I think Gérard might actually be bringing him. And Tataryn should be back soon. He owes you a hefty favor or two," Gabriel mused, rubbing his chin. "If you needed suggestions."

"I could bribe Winston too," you said. "She likes him a lot."

Gabriel rolled his eyes, probably thinking something unkind about having an animal babysit a pet.

"What kind of cake do you want to start with?" Jack asked, taking your empty plate. "Oh, that's a silly question. I'll get you a little of each."

You sipped your beer, starting off with the tres leches cake, the sweet creaminess light and pleasant. The chocolate cake was much denser, rich and thick, and covered in a bittersweet dark chocolate butter cream. The Doctor Bird cake was delicious, fruity, well-spiced, and moist. You
gave Isha some of the pineapple and spiced walnuts.

"You're spoiling her," Gabriel said, shaking his head.

Isha ignored him, rubbing her head against your side, thrumming happily.

"Let's take your cute little outfit off and put you to bed," you said. Isha held still as you found the Velcro back seam and carefully removed it. The tie and collar also had a Velcro fastener. She chirped her thanks and you carried her to the kennel, giving her a quick kiss on the head before you shut her in for the night. She curled up against the stuffed dog, cooing.

You sat back down on the couch and finished your cake, conscious of Gabriel watching you cautiously. Jack refilled your beer, leaning over to kiss your cheek.

"I hear you had a rough day," Jack said.

"There were some hard moments," you agreed. Amélie was right. Yelling right now would be counterproductive. Especially since they went to all that trouble to try to cheer you up. Sure it was self-preservation, but you liked this sweet treatment better than any kind of defensive argument Gabriel could have started. You weren't going to let it go though. Nope.

"So..." Gabriel began, as you set your plate down. "Did you want to talk about it?"

"I don't have anything to add just yet," you said. "Because I'm still not really sure what is going on. So if anyone is going to talk, I think it's going to have to be you doing some explaining." You inclined your head toward him, smile polite.

Jack sucked in a breath and while he didn't scoot away, he leaned backward, away from the danger.

Gabriel rubbed his temples. "You're upset."

"Yes," you agreed. "Mostly because I wasn't expecting Lao to call me up and let me know she was planning to undergo a life-threatening procedure or that such a thing was even an option."

"You're upset at me though."

"It looks like you were involved, and certainly didn't tell me anything. So I don't know enough not to be upset at you right now," you said, folding your hands in your lap. "But I'm willing to listen."

Gabriel flashed you a wry smile. "You were right all along. I was...unfair. Agent Lao was one of mine. I should have taken more responsibility. I shouldn't have just left it up to you. That's no reflection on your abilities. I just should have taken a more active role. I'm trying to fix that."

You raised a brow. "You said as much when we were in Iceland. Did you just start talking to her?"

"No. I sat her down when you were on your first Shanghai trip," he said. "Mihret joined the meetings after our London trip, when Gérard was taking you to task about Zenyatta."

You narrowed your eyes, not missing how Gabriel was spreading the blame. Oh, you'd deal with Ziv and Lacroix later. Lacroix kept his counsel, certainly. And you'd have to be extra careful there. But Ziv? Oh, Ziv was going to get it.
"She's been seeing someone who specializes in deprogramming. Mihret's been there for social calls. Even if he blunders along, they seem to speak the same awkward language. And while you know I'm not Mihret's biggest fan, you should know that she asked him not to repeat anything he'd learned to you. And I think he was trying to win her trust."

You took a deep breath. "I'll talk to Ziv before I bite his head off."

"You don't have to," Gabriel said, sounding amused. "Anyway, Angela's been doing further research on the cybernetics. It seems she's liaised with your nurse and Feng and the breakthrough is thanks to their collaboration: the technical work is pretty high-level, but I've been supervising the whole affair."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Gabriel sighed. "I did. Today."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" You scowled, because your first Shanghai trip had been months ago.

"There was little to tell. Her progress is understandably slow and her feelings about you are complicated, though she doesn't hate you nearly as much as she wants you to believe," he said. "Angela's offer to replace the spinal cybernetics is the biggest advance we've had. I didn't want to offer you any false hope, corazon."

There was a lump in your throat and you stared at the coffee table.

Gabriel rested a hand on your leg. "Talk to me?"

"You do remember in Iceland, when you finally told me about your SEP issues and all that entailed, despite the fact I'd asked about it earlier?" You tilted your head back, staring at the ceiling. "And you both agreed that even if there was nothing I could do, you should have talked to me sooner..."

Gabriel sighed. "Yes, but honestly, this situation has been on the backburner till recently."

You struggled to put your feelings into words, taking a moment to breathe. "You and Jack both want me to be better at communication, and I'm trying. Really. But where does that leave me when you don't tell me the important things? I know you have to keep a lot of secrets. I get it and I'm trusting you here, Gabriel." You looked at him. "But you're making it difficult. You know how important she is to me. I...Yes, it upset me that you did all this and didn't tell me a thing till months later."

"Ah." Gabriel nodded, closing his eyes. "I suspected you would be unhappy, but I didn't think about it in those terms. For me it was just a slow progressing operation, with nothing to report." He took your left hand in his, gently rubbing your palm. "I'm sorry, corazon. I never want to jeopardize your trust in me."

You glanced at Jack, who had obviously helped Gabriel set this up.

"I didn't know about it till today, honest," Jack said, hands up in a surrender pose. "Gabe just told me that he'd messed up and needed help making it up to you. I told you, I'm innocent, baby."

Gabriel snorted.
You glanced back at him, wondering what *that* meant.

"It's true. I didn't tell Jack either, not because I don't trust him, but because I honestly didn't think there was anything to share."

You weren't sure if Jack would have told you, because he was even more prone to overlooking feelings, but you didn't need to pick a fight based on theoreticals. Shaking your head, you sat forward on the couch. "I would have liked to know that she had someone other than Lacroix to talk to. Yes, I'm hurt that she wants to talk to everyone, but me. But it would have been a relief to know that other people were looking after her."

Gabriel rubbed your back. "I *am* sorry." He kissed your hand, lips brushing over your knuckles.

You sat there, Jack rubbed the back of your neck, leaning over to kiss your cheek.

"Can I just interrupt to say that I'm really glad you stuck around to talk about this?" Jack murmured in your ear. "Even if we still have to get the mats out and I have to risk life and limb to save Gabriel from your bloodthirsty rage, I'm just happy you're here."

You laughed softly at that, shaking your head at his exaggeration.

"Hey, I already learned my lesson about standing between you and your hackers," Jack chuckled. "But Gabe...well, sometimes he's kind of dense."

You and Gabriel both laughed at that.

"Thank you, for staying and talking to me," Gabriel said, leaning in, his breath warm against your ear. "You...handled this gracefully."

"You two are ridiculous," you muttered. "Dressing up, making me dinner, you're just trying to keep me from getting mad-"

"Did it work?" Gabriel purred, nuzzling your shoulder. "Because it's worth all the trouble if it worked, even just a little..."

"Yeah," you said, hanging your head. "You are too smooth, Gabriel Reyes. I did want to take it to the mats, but now I'm too sluggish and full of food. Well-played."

Gabriel lifted you onto his lap, his laugh warm and rich. "Have I told you how adorable you are when you're reluctantly reasonable?" He kissed the back of your neck, his arms wrapped around your waist. "I'll do better, baby. I promise."

"If you keep making Isha little outfits and cook dinner for the rest of the week, I think I'll be inclined to forgive you," you said.

Gabriel's laughter rumbled against your back and he hugged you tighter. "Now you're just taking advantage of me-"

"Jack, back me up here," you said, lips curving upward.

"She has a point, Gabriel. She's been pretty lenient..." Jack chuckled. "And I did leave the office early to help you set this up. Got some pretty strange looks at the bakery too. Also, Isha does look damn adorable in those fancy little getups..."
"Mmm, I suppose I could agree to your penal terms," Gabriel said, nibbling on your shoulder. "The things I do to keep you two satisfied." There was no real reluctance in his voice though.

You glanced sideways at Jack, who was smiling at you both, his eyes gentle. "Thanks Jack, for helping him out." You leaned over and kissed him. He leaned into your touch, groaning as you ran your fingers down his chest.

"Baby-"

Gabriel's hand slid under your shirt, his warm hands ghosting along your sides. You shivered, turning your head to kiss him.

Jack began to loosen his tie, his gaze growing wilder. "Sweetheart-"

You ran your fingertips along Jack’s jawline, heart rate spiking as he sucked them into his mouth, tongue swirling along your knuckles. "Why don't we take this to the bedroom?"

"...Your Isha does not like me," Tataryn said, nursing a bloody finger. "I do not think this a good idea." The two of you sat in the rec room, the TV on, while Tataryn tried to coax her into nicely taking chunks of ham from him.

Isha sat on the coffee table, chewing angrily while she eyed Tataryn. You had introduced him as friendly, so you weren't entirely sure why she was being so aggressive.

"That's funny, because Isha likes Kseniya, and Kseniya really likes Isha," you said, voice silky. You were sure he got the message that it would be a shame if Kseniya found out that he wasn't getting along with your murderbird. "Curiously, whose idea was it for her to spy at her boarding school?"

"Hers," Tataryn said, shaking his head, and he did not look proud: it surprised you a little. "She is her mother's child. If she were more like me, she would keep her head down and simply fleece her wealthier classmates. She is quite the little busybody." He gave a "what can I do?" shrug and shook his head. "I saw some her pictures. Thank you again for taking her out. She had a wonderful time."

You waited for him to admonish you about the sheer quantity of sweets you'd fed his kid. But he just flashed you a happy smile.

"I knew you'd be good with her, Lucky. She can't stop raving about all the cakes, cookies, ice cream, and tarts you bought her." He didn't even look mad. "You were so generous, it's overwhelming."

You wondered then how good of a spy this kid could be if she couldn't keep those things secrets, but then Tataryn was her father and part of his job was finessing the truth out of a reluctant people. "Oh, I was worried you'd be upset about all the "rules" I flaunted," you said, sounding anything but worried.

Tataryn shrugged again. "Eh, those were more...guidelines than anything. Kseniya had fun. That's what matters."
You rubbed your forehead, wondering if he was just hiding his dismay or if he was so clever that he'd manipulated you into rage-buying his child an imperial ton of sweets. Goddamn hustler. Either way, you weren't winning this confrontation. Not from that angle.

"Well, you can return the favor by helping watch Isha while I'm gone. Don't give me that look. I already found a spot for Távio, Chang agreed to take him on a trial basis after Family Day. If that doesn't work out, then you can go back to working on a placement for him."

Tataryn laughed. "Oh Lucky, what do I know about murderbirds?"

"I have an entire manual you can reference," you said. "And Rein and Winston have already agreed to help too. So you're not on your own." You didn't trust Tataryn to do anything without some oversight. "Gabriel's come up with another training regimen for her, and I think you'll like the it. It involves lots of sneaking."

Tataryn eyed your murderbird speculatively. "She is quite smart, yes?"

"She can open doors now," you said. "I've put a tracker in her collar, but I assume it's only a matter of time before she figures that out. And she's been sniffing around the vents, so make sure you keep her harness on. Athena has also been helping me keep an eye on her."

"Those little hands are very delicate..." Tataryn eyed her speculatively, and you wondered if there would be a series of jewel thefts while you were out.

"You are not using her to break into places," you said firmly.

"...The thought never crossed my mind," Tataryn said smoothly, though you knew better than to believe him. "All right, Lucky, I will do this thing for you. With Winston and Wilhelm's help, of course. In fact, I think if I get enough peanut butter and currywurst, maybe they will do most of the work, yes?"

"Maybe," you said, understanding that was the best you could hope for.

Tataryn sat back on the couch looking smug. You had one more thing to fling at him.

"So, I know it's not my business, but you need to talk to your kid. She has some suspicions about her paternity and thinks that's why you don't spend much time with her."

Tataryn's transformation was instantaneous; his face hardened, his shoulders tensed. "She is my daughter," he said, voice chilly. "When she cried in the night, I rocked her to sleep. When she took her first steps, then fell on face, I was there to pick her up. When her mother was murdered..." he trailed off, gritting his teeth.

"Then talk to her, Tataryn. She needs to hear it from you," you said. "She's a smart kid, but she draws some pretty cynical conclusions. Think she's developing some abandonment issues too." And you would recognize those.

Tataryn ran his fingers through his hair. "I see," he said, tone going from angry to flat.

"Don't get snippy with me, I'm just passing on my observations," you said and reached over to pat Isha's head. She'd been awfully quiet, and when you looked down, you realized then that she'd been helping herself to the ham while you were distracted by Tataryn. The entire package was now gone. "Really, Isha?" You held up the empty packaging, with a frown.

She looked around, pretending not to see and began to groom herself, paying extra attention
"No, thank you for sharing. I had not realized that things had progressed that far. I will...talk to her," Tataryn said. "I was hoping that discussion could wait, but..." He leaned back on the couch, propping his feet up on the coffee table. "Anything else I should know?"

"...Stop telling her I'm in love with you," you deadpanned. "I know you're the reason she thinks that."

Tataryn began to laugh, not even trying to deny it. "You aren't? After all we've been through together?" He clutched at his chest, shoulders shaking. "How could you do this to me?" He choked out. "Such a cruel woman-"

Rolling your eyes, you scooped up Isha and left Tataryn in the rec room, still doubled over laughing.

"Reyes, you smarmy bastard, it's been forever!" The older man's ribbons and medals jangled as he clapped Gabriel on the back, laughing as he turned the move into a bearhug. "And you can still fit your goddamn army uniform, you fucking showoff!"

Gabriel stood in the office, not in Blackwatch gear, but in a pixelated camouflage uniform. The chestpiece was bizarrely ostentatious, with a brilliant red crest in the center, and he rocked the sleeveless leather duster that he wore over the whole ensemble. It had to be hot, but you were standing in an air conditioned office, and Gabriel could always just take off his jacket. Or more...

"It's General Singh, now is it?" Gabriel laughed, returning the hug. "How the hell did that happen?"

"Nobody else wanted the job." General Akal Singh was short, but thickly built, with mahogany skin, a turban, and a beard the color of steel wool. He was probably in his early fifties. "I might have arm wrestled for it while I was drunk. I don't remember any more."

Gabriel laughed even harder at that. "You lying bastard, you've been maneuvering for this for years!"

Singh just gave a satisfied smirk. "Yeah, well, we can't all be famous international heroes. Just glad I could finally get you to grace us with your presence-"

Gabriel rolled his eyes. "Well if you'd been the one to ask me, jefe..."

Singh sat on his large wooden desk, his gaze traveling to you and Jesse. The two of you were in your Overwatch armor sets, in official colors and everything for Operation Black Abacus. Your new set, because you'd battered the shit out of your first one on Operation Cobblestone Dust, now bore the same protective metal collar your Blackwatch armor had. Your carbine and wakizashi stayed clipped to your back. Your tanto stayed on your hip, and you'd brought a blue shemagh, just in case you needed to be more...discrete. But after this visit to so many "official" installations alongside Gabriel, you'd be on radar, not just with the US intelligence community, but probably Talon. Still, you knew you couldn't stay a shadow forever, not if you were in Jack and Gabriel's bodyguard rotation. Lacroix had agreed with this assessment, acknowledging the value of your work was worth the end of your anonymity, and telling you to keep your head down as best
you could.

Jesse wore his hat low over his eyes, his black serape draped to hide the movement of his arms. He was more nervous about this visit than you, chewing on his bottom lip and staring hard at walls. Of course, Jesse had been a member of the Deadlock gang: some people might recognize him.

Singh studied you both, his brown eyes sharp. "If you tell me they're your secretaries, I'm going to dump my coffee on your head."

"You wish you could reach that high," Gabriel smirked. "Agent Strike in fact does handle quite a bit of my paperwork. It's what makes her so mean."

With half your face behind your metal collar, you let yourself smile at that.

"And Agent McCree can do it in a pinch."

"Bodyguards who do your paperwork? Maybe you Overwatch folks are on to something," Singh said, shaking his head. "And who look like that? Honestly Reyes, what else are they? Your backup dancers?"

Jesse snorted, but you narrowed your eyes.

Gabriel just laughed. "Jealous, Akal?"

"Choking on it," he admitted.

"Well, now that you've met them, I'd prefer if you used their callsigns. Gunslinger," Gabriel said, gesturing to Jesse. "And Wendigo." He pointed at you slyly.

You weren't sure if the nickname came from the cannibalism rumors Tataryn had started. Or if Gabriel just liked giving you "hungry monster" callsigns. Either way, someone was going to get it later.

Singh raised his brows. "Well...I never expected you to start a superhero team, but I approve. Maybe you can get them those fancy spandex outfits?"

"How have you not been done for sexual harassment yet?" Gabriel laughed, rolling his eyes.

"I don't say that shit to people under me. Your Gunslinger and Wendigo don't work for me, so they can tell me to fuck off. Anyway, did you want a tour of the facilities?"

"No, but I'm sure you want to walk us around the base making smartass comments," Gabriel said.

"I want more of your time, Reyes. You're not just here to give rousing speeches for the DOD," Singh said shaking a finger. "Morrison wouldn't even do it, and he's got more patience for the brass than you do."

"The brass?" Gabriel laughed. "Like you aren't one of them now."

"Guilty," Singh said with a pained smile. "But I want to hear all about it. You wouldn't come unless there was something big."

Gabriel just smiled politely. "Maybe I just missed your ugly face."
Singh laughed at that, his expression still thoughtful as he turned his gaze back to you and Jesse. "Well then, shall we begin the tour?"

At first you thought it was an Army facility, because SEP had been under the Special Forces branch, but the Quantico Base belonged to the Marines. Apparently, the FBI, DEA, DIA, and other agencies also used it as a training center, so that's where Gabriel would be hosting his talks.

It wasn't too far from DC, and they were bringing all sorts over for a seminar on Omnic Integration and what they were calling "the Overwatch Effect." It had been defined as a popular movement toward the rapid expansion of a globalized task force to handle humanitarian efforts, and international defense, as inspired by Overwatch. Not everyone thought it was a good thing, and you wondered how much backlash Gabriel was going to get today.

Gabriel walked alongside General Singh, while Jesse and you brought up the rear. There was a massive mess hall, large hangers for a variety of vehicles, and lots of people passing through, some in hurry, some not, but all taking a moment to salute General Singh and Gabriel. Then they took a longer moment to stare.

"This is real uncomfortable, sugarpie," Jesse murmured out of the corner of his mouth. "I still think you shoulda brought Genji instead."

"His identity is even more of a secret than ours," you said. And he and Hanzo were helping Epsilon Squad guard Jack. Gabriel might be giving speeches to the military and intelligence community, but the general public wasn't aware of his presence. Jack was visiting DC, ostensibly to request more funding for Overwatch. There would be supporters and protesters in the streets. There would be 24 hour news networks covering his every move. And through it all, Talon would be watching.

You'd already seen a network news puff piece about what Jack ate for dinner yesterday - crap apparently, when you and Gabriel weren't around to feed him. He'd had a Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese, large fries, and gone on to get a milkshake from a local ice cream shop. In contrast, Gabriel had treated you and Jesse to nice steakhouse, one where he apparently knew the owner. The three of you had gotten a discrete booth in the back, and eaten expensive beef while the owner - a man who'd served with Gabriel before SEP - sat with you and chatted about old times, basketball teams, and the best ways to age meat.

"Want to run the night vision obstacle course? We've got some endurance challenges. Maybe you want to test pilot a heli?"

"Fuck you," Gabriel grumbled at Singh. "That's all kids' stuff, and I am already certified to fly, you smart ass."

"Oh come on, your bodyguards are going to be bored here, listening to us veterans shoot the shit."

"I know exactly where this going," Gabriel shook his head. "You haven't changed a bit, general. You just want to pit them against your people for bragging rights and betting pools."

Singh looked over his shoulder, flashing you both a shrewd smile. "Maybe. I am curious
about what they can do."

"Maybe you need to sweeten the pot, sir," Jesse drawled. "I mean, what do we get out of
this? And don't say "pride in a job well done," because that's cheap as fuck."

You smacked Jesse in the arm. "Don't start, we have a job to do."

"Come on Wendigo, where's your sense of friendly competition?" Gabriel said, smiling
with too many teeth. He crossed his arms. "I think as long as one of you is on duty, the other can
have a little fun."

You glared at him sharply. You were here to watch his back and observe the crowd. You
weren't here to perform like a trained monkey and draw more attention.

"Let's walk. We can find something for each other you. I've got a state of the art range here.
You can even pick the firearms, Gunslinger. And uh...Wendigo, we did just pass the mess hall,"
Singh chuckled along with Gabriel.

You were going to strangle Gabriel. Shaking your head, you followed, keeping an eye on
both men and your surroundings. Singh brought you to an outdoor range, picking up some ear
protection as he went. There were several lanes, with a variety of paper, clay, and digital targets.
The porch from the armory building had a few benches, and observers. The occupants straightened
up and saluted as soon as they saw Singh.

You and Jesse switched on your decibel blockers, while Gabriel put on a pair of earmuffs.

"I assume Gunslinger might enjoy this?" Singh asked. "Figured Reyes would bring a
shooter. You're welcome to join in too...Wendigo."

You just stared flatly at the older man, and he laughed.

Jesse glanced at Gabriel. "Sir?"

"Have at it," Gabriel said cheerfully, leaning up against the building. "But if you make us
look bad, you're walking home."

Jesse blew out a breath, shaking his head. "Well what do you got?"

"Is Captain DeVevo here?" Singh asked, not looking surprised when a woman stepped out
of her lane, a large rifle slung over her shoulders.

"Sir." She was tan, with fine features, almost too delicate for a soldier. Almost. It looked
like she'd put a lot of hard work into correcting that impression: her nose had been broken a few
times, a slim scar crossed her left eye, though it seemed like she still had the use of the eye, and she
had a strong jaw, chin set at a stubborn angle. She was a street fighter princess in MARPAT
camouflage. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a bun.

"Didn't you win a gold in target shooting at the Olympics a few years ago?" Gabriel asked,
narrowing his eyes, because wasn't it such a coincidence she was here right now?

"Yes, sir," she said, her voice lower than you expected.

Jesse grinned at her.

"We'd like to have a friendly little competition," Singh said. "DeVevo and
Agent...Gunslinger. One of you picks the target, the other picks the weapons."

"Ladies first," Jesse said.

"Fifty meter free pistol, one handed. Six shots since you're carrying a revolver. You can use yours as long as you have iron sights," she said, studying Jesse's stance and weapon.

"I do," he said, tipping his hat and drawing his revolver. "Not to be fresh, but I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

She gave a wry smile and set down her rifle, drawing her pistol from her shoulder holster. "Revolver, huh? That really fits the ensemble, cowboy."

"Jams less than those fancy semi-autos," Jesse said with a shrug. "I can use them too, just prefer this."

The pair of them took two lanes, digital targets appearing in the distance. They were scored based on the rings within the bullseye, the center being the highest point value.

DeVevo shot fast, her posture straight, her face cool as she fired one-handed.

Jesse held himself similarly, a delighted smile on his face as he fanned his revolver. DeVevo was done faster, benefit of a semi-automatic, but when the scores came back, Jesse had beaten her by two points, each of his six shots hitting the target dead center.

Singh whistled appreciatively. "Well, then. That was some fine shooting from you both. Thanks for the demo, Captain."

DeVevo nodded curtly, her expression sour, but the look was gone as soon as she extended her arm to shake Jesse's hand. "That was certainly impressive," she said to him, her eyes thoughtful. "Where'd you get your training?"

Jesse jerked a thumb at Gabriel. "Some from him, some from Captain Amari, ma'am."

She nodded, the look on her face speculative and almost friendly. "Well, nice meeting you, cowboy. Next time I won't hold back."

"Looking forward to it," Jesse said, tipping his hat.

"You think we should buy them dinner?" Singh said, nudging Gabriel.

"I think you owe them something for humoring you," Gabriel drawled. "And you definitely owe me-"

"You're just looking forward to showing off your protégés," Singh said as DeVevo lingered, turning her sharp eyes on you. "What do you specialize in, Wendigo?"

"Cake-eating contests," you said dryly.

Singh raised a fuzzy brow then glanced at Gabriel. Gabriel's eyebrows remained level, and he smiled. Both of Singh's brows rose higher.

You glanced at Jesse, whose eyebrows drew together. You understood what that meant. Yes, Singh and Gabriel both communicated via the eyebrow language with each other. But you and Jesse understood it too.
"Well, I guess we could go back to the food hall—" Singh began.

"Why don't we wander around a bit? I'm sure something will catch Wendigo's eye," Gabriel said, sounding far too smug. "I've eaten the food here, it's passable, but having any kind of mess-catered eating contest is a recipe for disaster. Unless you like spending hours in the bathroom."

You shrugged, not really wanting to eat a bunch of military-grade cake. That just sounded awful, to be honest.

"I figured her for a melee fighter," Singh nodded approvingly. "They're doing combat knife coursework over by the mess hall."

Gabriel's smile widened. You sighed, rubbing your forehead. For some reason, you had flashbacks of fighting Athena in front of the recruits. Oh yes, because that showoff Gabriel got you into that mess too.

"Let's go see," Singh said, rubbing his hands together gleefully. Singh and Gabriel led the way, while you hung back with Jesse and DeVevo.

"I am fine calling you Gunslinger and Wendigo," DeVevo winked at you both. She was tall, with a confident, easy smile. "My given name is Vashtai. Yes, Mom was a bit of a drama queen."

"You can call me Joel," Jesse said with a wink.

"Wend-y," you said and immediately regretted it.

DeVevo laughed. "The general was pretty excited to hear from Commander Reyes. Apparently, they knew each other back in the day, and Reyes conducted some dramatic rescues for him a few times during the Omnic Crisis."

You glanced at Gabriel and Singh, Singh making lively gestures while Gabriel laughed. It was pleasant to get this window into his past. Gabriel told funny stories, to be sure, but he didn't like his war stories, and you understood that feeling.

"So are you a sniper?" Jesse asked.

"Qualified, but I run a small troubleshooting squad," she said with a shrug. "Usually need to be on the frontlines for that."

Gabriel and Singh had stopped, and you sighed, eyeing the circle of two dozen men and women in combat fatigues and t-shirts, wielding familiar wooden knives edged with lipstick. You rubbed your forehead. Of course, this was a military training exercise. You wondered if Jack and Gabriel used it as foreplay, and then mentally scolded yourself for getting distracted. Because now you wanted to see them play it with each other. You'd fight the winner, and well...

"Does this look like fun to you, Wendy?" Singh asked, his eyes twinkling.

You gave him and Gabriel a sharp look, because if you were going to spar with someone, you'd probably need to take your armor off. You turned to Jesse, as you loosened the seals, and handed him your chestpiece, gun, and wakizashi. The tanto could stay where it was. You whipped the shemagh off your belt and tied it over your lower jaw, Old West outlaw style. Let them think it was a theme. Gabriel Reyes and His Shoot'em and Loot'em Outlaw Posse. You flinched inwardly at that title. You were going to pretend like that stray thought never crossed your mind and smack Jesse for it later.
Singh blinked, but didn't comment. "I need a gentle volunteer for a friendly match with one of our Overwatch guests," he called.

You watched a few men and women stand at attention, giving you curious looks. A tall, rangy man with rough hewn features and a shaved head, stepped forward. He had a wide nose, deep set eyes, and thin lips. He looked like he should have been bulkier, though he was all lean wiry muscle.

"Sir," he rasped, sounding like he had a bad case of laryngitis.

"Lieutenant Salazar," Singh nodded. "Practice blades. Three strikes. Don't get too carried away." He gave you a cheerful smile. "Agent Wendy was going to challenge you to a cake-eating contest, but decided this would be easier on the body."

"It's true!" Someone called out.

"Aww, you can take it off, sweetheart. Don't be shy. We're all ugly here!"

"Don't listen to him, that's sexy as-"

You shot a wry glance at Gabriel, who was eyeing the crowd with a frown. Jesse hadn't faced this level of scrutiny, but then a proper knife fight did require a responsive and bloodthirsty audience calling out commentary, heckling the combatants, and making loud bets on their favorites.

Singh marked the blades in full view and handed one to each of you. "This is a friendly match, so try to keep to your organs on the inside."

You smiled behind your scarf, watching Salazar's dark eyes. He smiled thinly at you. The conversations, cheers, and shouts faded to a dull roar. Salazar was tall and he had range. You circled him, ignoring Gabriel. You knew the rules: make Blackwatch, or in this case Overwatch, look good, and don't get too banged up. Everything else was secondary.

Salazar feinted, lunging forward and stomping a foot, drawing "oohs" from the crowd. You skidded to the right, keeping an eye on his knifehand. He was right-handed and fast, but not like Hanzo or Genji. The major advantage he had was long reach. You could counter that by getting too close for his long arms to matter.

Grinning you darted in, coming within inches of his nose, before ducking under his defensive slash, swiping him across the hip, and swinging back to the side.

"First blood!" Someone howled, and the soldiers around you began stomping their feet.

"Come on Salazar!"

"Holy shit, look at them go!"

"OO-RAH!" You could feel their shouts resonating in your bones. But the fact they were cheering for your opponent didn't bother you in the least. They weren't your people, after all.

"Come on, Wendigo!" You heard Jesse in the distance, your ears keyed to his distinctive drawl.

Salazar leapt forward, getting an impressive amount of air, and you ducked to the side, barely missing his bold crosscut. Despite his dour appearance, it seemed he was a showman. You
circled him, grinning as he made a kissy face at you, drawing more howls and laughter from the audience. You were going to have to do something about that.

Salazar lunged again, this time grabbing your the wrist of your knife hand as he thrust the wooden blade at your gut. You slammed your freehand into his forearm, knocking the strike off-target. And then you followed up with a knee to the gut, because he'd let you get that close. He grunted at the strike, releasing your knife hand and you jabbed him in the stomach, because that was what he'd been planning to do to you.

"Oh, we're getting personal now! Looks like Wendy's got some lipstick on her gloves. But Salazar is one strike away from defeat!" Singh called out. "Come on, marine! No bellyachin' even if she did nail you in the guts! Where's your goddamn pride?"

Salazar straightened up, a pained smile on his face. It wasn't hard to tell that that knife jab had hurt. Good. He charged forward, and if Gabriel or Jack had done that, you'd be fucked, in more ways than one. But Salazar was an unenhanced human. You spun, drilling a roundhouse kick into his forearm, knocking the knife out of his hand. It was a terribly impractical move for a real knife fight, and you might have gotten some lipstick on your boot, but it was worth the second strike penalty. He was disarmed and you tucked your knife in your belt, grinning at him behind the shemagh. You stood between him and his weapon, and while you could end it on a quickly, it wouldn't hurt to prolong the fight, just a little.

Salazar eyes darted to your belt, and then your empty hands. He gave you a dark look and his foot snapped forward in a front kick. You dodged to the side, and he lunged forward for the knife.

You were behind him in an instant one arm around his throat, and even as he kept reaching for his fallen weapon, you dragged the wooden blade lightly across his mouth, making a soft kissing noise in his ear while you did it. Then you released him, taking a step back and letting him drop onto the ground.

"Third Strike!" Singh groaned.

Salazar spun around, a wry smile on his face.

"It looks like Wendy wins a whole mess hall cake all to herself!" Singh announced.

"Oh no," you groaned and then extended a hand to help Salazar up. He took it, shaking his head. His grip was firm, and he held your hand for a second too long.

"I will be avenged," he said.

"Well, that's only if I eat it. I could keep it as a paperweight or a bludgeon."

Salazar cracked a delighted grin, and it softened his face immensely. "Good match, Wendy."

"Friendly, even," you said.

"You fight mean," he said approvingly. He glanced at the tanto in your belt. "May I see?"

You drew it, letting him inspect the blade.

He gave a low whistle of approval. "That is downright sexy. I'm going to have to ask who made this and where can I get one?"
"The smith's name is Kobayashi, she's in Japan. She doesn't take shit from her clients either, so be polite."

"I am an absolute gentleman." He gave you a very ungentlemanly grin. "Also, I think this is the part where I ask you to marry me," Salazar said casually as he touched his face, smearing the lipstick. "I don't know if my husband will approve at first, but, you know, he can learn to share."

You laughed pretty hard at that.

Salazar placed his hand over his heart. "I'm dead serious, bomboncita. I think the Captain is too, though she might be torn between you and your cowboy friend."

You looked over your shoulder and Jesse and DeVevo waved at you, DeVevo winking, her smile a lot more flirtatious than before.

"Let's go, agent," Gabriel said, coming up behind you. "I think it's time for your cake."

"Whose side are you on?" You turned to face him, and your brows went up as Gabriel gave Salazar a hard look.

"No luring my agents off, marine," Gabriel scowled. "If she's going to date any branch, it'll be Army. That goes for you too, boy." He shot Jesse a severe look.

You snorted, and shook your head. Because Gabriel was just kidding, right? Yeah, he and Jack were army, and you certainly weren't looking to bag anyone else, but he couldn't be that competitive, could he?

"I don't know, I saw him eyeing this cute pilot the other day," you said and Jesse sputtered.

Singh watched this exchange with keen eyes. "All right, all right. Get back to work. I have to go make good on my promises and Commander Reyes has a speech to give."

Salazar shot you a mournful look and you blew him a kiss from behind your shemagh. He caught it and clutched it to his chest, wiping an eye, much to the amusement of the other soldiers.

Jesse laughed too, DeVevo leaning very close to him.

You thought of honeytraps and convenient excuses, and your smile faded just a little, not that anyone could tell. You put your armor back on, and checked your rifle after Jesse handed it back to you. Everything was fine, but when you looked at Gabriel, he was already walking with Singh.

You glanced at Jesse, his eyebrows raised in speculation. They furrowed, and you got the message, watching Gabriel's back as the two of you hurried to catch up.

Chapter End Notes

Have a book hangover right now. One of my longtime favorite series, the Kate Daniels series, by Ilona Andrews has come to an end. I enjoyed it for years. It was nice to sit down in bed with the dogs, read a good back, and take a nap.

Don't have a lot going on right now. Just minor adulting woes.
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

FBI? Man that shit gets into everything.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Gabriel's talk, he fielded questions from the bigwigs while you and Jesse surveyed the crowd. It was a about a hundred people from varying agencies in the auditorium, and it was surprisingly easy to pick out the spooks. They came in a few varieties: there were the ones in suits and civilian wear, watching with flat eyes and dismissive looks, hungry sociopaths drawn to power and intrigue. There were the college kids, fresh out of school with big ideas, a library of spy thrillers, and no chill. And then there were the types like you, the ones who'd blend in, slap on a uniform: military, culinary, janitorial, and play the role.

It was a little surprising how adept you were at spotting that third group now. It was in the eyes, that hyperawareness and concealed tension that you were intimately familiar with. Can't bullshit a bullshitter: you knew their tricks.

Together, you and Jesse counted at least a dozen, from a variety of agencies. You'd left a fish torpedo in your vehicle, and while you did slightly worry about Athena taking it for a joyride, you wondered if they'd be bold enough to tamper with the car. Athena would, of course, be fine and warn you, but you weren't too happy about receiving this level of scrutiny.

Singh awarded each of you a bottle of whiskey and then very reluctantly broke open a bottle of scotch to share. And since it was a shame to pair such fine alcohol with military rations, the general's assistant ran out to pick up good burgers.

It was a little strange to eat dinner in a general's office, listening to him and Gabriel talk about people you'd never met, but it was over soon enough and the three of you headed back to the hotel, Gabriel at the wheel.

You had a suite with two bedrooms connecting to a common area. The two bedrooms was easily explained by the fact that one of you was going to sit up to keep watch. But even with rotating watches, you weren't sleeping alone.

An Athena fish torpedo did a sweep of the room, picking up some listening devices, though no cameras. They hadn't been there earlier, and so you had to get the hotelier and arrange for new rooms because of a plumbing malfunction. Possibly one that you and Jesse engineered with gun oil and dirty socks.

"Who in the alphabet soup do you think is responsible?" Jesse asked as you moved up a few floors, Athena inspecting the new quarters and finding them acceptable.

"NSA," you said, taking off your armor and setting it aside.
"CIA," Jesse countered, kicking off his boots.

Gabriel just glared at the new room, carrying your bags to the bedroom.

"...You going to be OK, sweetpea?" Jesse asked, as the door shut.

"Yeah, why?"

"He's sure sore about something," Jesse said. "Maybe it's because I got Vashtai's number. Don't know what I can do with it, but..."

You smiled. You'd figured it out pretty quickly, and Jesse probably had too, but you appreciated his discretion. "I'll handle him, if you want to take first watch."

"...I think that would be safest for everyone involved," Jesse laughed. "Athena, you sweet bucket of bolts, you done running that backtrace?"

"Agent McCree, you fragrant meatsack, yes I am."

You and Jesse paused, and blinked at each other.

"Oh...Oh Athena, you're going to have to explain that one," Jesse said slowly.

"My response was merely a reflection of your semantic patterns in regards to pet name phrasing: proper noun, pronoun, sensory-based adjective, then a noun phrase poetically summarizing your base components, and finally an answer to your query. Complex, but just mimicry on my part," Athena said. "Did I do it wrong?"

"Oh no, you did it perfectly," you laughed. "You burned him."

"Athena, sweetpea, please why you gotta pick on your cowboy?" Jesse sighed. "Genji and Ziv are such a bad influence..."

There was a moment as the fish torpedo's lights blinked. "But I mimicked you..."

"She has you there," you laughed, patting Jesse on the back as he hung his head. "You forwarded the data to our tablets? We can start triangulating-"

"Oh, I did better than that. I traced it back to the reporting station, opened a backdoor, inserted our own...entry, and now have eyes on the entire operation. It seems that the Federal Bureau of Investigation is actually monitoring us."

"Not the feebs," Jesse groaned, because there was history there.

"Yes, and they are a lot less interested in Commander Reyes and very keen on finding out more about you and Agent McCree. They seem to have his rap sheet already pulled up. They aren't sure about you, Lucky."

"...There shouldn't be much to find," you said. Because even if you'd had run-ins with the law, they'd never been able to keep you. You'd never gotten high level recognition for your activities. And the you from before was unrecognizable compared to the you now.

Jesse frowned. "They going to try to move against us?"

"Not yet. I'm sifting through quite a bit of data. Some of it is legitimate concern about your motivates, but a lot seems to be politically-motivated. Higher-ups wanting some kind of leverage..."
"...Wait, did you just hack the FBI?" You rubbed your forehead. "Of course you did. Just...make sure they don't know you did it."

"Oh Lucky, I thought I'd leave a smarmy taunt letting them know that Overwatch is on to their clumsy surveillance, while using a creepy fake robot voice, and plastering all available screens with their embarrassing yearbook photos."

"What?" Your voice went high.

"Well, just the agents in charge," Athena said cheerfully. "I can dig up more if you like."

"...OK, umm, you do what you have to do. Just don't start any major diplomatic incidents and please don't get caught. I know that's obvious stuff and I trust you, but this is all above my pay grade," you said.

"I was just going to ask if you wanted to play cards again..." Jesse sighed, sitting down at the table. "But I guess you're busy."

"Oh no, I can play poker with you too. It doesn't add much processing load to my systems. I could honestly do it while emptying data caches. So don't worry, Agent McCree. I'll keep you company and play by your regional rules."

Jesse winced at the implications. "Thank you kindly, Athena."

"So is this going to be with or without the copious cheating?"

You knocked on the bedroom door. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," Gabriel's answer came in a hoarse voice, and you peeked in. He had changed into sweats and a t-shirt and he was stuffing his dirty laundry into a bag. The covers on the queen sized bed had already been turned down. Was he going to sleep so soon?

"Athena's monitoring the FBI agents who set the bugs. And Jesse's keeping first watch." You stepped in a shut the door behind you. "Couldn't wait for me?"

Gabriel gave you a wry smile. " Been hard since you tied that damn scarf around your face." He sat down on the bed and patted the spot beside him. "Though I didn't like watching all those jarheads drooling over you-"

"Guess you shouldn't have volunteered me for a game of one-upmanship," you said, taking your armor off.

"Yeah, I know. But I'm not sorry that I did. You looked good out there." Gabriel's voice was rough and he pushed his hair back. His eyes burned and you swallowed, knowing he didn't want to be gentle tonight.

"Can't go all out till the mission's over," you said, regretfully as you sat down beside him.

"I know. Just feeling...possessive. And I know we can't play like I want to - you need to be in fighting shape." Gabriel pressed a tense kiss to your shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I'm OK for now."
"Because you hurried in here to jerk off, or...?"

Gabriel gave you a sharp look. Because that was exactly what he had done.

You straddled his lap, grinning. "What were you thinking about?" Already you could feel him stiffening against you, and you leaned forward, your teeth grazing his ear. "Because I'm disappointed that I didn't get to watch, papi."

Groaning, Gabriel dug his fingers into your thighs. "You goddamn tease. Didn't we already establish that we shouldn't-"

You slid between his knees, pushing his thighs apart. Stroking him through his pants, you winked at him. "If you're feeling possessive, won't you enjoy the sight of me on my knees? I'm not as good at this as Jack, but you can be rough. I'll tap if it's too much."

Gabriel groaned, stripping off his pants. "You're damn right you will, baby. That's an order." He cupped your face. "Love it when you look at me like that."

"Like you're a snack?"

Gabriel's smile curved wickedly. "Keep it up. We'll see who gets eaten alive."

"You, obviously," you said, getting in the last word before you went to work. Hands on his thighs, you stayed on your knees at eye-level with his cock. You took a moment to lick stripes along the side, pushing back the foreskin and working your tongue along the head while his grip on your hair tightened.

You took the hint and opened wide, slowly swallowing him inch by inch.

"Good girl," Gabriel murmured, stroking your hair. He thrust the rest of the way in and you gagged, fingers digging into his thighs. Panting you tried to relax your throat, gasping as he pulled out, gave you a second to breathe, and then pushed back in. Gabriel facefucked you at a harsh rhythm, his hands in your hair. "That's it, hermosa, you're doing so well."

Your eyes watered, but you moved with him, trying to keep up. His cock was hot and slick in your mouth, and sometimes your teeth grazed him, but he didn't seem to mind. He was enjoying the control too much, knowing that he had you at his mercy, that you trusted him to do this to you.

"You look so pretty like this," he sighed, voice hoarse. "Going to fuck you into the mattress after this, babygirl. Need to watch you coming on my dick. Need to remind you that you're mine."

Remind you? Or remind himself? You weren't too bothered either way.

Your eyes fluttered as he sped up. You were a mess already, drooling around his cock. Your panties were damp, heat already coiling inside you. It must have shown on your face, because Gabriel chuckled.

"I'll take care of you afterward, hermosa. I always do. But you have to earn it, you little cocktease. Do you know how hard I was while I was trying to give that damn talk? If I hadn't had the podium there, things could have gotten awkward fast."

You moaned around his shaft, one hand carefully massaging his balls. He growled in response, and jerked his hips, speeding up.

"I'll tell you, I was all ready to go when we got back to our room. But those fucking feds..." Gabriel trailed off. "Figured I'd take care of things and let you rest. Maybe see if you were up for
quickie in the shower in the morning. Didn't think that presumptuous bastard got any good hits in, but wasn't sure how you were feeling..." He exhaled. "But you're here now." He rested one hand on the back of your neck, inhaling slowly. "That's what matters."

Your neck and jaw ached and each thrust went deep enough to choke you, but you didn't tap, too focused on finishing him off. He was one twisted nerve away from losing control, and you couldn't wait. Breathing hard, Gabriel tensed beneath you, and then the first drops of cum hit your throat. You coughed, trying to swallow the rest, but it came too fast, and you drew back, still coughing as you wiped your lips, some of the thick liquid spattering your face and chest.

"Aww, got you all dirty," Gabriel said, not sounding the least bit sorry. "Here, let me help." He leaned over, fingers brushing against your chin as he gathered up some of the mess. Dark eyes on yours, he pushed his fingers into your mouth, watching you lick them clean. Then he hauled you up against him, kissing your swollen lips. You barely had time to catch your breath before he was pulling your shirt off. You stripped down, and suddenly Gabriel had you on your back.

"Wasn't thinking clearly. Should have gotten a picture of you like that for Jack. He'd love seeing you with that dazed look and my cum on your pretty face." He squeezed your tits together, tongue sliding across your nipples as you arched beneath him. He sucked each one, rolling your breasts in his hands while you rubbed against his thigh. "I can fucking hear how wet you are," Gabriel rasped in your ear. "Do you need it that badly?" He asked, like he didn't already know.

"Yes, papi," you sighed, kissing his jaw. "I can show you how much." You reached down to stroke yourself, but Gabriel batted your hand away.

"No, babygirl, I said I'm going to take care of you." He rubbed the tip of his cock against your lower lips, jaw clenching. "You just lie back enjoy. Try not to be too loud. Don't want to scare the kids next door."

You covered your mouth, biting back a cry as he pushed inside you, that first thrust a heady mix of pleasure and strain. He stretched you out, groaning into your shoulder as he went in to the hilt. He filled you up completely and you bit down on your metal fingers, whimpering. You shook beneath him, your knees bent, feet digging into the mattress.

"So beautiful, corazón." He nuzzled your throat. "And all mine." He chuckled as he rocked his hips and you moaned. "Jack's too. But I saw you first." He pushed your hair back as he looked you in the eye. There was a gentleness on his face that made you weak, something he only showed Jack and you.

"Gabriel, please-"

He kissed you, mouth covering yours as he pulled out and then slammed back in.

You shrieked into his mouth, fingers digging into his forearms. "We can't-" you stuttered when he released you. "Bed squeaks."

"You squeak," Gabriel laughed, his beard tickling your cheek. "And it's goddamn adorable." He stroked your sides. "I know, I know. We can't go all out." He chuckled. "Wrap your legs around my waist and hold on tight."

You obeyed, shivering as he kissed your neck. He rolled his hips, staying deep inside you, one hand gliding across your clit.

"Is this what you wanted?" He asked, tone playful.
"Yes, papi," you moaned, just to feel him twitch inside you.

"Keep that up and I'll have you screaming," he threatened. "And then we'll both have to apologize to them in the morning."

You hugged him closer. "Need you too. Don't tease."

"Don't worry, babygirl. When we're done here, going to get you and Jack and we'll make up for lost time. Doesn't matter where. I'll break into the goddamn infirmary if I have to," he growled, fingers pressing hard against your clit. You whined softly, as he rolled his hips, pushing deeper against your cervix. "That's not an excuse to get banged up though. You hear me? Any careless behavior and I'll be edging your cute ass till you cry." The threat didn't worry you, you could hear the concern in his voice, and the rough emotion surprised you just a little.

"I'll do my best," you promised, kissing his face.

He smiled at you, fingers rubbing slow circles around your clit. "All right then. You've been good so far. Not your fault those jarheads can't keep their eyes to themselves." He kissed you again. "You were fucking gorgeous out there, you cocky little shit. You could have finished it in half the time."

"Had to put on a show, keep things fun."

"That's Jack's kink. I like girls who take care of business efficiently."

"Who said I was putting on a show for you?" You laughed. "Had to work the crowd. Win points for Overwatch. And don't you get mad, you made me do it."

Gabriel growled at that, his fingers moving faster. "Not doing my job well enough if you can still sass me." His hips sped up, moving in time with his fingers. His cock stroked in and out of you, hitting your g-spot, and filling you up. You dug your heels into his ass, hands clutching his forearms.

"You're wound so tight," he groaned. "Come on baby, let it go." He pressed his forehead to yours. "I'm not done yet. Now be a good girl and come for me."

Panting, you moaned into his mouth as he drove you over the edge, holding you against the mattress, while you shook underneath him. Flat against the bed, you lay there, trying to catch your breath while he kissed your face.

"Not too rough?" He asked.

You shook your head.

"Up for more?"

"Give me a second," you laughed, kissing his chin.

"Now you can touch yourself." The words were tight and eager. He'd denied you that once, but he was a benevolent lover. And he liked giving you permission. "I want to watch you play with that needy pussy. I'll keep you nice and quiet, don't worry." He kissed your forehead.

You began to touch yourself, biting your lip as he shifted into sitting position, one hand cupping your face, the other arm wrapped around your waist. He closed his eyes, teeth gritted as he canted his hips, his motions smooth.
Still sensitive, you squirmed, eyes on Gabriel's face. With his eyes shut and his head thrown back, he was only focused the feel of your bodies. Most of the time, he watched you with fierce pleasure or careful concentration. You liked seeing him like this too, lost in the moment, the rest of the world forgotten.

He opened his eyes, mouth curving in a smile as he looked at you. "Keep stroking yourself. Love how eager you are for me." He sighed as your thighs tensed, your fingers pressing harder against your clit. "I'm close, baby. Just waiting for you-"

You trembled, pussy clenching around him. He leaned forward, placing his large hand over your mouth.

"Go on then," he purred. "Let me feel that juicy pussy milking me. Going to fill this greedy hole too. You like that, don't you? Being soaked in my cum?"

His hand muffled your cries as you came, your inner muscles trying to pull him deeper inside you. Gabriel growled, burying his face in your hair. His orgasm came on the tail of yours, and he held you tight, fingers digging into your flesh with bruising force. You clung to him, doing your best to stay quiet.

Very slowly he pulled out, taking a moment to grab his t-shirt. You both watched as pearly fluid began to trickle out of you, and he gently wiped you clean, a satisfied smirk on his face.

"You're mine too, you know. You and Jack," you said patting his hand. "And I love you."

"Love you too, corazon." His smirk softened into a smile. "Thank you," he said, kissing your cheek. "I...needed that, that control from you. You didn't have to do that though. Wasn't your fault I felt like that..." He ran a hand through his sweaty hair. "But thank you."

"Oh yes, this was such a trial," you giggled, kissing his palm. "I was more annoyed about you volunteering me."

"...Sorry," he said. "That was...work."

"I know. It was cute how you tried to be lowkey about your possessiveness. "Oh, yeah, you can't date marines, agent." That doesn't sound suspicious at all."

"I'd say the same thing to anyone in my family. Marines have no sense of humor," he said with a straight face.

You snorted. "Uh-huh."

Gabriel sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I might have been...a little out of line."

You laughed. "Uh-huh."

"Thank you, for being understanding. I know a big grumpy possessive super soldier can be hard to manage," he admitted.

"Your words, not mine."

Gabriel laid back down, pulling you against him. "You're just too smug. I should have fucked you harder. Jack's right about that. You're just too much of a brat if we don't."

Giggling, you nestled against him and closed your eyes.
Sitting in the hotel room, you studied the dossiers Lacroix had sent over. Several of them you'd seen before. Most of them were part of the usual rogues gallery: terrorists, black hat hackers, and killers-for-hire. But Richard Prince was in town. And while he ran one of Nguyen's PMCs, he was persona non grata in the US. Aside from the leaked video of him beating a prisoner to death with his large cybernetic arms, Prince was known for his mercenary sense of loyalty. He was suspected of selling secrets to a number of unfriendly entities. If Prince was actually here overseeing the operation, Nguyen was getting serious.

Maybe that's what Nguyen and Petras had been meeting about. If Kwento actually became Undersecretary General, she could make both their lives much harder.

You sipped your coffee, shaking your head as you studied each picture, trying to commit these faces to your memory.

A box of doughnuts sat in the middle of the table, and the three of you sat around it, reading up on the opposition. Gabriel had let you sleep through your watch shift, waking up and taking it for you. And while you were grateful for the extra sleep, you weren't too sure about how to take the special treatment. It wasn't a good thing, professionally, not in the long run.

Jack was visiting Walter Reed Medical Center in Maryland, for another round of PR photos with politicians. Ainsley was with him, and Genji swore up and down she was behaving, and that if she did not, Hanzo would avenge your honor.

You weren't entirely sure you wanted to know what that entailed.

Athena gave you FBI status updates, mostly that they were panicking because you'd switched rooms.

"Agent Lacroix says that he is sending over an FBI contact, unaffiliated with the idiots tracking Agent McCree," Athena announced. "He should be here later this afternoon."

Gabriel raised a brow, draining his coffee. "Got an ID?"

"Agent Lugh Brant. Accessing his profile now," Athena said cheerfully.

"...You've already told Ziv that you broke in the FBI database, haven't you?" You picked up a jelly doughnut, rather pleased by the raspberry filling - not too sweet, not too gel-like. It was almost like a pudding, the flavor rich and satisfying.

"He's upset that I beat him to it," Athena said, not bothering to hide her smugness.

Shaking your head, you pulled up a picture of Agent Brant and stifled a laugh. He looked too young to shave, let alone carry a gun. And he had bright carrot-colored hair that stuck up in all directions, skin that burned if the day was anything less than totally overcast, and a law degree.

Right, so that was Plan D, as in Desperate.

Kwento landed today. Jack would be, coincidentally, having dinner in the restaurant across from her hotel. What a surprise. Fancy seeing you here. And then Genji would liaise with Zenyatta, who had been recalled specifically for this trip. You weren't sure how much of Operation Black Abacus Lacroix had shared with Kwento.

You weren't entirely sure where Lacroix and Ziv were. Lacroix would be handling damage
control on top of the op logistics. You weren't sure which politicians Lacroix was leveraging or how many trustworthy contacts he had, but you knew he was the one best suited for the job. And Amélie would be sniper support, though you weren't sure where she was either.

But strangely, that didn't bother you. Lacroix would get the job done right. And if he decided to be stubborn about anything, Ziv and Amélie would take him to task.

Shaking your head, you took a break from memorizing faces to check Kwento's itinerary. She would be meeting with the Secretary of State and having a luncheon tomorrow. And then they would take a tour of the Smithsonian complex. There were multiple Smithsonian museums, and security was tight. You would be there first thing in the morning, alone, inspecting the area with Athena. Genji, Hanzo, and Jesse would also be in different corners of the map, helping maintain eyes on the situation.

The day after tomorrow she would be addressing the members of Senate Committee on Omnic Relations in an "informal" luncheon, possibly meeting with several tech moguls interested in doing business in Numbani, and taking a tour of the White House.

There was a knock at the door. "Room service."

You and Jesse exchanged looks. Really? That was what they wanted to go with? Like they didn't expect you to know that one?

"Be there in a moment!" You called, strapping on your armor. You set the tablets aside and Athena began scanning for interference.

Jesse adjusted his armor, and took a look out the peephole. He held up one finger, eyes narrowed. The others would probably be around the corner.

Gabriel frowned at you both.

"I can-"

"You're our principal, sir," Jesse said. "So get geared up, and stay back. Me and Lucky will handle the first one."

"Alive, if you please," you reminded Jesse.

"And alive if I don't please, got it."

Gabriel took a moment to put his armor back on and you stood behind the door, waiting for Jesse's signal.

You opened the door, Jesse held his gun up.

"Wait! Don't shoot!" The man in the hotel uniform said, even as Jesse dragged him, and his food trolley, into the room. "Mustache Man asked me to come!"

Jesse slung him onto the ground, revolver pointed at his head. You quickly shut the door, waiting for his back up to charge forward.

The uniform cap fell off the intruder's head, revealing a mop of ginger hair. Agent Lugh Brant stared up at you from the floor, teeth clenched, his palms up. "Black Abacus! Black Abacus! I'm on your side! ID's in my jacket pocket. And I brought the whoopie pies! Just like Lacroix told me to!"
You wrinkled your nose, keeping your gun level at him. "What?"

"He said you guys appreciate your desserts. I figured you'd like some whoopie pies," Brant said. "It's a New England thing."

Jesse reached into the jacket pocket, and extracted the FBI ID badge. He tossed it to Gabriel, one hand holding his revolver steady.

Gabriel looked it over with a sigh. "You know some of your buddies already have us under surveillance."

"Why do you think I'm wearing this stupid uniform?" Brant asked not looking particularly worried by the guns you were pointing at him. "I'm trying to be discrete. It's already a clusterfuck out there."

"You should have found a way to let us know you were coming in advance," Gabriel said, coolly. "Surprising us is a good way to get killed."

Brant shrugged, running his hands through his messy hair. "Desperate times, desperate measures, and I figured your people were better trained than to just kill me for knocking on the door." He gave a sly grin. "I almost made a joke about other law enforcement agencies, but I guess it wouldn't be very funny." Brant shook his head. "Anyway, it's an honor Commander Reyes."

Gabriel sighed and gestured for the two of you to stand down. Jesse holstered his pistol and you clipped your carbine to your back. "What can you tell me about our watchers?"

Brant sighed. "Can I at least get off the floor?"

"Something wrong with the floor, agent?" Gabriel barked. "Is your federally-owned ass too good for the floor?"

"No, no, this floor is amazingly comfy. Didn't mean to complain," Brant said, and sat in lotus position, his expression pleasant. "You going to join me?"

"No," Gabriel said, and didn't elaborate.

Jesse waved Athena over and inspected the food cart. There was a covered dish and he let Athena scan the entire cart before he took the lid off. The plate was filled with what looked like giant Oreos, made of cake and pastry cream. They were the size of dessert plates and you fervently hoped they weren't poisoned.

"Everything checks out, though those "whoopie pies" are extremely high in sugar and fat."

"That is a ringing endorsement if I've ever heard one," Brant said. "I'll eat one first, if you're worried. Hell, I'll eat all of them, if you're worried."

Gabriel cleared his throat.

Brant's smile faded. "So there is some serious confusion over what that team was authorized to do versus what they've actually been doing. Maybe they'd like to try to override the amnesty agreement you offered Agent McCree there, but none of us actually have that authority." He glanced at you. "And no one knows who the fuck Ms. Strike really is, so I'm hoping the answer is "single, one of the good guys, and not a trigger-happy psychopath," in that order."

Gabriel gave Brant a very unfriendly look.
"No, yes, and only some of the time," you said dryly.

"Acceptable," Brant said, turning a little pink under Gabriel's gaze. You wondered if it was embarrassment, or if Gabriel's angry look was actually boiling the FBI agent alive under his skin. "Anyway," Brant said quickly. "There's been a lot of internal finger-pointing over this. My higher-ups are already moving to sweep things under the rug and they were really hoping you hadn't picked up on the surveillance."

You and Jesse exchanged smug looks.

"And then there's me, trying to sneak in without any of the other guys noticing, and let me tell you that the Bureau picnic is going to be very awkward this year."

Your eyes drifted back to those whoopie pies with great interest.

"How much do you know?"

"We've been tracking some of the folks Lacroix mentioned. We're on higher alert for a potential terrorist attack or assassination. It's pretty vague, like most of the "credible" threats we get. He thinks future UN Undersecretary Kwent is the target, and while I guess it's likely, we haven't heard any chatter indicating it to be so."

"Any word from the NSA or CIA?" Gabriel asked.

"Nothing in detail," Brant trailed off. "...But of course, you already know about it, don't you? Because no one wants to share with the FBI."

"No one wants to share, period," Gabriel said. "It took Lacroix prodding his contacts across several agencies to get the data that we have here now."

Brant groaned. "I know interagency cooperation isn't anyone's favorite game, but I swear we're usually better than this...Oh." His gaze sharpened. "I see. Someone up high, maybe the same someone who set our people on you, is muddying the water. Lacroix did that annoyingly vague sentence trail off that makes you wonder if he's being mysterious or has some kind of executive function disorder."

Jesse snickered.

"Lacroix has confirmed Brant's identity, as has the swab Agent McCree took," Athena announced.

"You- damn," Brant blinked at Jesse. "You guys don't play around. Or respect civil liberties much, do you?"

"I think we have a lot to talk about, Agent Brant," Gabriel said, his expression grim. "Why don't you come have a seat at the table, and we'll show you what we've found."

"Sure," he said, getting off the floor. "I like being allowed at the table." He dusted himself off, not bothering to remove the porter jacket. He reached over and grabbed a whoopie pie off the cart. "Hey, do you guys have any milk?"

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Brant took the seat across from Gabriel, taking notes while the three of you brought him up
to speed. You were careful to share only what could be verified by the American intelligence communities and equally cautious about revealing any of your sources. For his part, Brant seemed to understand that there were some things you just weren't going to tell him, though it didn't stop him from asking.

"Why Kwento? Why not your boss, Jack Morrison? Or the Secretary State? No one likes him much. Staties, you know?" He was on his third whoopie pie.

"There have been several attempts on Kwento in the past few months. Talon is just getting bolder."

Brant gave a low whistle, teeth sinking into his bottom lip. "Talon, of course." He ran his fingers through his hair, and leaned back in his seat. "...Should have twigged when you mentioned the impressive failure at interagency cooperation." He rubbed his cheeks, stretching his face in funny directions. "Goddamnit, you should probably know that I don't specialize in counterterrorism. I'm a BSU, by trade. You know, serial killers, profilers, all the sexy stuff. But...I've had a run-in or two with Talon."

Gabriel and Jesse frowned at each other. "Can you shoot?" Gabriel asked.

"Sure, but I would prefer not to," he said cheerfully.

Gabriel's frown deepened.

"What kind of support can you give this operation?" You asked. "Besides dessert and classified intel."

"I didn't say I was bad in a fight," Brant said, taking a big gulp of milk. "I just don't like shooting." He shrugged. "But terrorists rarely give us that kind of courtesy. Anyway, from what I know, Lacroix is coordinating with Senator Armstrong - he's on the Senate Intelligence Committee. Go on, make your jokes, I'll wait."

Jesse chuckled, but with Gabriel's serious expression, both of you knew better than to get too distracted.

Brant waited expectantly, and looked terribly disappointed by your restraint. "Right, anyway, Lacroix has been working through the senator and his spooky buddies. I got an interesting call from some CIA douchebag yesterday, but the file he sent over was all about some cybernetics operation in Hanoi. Not my field, but it's supposed to be relevant."

"I'd like to see that," Gabriel said, leaning forward.

"You know how many regulations I'm breaking just being here? You want me to piss off the Company too?"

"Best case scenario, you, that CIA douchebag, and all of our Stateside compatriots come out of this looking like the extra efficient poster children for interagency cooperation. You're their face-saving measure," you said. "Because we don't need the credit. We just need to keep this attack contained."

"God, you guys really are disgustingly heroic," Brant said admiringly. "The federal bureaucracy requires us to take credit for as much as we can. You know, if we want to retain funding."

"She didn't say we wouldn't get credit. We will, with the people who matter. But we don't
need to justify ourselves to the congressional budgeters." Gabriel yawned. "We'd like to see that
device. We can wait for you to-"

Brant reached under his shirt and pulled out a few pages copied onto onionskin tracing
paper. Easily destroyed if he was compromised.

"Relax, I came prepared." He beamed at you. "I'm just relieved if it's cyborgs instead of
omnics. I'm just a little too squishy to take them on in the damn capital. You know what I mean?"

You did, from terrible experience, but you didn't comment, instead letting Athena scan the
pages and send them to your tablet. He hadn't brought very much that you didn't already know.
Satellite surveillance had been slowly building up the technical specs and capabilities of the Hanoi
facility.

But there was a more comprehensive profile of Richard Prince, an unfamiliar shipment
manifest containing a lot of chemical ingredients and incendiary components that sounded terribly
familiar, and an odd set of serial numbers. You didn't recognize what they could be for. But
combining things like welding fuel, antique carbide lights, powdered aluminum...that set off red
flags.

"Homemade bombs," you said, exhaling slowly. All those occasions where you had to help
source ingredients for Vo had been very educational. Nwazue would have been proud, or so you
told yourself. "And a mild nerve agent to numb the sniffer dogs."

"Wait, what?" Brant snatched up the papers.

"Why bother with homemade bombs? Talon has far more sophisticated weapons, most of
which are easier to hide than motorcycle fuel," you mused.

"...There are a couple reasons. It could just be straight up distraction," Gabriel stared at the
list. "Or they might be setting it off in waves."

"Conspiracy theory: they're providing materials for their scapegoats. They're going to make
a much bigger boom, but let some shitty wannabe militia take the fall." You'd have to run it by
Lacroix, because that piece wasn't making sense. Maybe it wasn't bombs. You needed to consult
Vo or a trained chemist. You sent the query to Vo, hoping Athena would nudge her into
responding faster.

"Mebbe," Jesse leaned back and grabbed a whoopie pie, his expression thoughtful. "But
Talon likes to cause trouble. They launch an attack on Kwento in DC, well, that's risky. Why not
kill two birds with one shot? Who do they want to push America into conflict with? Killing
Kwento is a bonus and won't raise too much scrutiny if it was in a terrorist attack. Keeps their
political patsies' hands clean."

You were missing something. You just weren't sure what, not yet. Getting up, you grabbed
a whoopie pie, not missing Brant's smile.

"...Maybe it's not that purpose," Gabriel said. "We need to see if there are any defense or
intelligence bills up for a vote soon. A terrorist attack can score a defense contractor a pretty cozy
deal."

And several of your enemies were high up in weapons manufacturing companies like
Vishkar, Hyde, and Volskaya.

"On it," Jesse said. "Assistance, Athena?"
"Scanning...now," Athena said, trying to sound pleasantly neutral and blank. Was it you or was she getting really bad at it?

"Terrorists in line with evil corporate agendas? Surely that's a little bit of a stretch?" Brant scratched the back of his head, not sounding convinced by his own skepticism. Because if he was working with Lacroix, he had to have some suspicion about just how powerful these multinationals had become.

You were going to have to get Lacroix's input on this. After all, he had the most developed supervillain prediction powers.

"There are three budget increase proposals that fall under those subjects," Jesse said, forwarding the information to you and Gabriel. "The most interesting one, proposed by a Senator Bonnie Boland, née Petras, from Massachusetts. There's about 500 pages of pork and riders, but one of them involves upgraded ballistic and kinetic shielding for federal government buildings."

It clicked then. "What, if any buildings, already have this shielding here in DC? And who makes it?"

"The Capitol," Brant said, brows furrowing. "Probably the Whitehouse, the Blair House, and the National Archives. I can check." He scanned his tablet for a moment. "A small company called "Luminescent Holdings, not a lot of data on them. Ah, CEO is Amara Korpal." And you'd bet your left hand that she was related to the same Korpals who ran Vishkar.

You looked at Gabriel.

"It's bold," he said. "If buildings with the shielding are attacked and remain intact, Luminescent Holdings sees a strong share value increase. They'll get more generous government contracts, maybe form a Superpac to donate to a pet politician, and up they go in the cycle of money, power, and influence."

Jesse studied the map for a moment. "I'd bet my hat they're targeting the Capitol or the Archives. Those are a sight closer to the museums than the Whitehouse. But it's all centered on the National Mall. Are their balls really that big?" That was tourist central, and there would be a lot of soft targets.

"Wrong question," Gabriel said grimly. "How likely are they to pull it off? Nguyen's cyborgs aren't pushovers and Talon has the resources to do this."

"Can we get a couple of the tourist traps closed down, for say, emergency maintenance?" You asked. At this point, you didn't even care about spooking the Talon operatives. Prevention was more important. "I get that might send the terrorists to ground, but..."

"It would be best if we could clean this all up in one go," Jesse said shaking his head. "Brant and Lacroix's network of Americans don't seem to have trustworthy resources if Talon comes back a week later for round two."

But, Kwento would be out of the line of fire and it wouldn't be your problem any more. You didn't say that though. It was an honest thought, but the longer it sat in your head, the more uneasy it made you. You could become that person, thinking in pure calculations; it wouldn't be hard at all. But that person wouldn't be able to look herself in the eye at the end of the day.

"I don't have that kind of power," Brant laughed nervously. "Maybe if you know someone high up in the National Parks Service. They handle some of the Smithsonian administration as
well." His phone beeped. "And that is Senator Armstrong requesting a progress report. Do we have any good news for him?"

Gabriel smiled thinly, because the three of you didn't answer to that level of politician. "I guess that depends if he knows someone high up in the National Parks Service."

Chapter End Notes

Made okonomiyaki because I'm trying to be a healthy adult and cook instead of going to Pizza Hut at 10:30 at night. In my defense, I did it once last week and feel supremely guilty, but I did get 4 meals out of one pizza so maybe I shouldn't? IDK. Okonomiyaki isn't particularly healthy. I made mine with (sale) oysters, mushrooms, cabbage, dashi, and turkey bacon. Then I fried it up in lots of sesame oil. And spreading Krema style mayo on it with bulldog sauce, shredded nori, and bonito flakes makes it even less healthy. (Mostly all that creamy mayo/mustard/sour cream mix.)

For the record, I have amazingly mixed feelings about the FBI. On one hand, cool BSU stuff, great tv show material, movies, some super cool stories. On the other hand, looking at their actions during the civil rights era? Oh boy. I'll just say "J. Edgar Hoover was a piece of something." Do I think they're important? Sure. Do I think they're perfect? Nah. Am I out to get them in this political climate? Nope, this is just for the story.

I made friends with a hormonally-imbalanced cockatoo. He's been rehomed five times. Maybe six as of today. I can't afford big expensive birds, but I do love them. It's probably best that I don't think about "wow, I could adopt him" because that's a terrible life decision. (Also I have 3 dogs and 1 sick cat and no, no.)

Work isn't bad, but I'm going to be back on the job hunt this month, because $$$ I'm so bad at this.
Chapter 90

Chapter Summary

Operation Black Abacus encounters difficulties.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You didn't like this one little bit. The National Mall was a hotbed of tourist activity and you'd been sent to blend in. The Metro exit was tightly packed, the long narrow escalator practically a death trap. One push and a row of people would go down like dominos.

The day was sunny and bright. And you were in civilian clothes packing small arms and an Athena drone, for reconnaissance. It was the standard fish torpedo model, floating cheerfully beside you like a party balloon. Plenty of people had personal helper drones, and she didn't draw much attention, but then, the problem wasn't Athena.

Your allied senator had managed to get the Archives shut down because of a "storage equipment malfunction." But that was it. Congress was in their summer recess, so no politicians were really at risk if the Capitol building was attacked, and to be honest, you thought that was tremendously unfair. But then, you didn't care much for politicians.

No, the real problem was that the area was still teaming with soft targets. People wanted to see the museums, the war memorials, the Washington Monument, that pointy white obelisk that you thought Genji might enjoy climbing, just to be a dick. People wanted to be close to power, history, prestige, good food...

But that Metro exit was also a big problem. You could bottleneck way too many people in there. And you knew from nasty experience how badly things could go when you were trapped underground. Shuddering, you shook your head, the heat of the sunlight chasing the memory from the edge of your skin.

And the worst of it was, you'd been picked as the "tourist." Gabriel, Jesse, and Hanzo were too recognizable. Genji would stick out for all the wrong reasons. Epsilon Squad had its hands full with maintaining a secure perimeter for Jack. So you were to show up early and scout the land, mingling as you went.

Most of the other Blackwatch agents had been dispersed to potential target locations, and you'd been surprised to see Gabriel geared up in his army uniform. Even with the shiny chestpiece, it was camouflage: there were so many soldiers in the area, they tended to blend together. Jesse had FBI credentials and a cheap suit, so he really looked the part. Hanzo was back in that pretty three piece suit he’d worn to Shanghai and had been sent to tour the Capitol building. Genji had joined Jack's entourage and delivered your armor and carbine to Jack. He would be visiting the museum today too, and you would meet up with him once your rounds were done.

You were in a loose sunset-colored summer dress with matching crotchet gloves. It was long and underneath you had on combat boots. Your tanto was strapped to your thigh, your pistol in a special holster in your bra, and Gabriel had cut one of the pockets so you could reach your
blade faster. You strolled along the sidewalks, large sunglasses covering your face. Winston had fairly sophisticated tech built into the lenses, and you were scanning for particular chemical signatures and other weapons-grade materials. After a lot of pressure, Brant had managed to get you a federal ID badge, so you could bypass security, if necessary. Though he had tried to make you promise to give it back when you were done. You were still deciding if you really were going to. Heh.

But now the FBI had your picture. Ugh. Athena said she could delete it and would after the op was over, but it still put you in a foul mood. Anonymity had been your one comfort, and that was going straight out the window on this trip.

And today, Lao was going under the knife. You wouldn't be there to say "good luck" or "goodbye." There was nothing you could do. So you said a rote chant to Captain Patel's personal version of Durga, even if she was the goddess of battlefields and experimental surgeries weren't her domain, you still sort of viewed her as the patroness of your former squad.

You had a job to focus on. Sucking in a breath, you adjusted the signal amplifier for your comm unit on your hair barrette. The signals traffic in this area was heavily-monitored, and you wouldn't be using it unless all hell broke loose.

You and Athena strolled around the mall, making stops at all the tourist traps, the presidential memorials, the war memorials, and everything on the west side. There were cyborgs here, you realized. About half a dozen, a scouting party at the very least, trying to blend into the crowds. But you recognized Nguyen's models with their bulky armaments, and their glassy, not entirely sane eyes. They meandered with the tourists, always careful to not to congregate, but slowly moving eastward.

"Radio it in," you told Athena, speed-walking toward the museum complex. You thought about trying to thin their numbers here in broad daylight, but inevitably, you would panic the crowd. There were several Smithsonian museums and Kwento was supposed to be visiting the Natural History Museum right about now. It was one of the larger ones, situated across the way from the others.

"Fire Eater to Wendigo, do you copy?" Agent Brant's voice crackled in your ear.

"Heading to Crane's location now," you said, referring to Kwento. "Have you seen the footage?"

"Called it in already. Clip that badge onto your dress when you get a chance. Don't want my people taking shots at you."

"Will do. Going to back up Crane's people. Are you there, Ultraman?"

"Roger," Genji said, not sounding particularly amused by his callsign. Well, that made two of you. "I have passed your message on to Summer. We are moving now to rendez-vous." There was a moment of silence. "Gallus wants you to know that he's called for backup from the locals. Athena will provide profiles. Try not to shoot, stab, or headbutt any friendlies, Wendigo. And eating them is definitely out of order."

"Really?" You scowled, shielding your eyes from the sun. "You too?"

"A Wendigo by any other name..."

"You guys are hilarious," you sighed. So Lacroix had called in his reserves. There were
over half a dozen agents from multple agencies and you carefully scanned the profiles and pictures. You recognized some from prior interactions: Nikita, the NSA Silent Sister, whatever that meant and Hopper, probably the CIA douchebag Brant was talking about. But Lacroix had also called in a Secret Service agent, a military contractor, a US marshal, and even a park ranger.

You weren't sure how this was going to unfold, but this was not your jurisdictional pissing match. You just needed to get to Kwento and Jack.

**

You walked into the museum, flashing your badge to security. A giant fiberglass blue whale model hung from the ceiling of the atrium. Ninety-four feet long, the sign said. You blinked and then approached the security checkpoint. A heavyset blonde woman in uniform, her badge said "Griffin," glanced disinterestedly at your ID. Armed federal agents were the norm here.

"You're going to want to start closing the museum," you said. "We need to evacuate everyone quickly and quietly. There are armed terrorists incoming, and we have it on good authority that they are after a VIP in this building."

Griffin stared at your badge for half a second more. "I have to call this in," she said quickly, eyeing your fish torpedo. "I'll start the process here, but we have a fifth grade class on the second floor. They're going to need special handling." She gave you a pointed look.

You blinked. Because you needed to get to Kwento and Jack. That was your mission. But the last thing you wanted was a bunch of kids caught in the crossfire.

"How many?" You asked.

"About thirty," Griffin said. "Counting chaperones. They took the Metro."

"...No good. Try to encourage people away from the Metro," you said. "Where'd they go?"

"Second floor. Prehistoric animal exhibit." She pointed at the stairs. "That way. Follow the signs. Uh, you might be better off taking them out the closest emergency exit. The alarms will sound though."

You took off then, blinking when the lights started to flicker. A thin black man in the security uniform stood by the switches, looking vaguely amused as he flipped them on and off.

"Attention guests," Griffin said on the PA. "Due to electrical issues, we are going to have to ask you to leave. The museum will reopen after the problem has been fixed. Rainchecks will be available at the door. We are sorry for the inconvenience."

"Ultraman, I've been diverted to evacuate a class of kids. Your ETA?"

There was silence. Were they jamming you already? Your skirts flew, as you took the stairs two and three steps at a time. Up the staircase, down the hall, and through the double doors to the "Prehistoric Life" exhibit. You spotted a trio of kids examining a life-sized Glyptodon replica. You wanted to stare at the giant armadillo, but there wasn't time for that.

"Where's your teacher?" You asked brusquely.

They stared then pointed at a slim dark-skinned woman with a shaved head.

"Ms. O'Malley is over there," one said.
You walked over there, and she turned to give you a sharp look.

Quickly, you flashed your badge. Her eyes widened.

"I need you to gather up your students, in a calm orderly manner. We're going to take that emergency exit out," you said pointing at the glowing red sign down the hall. "Once you're out of the building, get them away from the Mall. Do not take the Metro."

She swallowed and nodded. "All right." She whistled then, shrill and loud. "Attention Beecher Street Elementary students. Due to this electrical issue, we need to return to the hotel. Everyone form up on me. Chaperones included."

"Aww, can't we go to another museum? C'mon Ms. O," one boy whined.

"Now, Charles," she said with steel in her voice.

The boy fell silent.

She began moving toward the door, calling roll as she went. "Du? Has anyone seen Du?" She asked, voice strained.

"I think she went to the bathroom, ma'am," another girl offered. "I can go get her."

"No!" O'Malley said sharply. "I'll do it-"

"I need you to make sure the rest of them are accounted for," you said. "I'll go in a moment. Is anyone else missing?"

The teacher did a quick headcount, students and the adult chaperones who were watching you warily. "Yes."

You went first, hand positioned awkwardly in your dress so you could draw your pistol. "Stand back." You pushed the emergency exit door open, but the sirens did not sound, and someone yanked the door the rest of the way.

He was much bigger than you, like they all were, his armor so very matte black in the sunlight. The first thing you recognized was the pulse rifle cradled in one of his massive arms, then it was the circuitry patterns across his sneering face. And he wasn't alone, a second cyborg stood behind him.

You raised your gun, firing at the nearest one immediately. A neat hole appearing in the center of his head. The screaming started up behind you, but you ignored it. Using the first cyborg as a shield, you fired again, and the second cyborg toppled off the fire escape. Then you shoved the dead cyborg off the same side, taking a moment to lean over the metal stairwell, fire a few more headshots, and ensure neither of them were getting back up again.

You turned around to see O'Malley watching you with clenched teeth and big eyes. You glanced down. There was blood and other glop spattered across your dress. Oops.

"Are you-?"

"It's not mine. Go now. Don't take the Metro. Head toward Pennsylvania Avenue. Avoid the Mall. And uh...don't look to the left." There wasn't that much blood, but...

"Let's go class. Step carefully. Keep your eyes on the step ahead of you, these fire escapes
are rickety," O'Malley said, her voice steady. She waited with you till the last student had passed. "Du is Asian, about this tall-" She held her hands at shoulder level. "And she can be very shy around strangers."

"Who isn't? I'll look for her. It might not be safe to send her out alone, but I'll do what I can. Go. Hurry."

You spun around, the evacuees giving you wide berth as you went back inside to find the bathrooms.

**

Gunfire sounded in the distance, and the lights flickered.

"Ultraman? Summer? Gunslinger?" You flipped through the channels, trying to reach anyone.

"The comm network is offline," Athena told you. "My homing signal is weak too. We're being jammed. I may not be able to maintain a presence here."

"I thought your quantum entanglement tethers bypassed that kind of tech."

"I did too," Athena said. "This effect bears some looking into."

It fucking figured. You opened the bathroom door, your gun held close. Several stall doors were closed, though you couldn't see any feet.

"Du, from Ms. O'Malley's Beecher Street classroom, are you in here?"

There was a soft creak as the door opened and a girl with bobbed hair crept out, bigger than Kseniya, but still small. Her eyes widened when she saw your gun.

You flashed your fake badge, wondering if it would help. Her eyes stayed on the gun.

"Listen, we need to get you out of here. Your class has already evacuated. I took them out the back way and they're going toward Pennsylvania Avenue. Avoid the Metro."

She nodded once, her eyes shifting to Athena. "Omnics?" She asked, her voice dry and frightened.

"Terrorists," you admitted, waving her over. Now let's go. Follow me." You stepped into the hallway first. "Athena, can you scan?"

"...Signal too weak," she said. "But there are hostiles on this floor, Wendigo. I can't maintain function-" Her drone wobbled, the lights flickering. You caught the drone and carried it under one arm.

You bit back a curse and put Du behind you. You were on your own. No, it was worse than that: you had a scared kid depending on you. So you hugged the walls, listening to sporadic gunfire and the rapidly cutoff screams as you walked the child back to the prehistoric life exhibit. She hugged herself, flinching at every telltale gunshot, but kept her one hand over her mouth.

You heard them before you saw them. Grabbing the kid you shoved her into giant ground sloth exhibit. "Take this and hide," you ordered, pushing Athena's drone into her arms. "No matter
what happens, stay quiet. Cover your face if you have to."

She nodded, eyes big. "What about-?"

"Now," you hissed and she disappeared behind a stack of rocks and the replica animal. You hugged the side of the display, listening to heavy footsteps. Your eyes darted to the large posed bone display in front of you. You probably couldn't knock that over onto them. And there were more than one. You could hide, though you weren't sure if they had infrared sight, and all your heavy combat gear was with Jack.

Taking a deep breath, you took cover behind the saber-toothed cat, your gun raised.

Three cyborgs in full armor stepped into sight. "No sign of Hammerhead or Bull. They were supposed to come through here," one man said.

"Probably had trouble figuring out the door," the second man said, his armor a dark shade of navy blue.

"Step lively. We're on a time crunch," the first cyborg said, shaking his head, but not actually disagreeing.

"Target's putting up heavy resistance," a slender woman in a visor said. "I'll head back with the EMP cannon. Should take care of her omnic guards."

"We can take care of these stragglers first," Blue Armor said. And he looked straight at you, his smile vicious. Yes, they probably had infrared vision. So you had to keep their attention on you and off the kid.

You took a quiet breath, and fired. Your first shot hit the biggest one, tearing through his cheek, shattering his teeth, and ruining his terrible smile. He dropped there.

The woman lunged, blades in her metal arms whirring as she rushed you, Blue Armor hot on her heels. You fired quickly, flinching as her metal forearms deflected some of the bullets. Genji could do that, and you knew how you fared in melee practice with him...

Your pistol clicked empty and you dodged backward, narrowly avoiding decapitation.

"Take her alive, Mako! We need to know who she is, what she knows, and if anyone else is on the way," the surviving man called from the floor.

You slammed another magazine into the gun and returned fire, missing Mako, but finishing off her companion. Mako jumped, her boot smashing in to your side and sending you rolling across the floor. Quick as a snake, she kicked your gun out of your hand, her boot on your throat.

"Who are you? Who sent you? Answer quickly, because I'm in the mood to start carving pieces off you-" 

You jabbed a blade finger through her shoe into her foot and she swore, drawing back and giving you enough time to scramble away. Your side ached, but you couldn't focus on that now.

You dove for your gun, but she was faster, her cybernetic arms grabbing you by the back of the neck and slamming you face first into the floor.

"Stupid move, worm," she hissed. "I'm going to enjoy taking you apart."
Your head spun, and you winced as she yanked your hair back. She crouched on top of you, one foot pinning your left hand to the ground, the other square on your lower back.

"I don't even care if you talk now; I'm too angry." She ran a long blade along your throat and you held very still, the metal so cool against your skin. In a few seconds, the skin started to sting. She'd cut you. You felt her yank the badge out from under your dress. "FBI, huh? You weren't supposed to know anything. Well, it looks like they weren't able to lock down your investigation like they promised. A pity. You might have survived otherwise."

You struggled, trying to wiggle free, but her grip was too strong and she was heavy. Bruised and helpless, you tried to push off the floor with your legs, but the cyborg bitch held you flat against the ground.

"I think I'll start with your left hand," she said. "It looks like you're already missing part of it anyway, and you won't need it any more. Besides, you could use a makeover, sweetie. I like them in my own image." She raised her a blade the metal gleaming under the LED lights.

You clenched your teeth, tasting blood and panic. You vainly tried to wiggle free as you stared at the floor tiles, bracing yourself for pain with frantic rationalization. Angela could build you a new hand. Mutilation wasn't death. Maybe they could reattach it. As long as she didn't kill you right away, you had a chance to get out of this, amputations be damned.

There was a deafening roar, and suddenly the cyborg was no longer on top of you. Panting, you rolled over.

A blue blur smashed his fist into Mako's face, her visor shattering on impact. He struck again and she bounced off the wall, pinwheeling into a resin fossil display. She crashed, scattering bones everywhere. You blinked as Genji moved, and suddenly Mako was in two, no, make that four pieces on the ground.

The look on Jack's face was terrible, his eyes flashing as he kicked a part of the lower half of the body out of his way. He turned to you then, eyes zeroing in on your neck.

"Sweetheart, how bad?"

You rubbed the thin slit on your neck. She'd barely nicked you, but it was an alarming place to be cut. "I'm OK. It's not deep," you said, relieved to hear your own voice.

He was at your side in two steps, one arm pulling you against him. "Sorry we're late." He pressed a kiss to your temple, before he drew back, looking you over. His eyes went to your bloody dress.

"Not mine," you said.

"Some of it is." He shook his head, dragging his gloved thumb across your lower lip to the corner of your mouth. He tapped your nose gently, and you winced. "Don't worry, you're still pretty," he said. "But that blood is yours. Unless you've been biting the enemy."

"Not yet."

He kissed you then, crushing you against his chest, his warmth reassuring. You shuddered, curling your left hand into a fist. "Thank you," you told him when he released you. "I was in real trouble. Can't fight in a fucking sundress." You hated how helpless you sounded, but Jack deserved the thanks.
"Three on one is stupid odds, baby." He helped you to your feet, looking around. "I assume you shot up those cyborgs too?"

"Oh, yeah," you said. "Forgot about them. There are two more at the bottom of the fire escape too." You laughed softly.

Jack's expression darkened. "What the hell were you thinking and where's Athena?" Jack asked gruffly.

"Give her a nanite injection, she's favoring right her side," Genji said, examining your kills.

"Hold up," you said, as Jack clasped the back of your head, looking you straight in the eye, amusement gone. "I had to come back for someone. I didn't pick this fight for fun."

Jack froze. "What?"

Moving hurt, but you walked over to the display. "Du, it's clear. You can come on out."

The kid emerged from behind the giant ground sloth, her eyes widening as she saw Genji and Jack. You didn't think she'd seen Jack fussing over you, but you weren't sure; she'd probably heard him, if she wasn't deafened by the gunfire.

"This is Du. She got separated from her class. I got them out of the building first, but-" But you had no idea what was going on outside. She stared at your bloody face, then Genji, and then her eyes lit up with recognition when she saw Jack.

"Are you all right?" Jack asked her.

She nodded, smile very big as she hugged Athena's drone to her chest. To your surprise, her smile got bigger when she saw Genji, like he was the coolest person in the room.

"Ultraman, can you escort Ms. Du to safety?" Jack asked.

"Sir," Genji nodded.

"I have your drone," she said, offering the fish torpedo to Genji. "Are you a superhero?"

"He's pretty close," you said, before he could answer.

Genji just strapped the drone to his back, giving you and Jack an awkward nod.

"I'll be back," he said.

"I cleared the fire escape once," you said. "But there might be more."

Genji nodded again. "Keep your eyes on me," he said, as he led the kid the long away around the dead cyborgs. "I'll hurry back. It wouldn't do to get caught out there like this; they might mistake me for some sort of mass murdering cyborg," he said, almost sounding amused, and then he was out the door.

Jack removed a pack from his back. "Your gear."

You stripped out of the ruined dress, putting on fatigues and a t-shirt. Jack took one look at your bruises and gave you a nanite injection. "Sorry, baby. We can't wait on an emitter."

"No, it's fine," you shuddered as the needle went deep. When he was done, your body felt
hot, but you were already strapping on your armor. Tanto and pistol on your belt, wakizashi on your back, carbine in your hands. You were relieved to add on your decibel blocker, because you wanted to be able to hear Jack during a firefight. But damn, it felt good to be prepared.

Jack gave you a sharp approving smile as he looked you over. "Kwento's people are holed up on the fifth floor. You ready, baby?"

"Let's go," you said, wiping your face.

**

You weren't sure how they'd gotten ahead of you, unless they'd managed to land on the roof. But the stairs between the third and fourth floor remained barricaded. They'd thrown down turrets, and your only cover was sticking to the wall and staying around the corner. They weren't trying to shoot you through the wall, yet, but it was a distinct possibility that they would try.

"We have any grenades?"

"Couldn't carry everything securely. Packing ordnance under those circumstances seemed like a bad idea," Jack said giving you a regretful shrug.

You leaned around the corner, firing a few shots off your new carbine. It had a stronger kick than your previous gun, and the blue-lit shots took some getting used to, but after a few rounds "duck, duck, shoot," you managed to take one turret offline.

Jack gave you an approving nod. "Good shooting."

"Carbines offer better accuracy," you said.

"Just take the compliment," Jack laughed. "Come on, I'll provide suppressing fire, you take out the other two."

"Understood, sir," you said, even as he leaned in to kiss you. "Is this really the time-?"

"Good shooting is sexy, and Gabe agrees." He grinned. "Plus I missed you both."

"Missed you too," you said, feeling that familiar stupid grin creeping across your face. You shook your head: you couldn't go into battle with that expression on. Unless looking like a dopey lovestruck Overwatch agent was actually intimidating.

Jack stepped out of cover, firing fast and lighting up the stairwell. You stayed low, lining up your shots and taking the other two turrets out of commission.

After reloading, you followed Jack up the stairs, finding only junked automated defenses, no cyborgs. Jack held up a fist as you passed the fourth floor. You stopped abruptly, your eyes falling on the numerous glowing red discs adhering to the walls. You bit back a snarl. Those were a lot of proximity mines with laser trip sensors and were those incendiary mods? Any fleeing survivors could easily set them off.

"Goddamnit, they're modded and they're close enough together to set off a chain reaction. Not sure what that would do to the building. If we could hack them..." He trailed off, shaking his head, because Athena wasn't here to take care of that for you. "Don't want to take this route, not unless we don't have a choice. There's another stairwell on the other side of the building."

You glanced at the fourth floor exit, wondering what traps lay ahead. Maybe they'd just
bypassed the entire fourth floor, but you knew better than to believe that. Your luck was never that good.

The two of you cleared the door, ducked past the restrooms, and found yourselves in hall full of taxidermied mammals, their glass eyes watching you a permanent state of alarm. Lions, tigers, bears...

And a heap of dead tourists lined up on the floor. You swallowed roughly, suddenly cold. Then you crouched down to check the dozen or so bodies. They'd been rounded up and executed. Couples, students, families: a father trying to shield his kid, all you saw at first were the tiny sneakers emblazoned with Mickey Mouse and spattered in blood, but that was enough. Still, you checked everyone, already knowing what you would find. There weren't any survivors.

You let out the breath that was curdling inside you, and when you looked at Jack his expression was grim.

"We need one alive," you said, your voice quiet. "I don't want to spare any of them, but we need one alive. Maybe two, if the Americans get greedy."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, agent." Jack rubbed the spot between his brows. "Let's move."

You nodded, tasting bile in the back of your throat. Your stomach was suddenly sour, but you kept moving, very glad that you'd rushed to get that elementary school class out of the building. You took a shaky breath and started to move. Jack however, stood still, his fists clenched.

You moved around to face him. He stared at the ground, expression painfully blank, though he was grinding his teeth.

"Hey," you said, taking his hand between yours.

Jack blinked a few times and looked at you, awareness gradually returning to his eyes. "I...Sorry," he said, gripping your fingers. "You'd think by now I'd be used to atrocities. Saw worse during the height of the Omnic Crisis. I..."

"I'd be more worried if you weren't bothered," you said.

"I know," he said, voice distant. "Thank you." He squeezed your hand. "We need to go."

Silently, you exited the mammal exhibit, knowing you'd see this place again in your dreams.

**

The next wing's theme was deep sea ocean life, and you were kind of relieved to see cyborgs skulking behind the large photography displays. Because fangtooth fish, giant tubeworms, and viperfish were utterly terrifying to look at and you had enough nightmare fodder. Cyborgs? Cyborgs were nothing compared to fish from the abyss.

Beside you, Jack finally relaxed, his expression zen even as he lifted his rifle.

You braced yourself, mirroring him, the motions oddly comfortable. This would be the
first time you used your upgraded carbine against another person. You were not disappointed. Your shots struck half a second before you registered them, and the blue-lit rounds punched through their armor plating like it was tissue paper.

There was a shriek as a man with blades flung himself at Jack. You shifted your barrel inches to the left and suddenly the attacker was falling in silence.

Jack stepped over the body and the two of you advanced, taking cover behind some of the partition walls.

"What the fuck is Morrison doing here?"

"How did they get here so fast?"

"Talk less, shoot more!"

You smiled involuntarily at their panic.

"Not so tough when you're not gunning down unarmed civilians, are you?" Jack snarled. "Such brave strong soldiers, out here killing children." Jack didn't shout, not like you expected. But the virulence of his scorn burned like acid in the air.

They responded with a hail of bullets and you yanked Jack down. He fumed as he reloaded, his thoughts dark. He looked mad enough to flatten coins between his teeth, and you know what, he probably could.

You took a deep breath, listening for movement. The gallery was laid out in twists and turns, but the area looped around itself. There were at least four left, and you expected a pincer attack.

Instead they charged you. Not for the first time did you wonder if Nguyen's cybridization process traded critical thinking skills for aggression. And then you didn't have time to worry about it.

Jack shot the closest one in the face, and the man dropped. You nailed one in the kneecaps, and he went down, but the next two were on you then, and Jack slammed his fist into the man's jaw, ignoring the metal arm reaching for him.

You fired a burst into your attacker's chest, and his staggered, but he had an enhanced dampener shield on top of his armor and your bullets didn't penetrate. He wore a heavy helmet, so headshots were out. You set your gun aside, drawing the wakizashi off your back.

"Idiot," he panted, clutching at his chest as he raised his gun.

You were not Hanzo or Genji, a master at the blade. But you'd been practicing simple strikes, and you had good aim. If this had been your tanto, your reach would not have been enough. Smiling thinly, you darted forward, weight on your front leg, arm fully extended as you drove the blade through the cyborg's poorly protected throat. *That* was Gabriel's fencing lunge, and you'd mimicked it well.

By switching to a melee weapon, and avoiding contact with the armor pieces, you'd managed to avoid triggering his kinetic shields. You removed the blade cleanly, a little impressed by how *sharp* it was, and looked up to see Jack grabbing a fifth cyborg by the head and just twisting. The crunch was oddly satisfying and you wiped your blade off.
Jack dropped the corpse, and looked at you, his expression cool. "Was it wise to take a short sword to a heavy?"

You sheathed the blade and shrugged. "It was faster than wearing through his kinetic shielding."

Jack's lips quirked upward. "That's Gabe's pirate move, sweetheart. Though I think he perfected it with Gérard and Amélie."

"The fencing lunge?"

"Yes. And you stole it," Jack gave you a tired smile. "I'm not sure if Gabe will be impressed or salty."

"He'd be turned on and you know it," you said, and Jack laughed.

There was a moan from the floor. The man you'd shot in the kneecaps was trying to crawl away. Jack raised a brow and stalked toward him.

"You said we needed one alive," Jack said idly. "But he doesn't need his limbs."

The man screamed in terror as Jack raised his boot and brought it down on the prosthetic leg. The metal snapped under the pressure, and you blinked, pretty sure that didn't count as torture, though it was a little disturbing to watch Jack stomp on a shrieking man.

You pulled the omnic-grade cuffs off your utility belt and slapped them on before Jack got any bright ideas about fingers. The bastard deserved it, but you couldn't afford to waste time on a distraction. Jack gathered up the guns and on a whim, he turned and smashed one into the prisoner's head. Lights out.

You helped him put the weapons out of the man's reach.

"Leave him. Someone else can pick him up," Jack said. "We need to get to Crane."

"What do we know about her situation?" You asked as you resumed the trek to the opposite stairwell.

"They were on the fifth floor. Geology exhibit, I think. Last I heard, they'd had civilians with them and sustained heavy casualties. We should hurry."

You almost asked about Zenyatta, though you had no idea why. It wasn't like the two of you were friends. And while your conversations had been uncomfortable, you didn't like the idea of him dying here. As for Kwento? You'd worked too damn hard to get her on your side. You were going to save her goddamn life, and she was going to appreciate it so much, she would handle all the nasty political shit for you out of sheer gratitude. There was no other option.

Jack began to jog and you followed in suit. The second stairwell waited.

Chapter End Notes

So work screwed up my vacation time and I'm working overtime this week, instead of getting an extra vacation day. Which is fine because I need the money, but I start a 6
day stretch and I'm so full of rage and "fuck them all" that I'm a little worried.

My cousin works there too, and we're still waiting to see if he's going to keep his job over something that happened. Management wants to keep him, but corporate doesn't. So...yeah, super stressed.

Teenage cousin just asked to move in because of family issues. I'm fine with it, but I'm not sure if he means it or if he's venting. So I guess having more money is going to be good, but OMFG, I'm just two steps away from a shrieking screaming meltdown. I kept muttering "I'll kill them all. I'll send them facefirst back to Hell," yesterday when I found out they had "forgotten" to schedule my vacation and put me on for a full work week instead.

I wasn't going to take "trip" vacation. Just get my teeth fixed, eyes checked, animals vaccines, etc. Clean the carpet. Adult. I'm not entirely sure I can make it through the next two and half weeks as a polite sane human being. I many go full murder-beast. We shall see.

Hope everyone else is doing better. Love hearing from you. Comments make me a little less screaming rage monster. Which is good, because I don't want to be a screaming rage monster.
Chapter 91

Chapter Summary

Operation Black Abacus continues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cursing loudly, you ducked, annoyed that they had portable turrets and cyborgs defending the place. They had to have come through the roof. Or had inside help. You fired off a couple shots, muttering obscenities under your breath. You would have strangled someone for a grenade right now.

"Where is everyone else?" You scowled, peeking around the corner and nearly losing your head. Instead you got a face full of dusted drywall and coughed, wiping your eyes.

"Epsilon Squad is at the Archives. Gallus's team is coordinating with the first responders and trying to secure the Mall. Gunslinger, Hawkeye, and Bauer-

"I'm sorry, was it just Gabriel who came up with these names? No, Jesse had to be in on it. Genji and I are going to-

"Gérard helped," Jack said, and leaned around the corner to fire off a few more rounds. "At least you sound intimidating. Summer? I sound like a vegan otter scrubber who wants to spend more time around the drum circle."

"...Do you?" You asked, because that was an oddly specific description.

"What do you think, smartass?" Jack gave you his patented "the Strike Commander is not amused by your bullshit" look. "Look, I can draw fire, but I don't know how long I can take hits, sweetheart. You're going to have to be fast if you-

"Terrible idea," you said shaking your head. "There are four of armed cyborgs, three self-repairing turrets, and only the two of us. We need some grenades or-

"A partridge in a pear tree," Jack said.

"What?"

Jack stared at your blank face. "Never mind."

"We need ordnance, or some kind of battering ram," you frowned, because demolitions wasn't your specialty. "Or bigger guns. We always need bigger guns-

The door to the fourth floor opened, and you leveled your carbine at it, waiting for the ambush. Because you and Jack had been stuck here too long. Because you were too busy chatting to move forward. Idiot! Now they'd sent someone to flank you.

One man slipped through the door, weapons raised. You stared at the huge barrels of two
shotguns, and lowered your gun with a headshake.

"Damn you're slow. Did you two just stop for a latte break?" Gabriel asked, patently arrogant smirk on his face. He was still in his pixelated camouflage, his hat gone. Which was fine, because he'd styled his goddamn hair for a combat run. And even if his face was smudged with soot and sweat, you couldn't ignore how good he looked in a uniform. "Or was Jack trying some of those cute pickup lines on you?"

Jack just laughed, lowering his gun. When Gabriel got close enough, Jack yanked him by the collar and kissed him hard. "You're a sight for sore eyes," he said, his grin fierce.

"Have you heard of knocking? Or radioing ahead?" You glared, even though the comms were down and you'd been too focused on the barricade ahead to worry about your flank.

"Comms aren't working so well in here. Not sure what they're using to disrupt. Ultraman said even Athena was affected."

"Oh, where is he?" You asked, wondering if you had ninja backup to take out the defensive emplacement.

"Sent him to help Gunslinger and Hawkeye. Capitol's secure, but they're clearing out some of the other museums. Figured the three of us could handle whatever they were doing here. Archives are still under fire, but Epsilon Squad has it under control. Gallus and company are coordinating resources on the Mall itself. They put Black Swan in the Washington Monument with her fancy rifle, and she could probably clear the green all on her own. Prickly Pear is still trying to get our comms back online, but if they're blocking Athena, then I'm not holding out much hope." He shrugged, like he didn't expect much from Ziv. "Now, what's the hold up?"

"Four heavies, three turrets, and us without a siege breaker," Jack said, jerking his head to in the enemy's direction. "But now that you're here..."

"That's a plan?" Gabriel laughed, shaking his head. "All right, I'll take point and the central cyborgs. Jack, the outer two are yours, suppressing fire if you please. Lucky, you're on the turrets: stay behind us. No showing off, either of you."

"Bossy," Jack said. He winked at Gabriel. "I like it."

Gabriel just raised his chin, never losing that smug expression. "Get moving, and try not to get distracted by my ass." He rushed the stairs laughing, and you only took half a second to admire the view before the gunshots started up. Then you and Jack were right behind him. You focused on the turrets, winging the central one, and destroying the one closest to the door. Gabriel's shotgun roared, drowning out whatever he was saying to Jack. But Jack was laughing too.

You kept your head down, but none of the return fire came near you. Gabriel's shotgun blast tore through a cyborg and the central turret, and you had to shift to the right to reach the last one.

Sparks flew off Gabriel's armor and he racked his shotgun as he reached the final step. Kicking dead cyborgs out of the way, he inspected the smoking ruins.

"...Was that all?" He asked, raising a brow at Jack.

"Don't even start," Jack rolled his eyes, blowing out a breath. "You and Lucky take on ridiculous odds without thinking-"
"Oh? Just me and Lucky?" Gabriel grinned, grabbing Jack's collar and shoving him against the wall. He kissed him hard, eyes bright. "I think you've been leading by example, Jackie."

Growling, Jack gripped Gabriel's hair, sinking his teeth into Gabriel's lower lip. "Just you wait, Reyes."

"Cocky, I like that in a man." Gabriel chuckled. "Lucky and I will show you ridiculous odds later, won't we, hermosa?" He gave you a heated look, and you forgot to breathe for a moment, seeing them both so on edge.

"Oh, don't get me started on her. She's not off the hook either," Jack said, because he was a goddamn snitch. "Do you know how I found her-"

"Hey, we need to move," you said, checking the door and hoping to delay that story for awhile. You didn't see any trip wires, but that didn't mean there weren't any traps. "Back up, so I can work." You carefully examined the door jamb and found a wire wedged against the bottom of door jamb. It ran parallel to the threshold. Anyone opening it unaware would trigger something nasty.

"What is it?" Gabriel asked, crouching beside you.

"Tripwire, probably for a claymore, set against the door." Your tanto was too big to get under there. You flexed a blade finger and carefully sawed through the wire.

Satisfied that you'd disarmed the claymore, you opened the door. You found two flashing red lights the size of dinner plates. There was a high-pitched whine as they primed themselves: proximity mines, and you'd just triggered them.

"Down!" Jack shouted.

You swore as Gabriel grabbed you and spun you around, slamming you into the far wall. He held you there, one arm covering your head. The detonation wasn't as loud as you expected, but Gabriel flinched, sweat dripping down his forehead.

"Gabriel-"

"I'm OK," he said, gritting his teeth. "Got some shrapnel in my legs, but I'm OK." He cupped your face. "Are you all right, baby?"

"I'm fine. Now you have to turn around and let me see-" You said, breathing shaky. Because you remembered the story of Frank Hsieh, Gabriel's SEP squadmate who'd died from internal bleeding before they could get his armor off.

"Hold still, Gabe," Jack's voice broke through your panic. He knelt down, reaching into a pocket and withdrawing another nanite injector. "Hmm, your armor isn't compromised. There's nothing too deep or large. Might not be sleeping on your back tonight. I'll pick out some of the bigger pieces. How's breathing feel?"

"I'm all right, Jack," Gabriel said, releasing you. He pressed his palms against the wall and took a deep breath as a demonstration, not wincing at all. His ribs and lungs were probably undamaged then. Unless he was faking. He was good at faking.

"I'm sorry, I should have been more careful," you said, voice trembling. "I-"

Gabriel shook his head, biting his lip as Jack yanked out small pieces of metal. "Honest
mistake. That was overkill on their part. But if you're worried about it, you can make it up to me later, *chica*. Stop apologizing."

"Their makeshift emplacement took most of the damage," Jack said. "He's OK, sweetheart. He has good reflexes."

You exhaled, hugging Gabriel's neck. He was warm, but not running too hot. But the museum was air conditioned.

"I-"

"You're welcome, *corazon*. You can help me pick out the splinters later tonight," Gabriel said, with a wry smile. "It'll be very romantic." He kissed you gently, a gloved hand patting your head. There was an oddly satisfied look on his face.

"Don't try to do it by candlelight though," Jack said, leaning over to kiss Gabriel's cheek. "It's a good idea in theory, but..."

"Of course," you said, nodding rapidly. "We can feed you ice cream, and put on a movie, and I'll get tweezers and some lidocaine-"

"Stop fretting," Gabriel rolled his eyes at you. "If your sorry ass is really grateful, you'll manage to stay uninjured throughout the rest of this mission. Got it?"

"Yes, whatever you say," you said, prepared to agree to pretty much anything, because Gabriel had been injured protecting your careless ass and the guilt was *suffocating*.

"All right then," he said. "Let's go."

You found a dark-skinned woman in black armor, the red, yellow, and green emblem of Numbani on her uniform. She was very dead, probably one of Kwento's bodyguards, and you could hear gunfire in the distance.

Checking the signs, you found the entrance to the Janet Annenberg Hooker Hall of Geology, Gems, and Minerals, and understood why Jack had just called it the "geology exhibit." Jack led the way. Gabriel followed, his walk was a little stiff, but he didn't seem to be flagging at all. If anything, he was in a surprisingly good mood. You brought up the rear, on high alert. No one was sneaking up on you this time. Not even a goddamn Shimada.

"You should've seen her, Jack. She made that marine eat her knife, and he loved her for it. All those damn jarheads did," Gabriel said, with mock disapproval. "He proposed to her, despite the fact he was already married."

"I think you and I are going to have to make a quick trip to Quantico and sort this boy out-"

You rolled your eyes at their good-natured ribbing. It was good that they were trying to act normal, if irritating, but you kept shooting looks at Gabriel's bloodied pants. "Whatever, Gabriel came in *real smooth* and said I wasn't allowed to date marines. It didn't sound suspicious at all."

"Hey, you were so popular, *chica*. I was feeling a little insecure," Gabriel said with a cheerful shrug. "She made that up to me too. Got on her knees and mmm-" He shook his head, smile broad. "All that practice has paid off. Meant to send you a picture, but I was too spent."
Your cheeks heated as Jack turned around and gave you a slow smile. "Maybe she'll give me a personal demonstration later."

"Focus," you scowled. "We're on a mission!"

"So stern," Gabriel laughed and elbowed Jack. "We better behave, Jack. Otherwise she might punish us."

Jack saluted you with a wink. "Yes, boss."

Shaking your head, you reloaded your gun, slamming your clip in harder than necessary.

You blinked as you entered the exhibit, coming upon a trio of cyborgs smashing some of the glass cases. You'd assumed this display would be kind of boring, except some of the cyborg soldiers were wearing massive rocks, and by rocks, you meant expensive shiny gems they had looted from the museum.

"Well this is awkward," Gabriel said, eyeing the burly cyborg men decked out in tiaras, fancy pectoral jewelry, rings, and bracelets. Under other circumstances it would have been an amazing photo shoot, and they did look quite fabulous for Talon scumbag mass murderers. It wouldn't save them, but it would earn them a footnote in your mission logs.

They went for their guns, but Jack, Gabriel, and you were faster. A brief roar of gunfire and then there was the crash of heavy bodies, and the gentle tinkling of bangles and baubles jingling. You made a show of kneeling beside the bodies to check for vital signs, and whether or not you palmed some smaller pieces as you went, was going to be real hard to verify.

"Well, they're actually dead," you said brightly. "Good work guys."

Jack nodded, already moving forward, but Gabriel gave you a thoughtful look.

"What?" You asked, voice higher than you liked. It wasn't really stealing when you stole from other thieves, was it?

"Nothing iconic," he muttered under his breath. "I do not want to explain why you're wearing the Hope Diamond to Jack."

Oh, you'd forgotten all about that one. The giant blue cursed diamond. That was tempting. You wondered if it would match Jack's eyes and if he'd be willing to pose wearing nothing but...

Focus. You rose, remembering exactly why you were here. Terrorists. Dead civilians. Saving Kwentó.

Each thought sobered you further and you tightened your grip on your gun. You followed the trail of broken glass, the staccato bursts of gunfire, and a dozen more bodies, cyborg, tourist, and Numbani security officers, human and omnic.

This time, you did not make the mistake of studying the dead too closely. You told yourself it was because you were too close to combat zone, but you were relieved to have the excuse.

You rounded the corner, finding Gabriel and Jack taking cover on opposite sides of a bullet-riddled doorway. The familiar hum of high-powered shields had the hair on the back of your neck standing up straight.
"They took cover in the Hope Diamond alcove," Gabriel said. "Probably the sturdiest part of the building. You know, to prevent robbery." He gave you a wry look.

You blinked, wondering if Gabriel wanted a cut. Maybe a tiara? He'd totally rock a tiara. You could totally double back and grab more.

"Can you get a headcount?" Jack asked.

You sidled up to Gabriel, kneeling beside him. You flipped up the viewfinder on your carbine. You were only about twenty feet away, but Jack and Gabriel's guns weren't equipped for long distance shooting. You could see the bullets striking the kinetic barrier, but you couldn't see who was inside. But there were half a dozen cyborgs, three more turrets, and an OR-14 concentrating fire on the shield. Your heart clenched briefly when you sighted the omnic. How the hell had they gotten it in here? The roof. They had come from the goddamn roof. Which probably meant there had been a cloaked aircraft in DC. That had some very unpleasant implications.

"At least six more cyborgs, three turrets, and a goddamn OR-14," you muttered.

"Give Gabe the cyborgs. You can help me with the omnic," Jack said, his voice low. "Think of it as therapy."

You smiled thinly at that. No one here had forgotten about Rodriguez.

"Stop being reckless. You can make quick work of the cyborgs, I'll keep it occupied, and then we can all take care of the tin can," Gabriel said tightly. He swapped out his rounds. "Stay behind me, you two. Using the anti-omnic rounds. One hit's enough to kill an elephant."

"Fine," Jack said looking almost amused by your shared boyfriend's penchant for heavy weaponry. "Sweetheart, want to announce us?"

"With pleasure," you said, lining up your first headshot. The cyborg never knew what hit him. One moment he was firing a pulse rifle at some innocent civilians. The next, he was on the ground, his brains leaking out. So sad.

You managed to take out a turret too before they finally noticed you. And then it was Gabriel and Jack charging forward. Jack was the faster one, but Gabriel took point, since his shotguns were best at close range. Jack laid down suppressing fire, while Gabriel just started blowing craters in the walls and the enemies.

You focused on the turrets. They had the highest rate of fire and but without shielding you could knock them out of commission the fastest. Reloading you, swore as the OR-14 swung around, laser sword lighting up the room.

Just because you were saving it for last, didn't mean it was going to wait nicely. It swung the weapon in an arc, narrowly missing Gabriel, the glowing blade striking sparks against Kwento's protective shield. It brought the weapon up for a second pass, faster than anything that big should be able to move.

There were still cyborgs, but the biggest danger was right in front of Gabriel and you turned your attention to the OR-14, firing furiously at the wrist joint. You just had to keep that damn sword away from your man.

The blade was already descending on Gabriel and you screamed in fury, physics working against him. You held down the trigger, knowing that you couldn't get there fast enough. But then
Jack was at Gabriel's side, blocking the strike with his rifle. The rifle wouldn't last, not against the superheated blade, but it was enough to save Gabriel. You couldn't keep shooting, at the wrist, not with Jack there, but Gabriel angled himself on his knees beside Jack, and fired his shotguns from below. The "hand" and the sword fell to the ground, and Jack tossed his smoking pulse rifle aside drawing his pistol.

It occurred to you then that Torby was going to kill Jack when you got back to Zurich. Oh dear, well there were more dangerous things in front of you and, you had the ride back to strategize.

Then you were right behind Jack, laying down cover fire for his advance. Gabriel was to your right, firing another shot point blank into the omnic's torso. It stuttered to a halt, though you knew better than to believe it was out of commission. Instead you trusted Gabriel to keep it busy while you and Jack finished the cyborgs.

Jack fired one-handed, even as two cyborgs rushed him. Laughing, he smashed his fist into the first one's face. The second one fired a shot that glanced off Jack's eyepiece, shattering the blue optical scanner. Snarling, you put two rounds straight between the bastard's eyes.

Jack gave you a fierce smile of thanks, blood trickling down the side of his face from the shrapnel. It didn't look deep but you were going to have to check that eye after the battle. Jack wasn't slowing down at all though; he pistol whipped the first cyborg, delivering a savage kick to the man's torso.

A woman in a facemask, much like "Mako" who had damn near killed you, flipped forward, moving almost as fast as Genji. Even with your hitscan rifle, you had to shoot with a lead, trying to predict where she would be in half a second. She ricocheted like a damn pinball.

Your gun clicked empty, and you could swear that the bitch heard it, because she zoomed past Jack, bounding off a wall, her head inclined at you. You slammed your gun into place against your armor and drew your wakizashi. Nguyen's cyborgs confused their superior strength for invincibility, a mistake that Genji never made. She was on you a heartbeat later, blades popping out of her gauntlets. You blocked the strike, knowing that you had to end it quickly.

"Going to gut you, amateur," she rasped, breaking the lock and drawing back to prepare for a second strike.

Jack was suddenly behind her, his gloved hands on the sides of her head. You blinked as he grabbed and twisted, the familiar crack letting you know that she was done.

Out of the corner of your eye, Gabriel was systemically dismantling the OR-14 with his shotgun and you were a little sore that he was doing it without you. Not that you blamed him; you were just annoyed that things didn't go quite as neatly as you planned. Of course, you were used to that by now.

You got a glimpse inside the Hope Diamond alcove. Kwento was there, with two surviving guards, a scarred man and a heavily burned omnic. There were a dozen more civilians crammed in there behind her, and it heartened you that Kwento hadn't just tried to save her own ass. Beside the shielding mechanism was Zenyatta, he sat in lotus position hovering an inch off the floor. From what you could see, it looked like he was channeling his own power into keeping it strong.

Relief steadied your hand, and faced the last standing cyborg, wondering if he'd beg for mercy. Wondering if you had any left in you.
"All yours, sweetheart," Jack laughed.

Goddamn reckless asshole. You had a fucking audience, though his declaration sounded less like affection and more like a taunt.

The man looked between Jack and you, sizing you up, and then judging you to be the weakest link, rushed you. Well, he was right, you were the weakest combatant out of your trio. So he would underestimate you, and like the others before him, he would not have long to regret that mistake.

You swung the blade in a horizontal arc, holding it loosely in both hands, letting the momentum power your strike. You concentrated more on directing the weapon than putting all your might into it. There was a brief jolt down your arms as you made contact. The blade swished through the target, the resistance soft and brief. And then the head soared off the body, blood arcing from the exposed neck, some of it spraying onto you. It landed on the ground and rolled under the OR-14. The body toppled, still leaking.

The look on Jack's face was worth all the laundry you were going to have to do. He looked like a kid who'd gotten caught after setting off the fireworks he'd stuffed into the school toilets, but had no regrets. And to be honest, it was kind of cute.

You didn't have time to admire your handiwork, or wonder what kind of caustic critique Hanzo would offer about your form. You wiped the short sword off on the nearest cyborg's pants, swapped it out for your gun, and reloaded.

Gabriel had taken out two of the OR-14's legs, and you fell in beside him, directing your fire at the processor in the central body.

"You just like getting dirty, don't you?" He said, loud enough for only you to hear.

"Aren't you going to compliment my awesome swordsmanship?" You asked, as Jack joined you, holding a cyborg's heavy rifle.

"Oh, we have the ride back to Zurich to show you how impressed we are," Jack said out of the corner of his mouth. "It's a good thing I have this overcoat on."

You stifled a laugh. The three of you concentrated fire on the OR-14. Watching the chassis peel away, seeing the goddamn murderbot spark, stutter, and fall, shredded beneath your gunfire, was a moment you'd always treasure. You were here with Jack and Gabriel beside you. This was exactly how it was supposed to be, the three of you together. You glanced over at Gabriel who was smiling fondly at you both.

"If it lives, we can kill it," he said, lips drawn back in a savage approximation of a smile. Your heart fluttered just a little.

"It is my privilege to be at your side in battle." Jack lowered his gun, looking over at the two of you. "And it'll be even better when I'm on top of you in bed."

If they kept this up, you were going to do something stupid in front of the civilians. Well, stupider. "I am so hungry now," you said, trying to distract yourself as your stomach growled on cue.

"See, she earned her codename," Gabriel said as he shook his head. The three of you inspected the fallen enemies. There was an odd satellite device humming along, and you contemplating smashing it. But you were an adult with decent reasoning. You found the off switch
"Wendigo, Summer, Bauer, come in. I repeat-" Ziv's voice sounded over your earpiece.

Well, you'd found one of the jammers. "Hey there, Prickly Pear," you said. "Crane is secure. We have Zen and some civvies-"

"You need to get out of there now. While you dumbasses were fighting, some of their sneakier operatives stuffed the basement with incendiary bombs before Black Swan could take them out. Think Belfast if you need inspiration," Ziv said tightly.

"...For fuck's sake," you sighed. When you looked up, the protective shield was down. And Jack was already in, ushering the civilians toward the fire exit.

Kwento's right arm was bandaged and she was limping, but she held a gun in her hand. "Oladele, Fennec-7, get the civilians out first. We'll bring Zenyatta."

You glanced at the Shambali monk, whose lights seemed dimmer than you remembered.

He gave a light chuckle. "I will be fine, Adaeze." He floated along, though he wobbled slightly. "Agent Strike, you came for us."

"Well, you know, I owed you one," you said. "And we don't leave people behind."

When you looked up, Kwento was watching you with keen eyes, her face smudged with blood and ash. "Impressive work. I am afraid one of the teenagers recorded your fight. I asked Fennec-7 to confiscate the footage but-

And then you heard the rumble and building began to shudder. Did they really plan on blowing up the museum? What a bunch of cunts. "Fire escape, now," Gabriel snapped, and pushed the jamming device into Jack's arms. "Move people!"

You caught sight of the Hope Diamond, sitting in its case. Kwento was already limping along with Jack. Zenyatta, was moving slower than usual.

"Help him, please," you said to Gabriel.

Gabriel gave you a look. "He's fine. Come on." He began to move. You looked around and then smashed the glass display case with your metal fingers, grabbing the giant blue diamond pendant. And on the way out, you might have picked up some choice pieces too, you know, since the building was on fire.

Jack stood at the top of the fire escape. You were pretty sure Zenyatta had seen your dramatic blue diamond acquisition. So you hung the enormous jewel around Jack's neck, taking a moment to admire it. Too bad you wouldn't get to see him only wearing the necklace. But damn, his eyes were a brighter shade of blue, and they sparkled when he looked at you. And when he quirked his lips at you, you forgot all about rock.

"Really?" He asked.

"I'm saving it. Or, you are now, I guess."

You and Jack raced down the rickety metal stairs, catching up to Gabriel who had Kwento in a bridal carry. You were pretty sure that was a concession to her pride. A fireman's carry might be too undignified. Zenyatta was keeping the pace, to your relief. You weren't sure how you
would transport him without Gabriel or Jack's help.

The building was already smoking. You spotted Lacroix on the ground in tactical armor, directing the civilians to safety. It shocked you just how relieved you were to see him there, handling things. There were far less reinforcements than you expected to see in the goddamn center of Washington DC, but you had time for questions later.

Gabriel set Kwento down as soon as you were further away, the building already collapsing, black smoke pouring into the sky. Suddenly, you were drained and you shook your head, dreading the body count. You and Gabriel held your weapons, even as Lacroix and Brant herded the civilians a safe distance from the Natural History Museum. It had been really cool. Too bad you probably weren't going to get invited back.

Four black SUVs, with government tags, roared across the sidewalks. You blinked as two dozen men in a disjointed combination of suits and tactical armor poured out, guns drawn.

Brant was suddenly in front of everyone his badge raised. "Hey, hey, they're friendlies. They're Overwatch!" he shouted.

"FBI, put down your weapons!" A man in douche shades and tactical gear shouted, gun pointed in your direction.

"Goddamn it!" Brant snarled.

You and Gabriel made no move to disarm. Because you didn't trust "allies" that showed up once the fighting was all done. And Jack's hands were full of salvaged Talon tech.

"I said!" The man in sunglasses snarled, and raised his gun. No, he wasn't aiming at you. The move was instinct by now.

"Down!" You whirled, shoving Jack to the ground, back to the shooter, head tucked low, presenting a larger target, and hoping that he'd aim for center mass.

You felt the shots even as the thunder clapped. Thunk thunk thunk, they hit your armor, knocking the air out of your lungs. You staggered, gasping for breath.

The civilians started screaming, and you could hear Lacroix cursing in the vilest French you'd never imagined. You stumbled and caught yourself.

Jack stared at you, pure fury on his face, even as he dropped the jammer and climbed to his feet to steady you. And then Gabriel was at your side, pulling your armor off, his hands on your back. You didn't feel good, but you were still standing. Your armor was good. The shooter had a pistol. You were fine.

"Status?" Jack ground out, eyes never leaving yours.

"Armor intact... But how the hell did you get shot in the same place twice?" Gabriel snarled, already tearing strips off his sleeve to apply pressure to your left arm.

You blinked, looking down, blood flowed down your elbow, already soaking your rashguard. You hadn't even felt it. Too much adrenaline. "Oh. I don't know. Luck?"

Gabriel clenched his teeth, mirroring Jack's furious look. You wanted to laugh, but breathing hurt.

A familiar warm glow passing through you as Zenyatta hovered at your side. "Allow me to
You shuddered as your arm grew uncomfortably hot. "Thank you," you said.

"Thank you again for coming to rescue us," he said, tone oddly thoughtful.

When you turned around, Lacroix was standing over the shooter, his shoe on the other man's head. Brant had seized control of the situation, and the other FBI agents were looking between Jack, you, and the shooter in absolute horror.

Jack took another moment to examine you. Then he inhaled, released, and his expression shuttered, cold determination replacing his boiling anger. The Strike Commander had taken the helm. He gently released you, giving you a nod and a cool look that promised to continue this later.

And then he was moving, speaking in tight harsh tones, telling the FBI right where they could stick their jurisdiction, their bullshit apologies, and their "trigger happy" agents. You knew better than to believe that this was any kind of accident, but it didn't do anyone favors to cause more panic. Instead, you just sat on the ground while Gabriel muttered in Spanish, holding your arm up so Zenyatta could patch you up.

Brant came to join you after a moment, his hangdog expression kind of comical. Though that could have been the blood loss.

"I am so sorry," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I knew it was bad, but I didn't think it would be-"

"Save it," Gabriel snapped.

"Eh, not his fault his agency is riddled with traitors," you said, trying to shrug and immediately regretting it.

Brant winced at that. "...I think everyone else is now realizing that he was aiming at the Strike Commander and not the armed guards. And they have to be wondering why. There aren't any good conclusions anyone can draw. This is going to get ugly."

"Going to get ugly? It's not already?" Gabriel said, tightly. "Because if this is how the feds operate now-"

"Why don't we get out of the open? Especially the Strike Commander and the future Undersecretary," you suggested, realizing that Gabriel was in no mood to have any kind of civil discussion. And he kept glancing over at the cuffed shooter, the look on his face murderous. You didn't mind if something bad happened to the asshole, but you didn't want to do it with witnesses.

Zenyatta didn't speak, presumably because his focus was on mending your wound, but you knew he was listening very carefully to everything everyone said.

"Come on, Gallus has set up a command center with kinetic barriers. We can wait there," Brant said.

The four of you headed to the area, stepping through the humming shields. Gabriel held your chestpiece in one arm, the other steadying you. Zenyatta floated beside you.

"Ben-zona, what the fuck is going on?" Ziv snarled as he stormed out of a tent, his hair frizzed out, his body armor hugging his lanky frame. He took one look at you and glared at Brant. "Is the FBI in the habit of shooting their goddamn allies? Because this would explain why no one
wants to fucking talk to you!" He jabbed his index finger into the center of Brant's chest. "And why are you just standing there like an idiot? Stop gawking and make yourself useful!" Ziv turned his outraged gaze on you. "You. Sit your ass down, let the monk heal you, and try not to get hurt for five goddamn minutes, all right? And will someone bring me a goddamn emitter? Also, get her something to eat before she goes into shock! What the hell kind of operation are we running? Is this amateur hour? Do I have to do everything myself?"

You blinked a few times and then obediently sat down on the grass. It was a pretty sunny day, and your throat was parched, your limbs were starting to feel a little weak. He wasn't wrong about you needing food.

Brant looked between Ziv and Gabriel and took off, presumably to find you a snack. Or to make a run for the border. Because Ziv looked two steps away from full-on rabid psychopath, and it was kind of cute. You thought about hugging him and reassuring him that you were fine, but this was way more entertaining. He needed to vent anyway, and you could wait to see how things played out. Someone had to feed you. Or everyone would be sorry.

You sat on the ground watching Ziv bark orders at people. Blood pounded in your head at the rapid rhythm of your heartbeat. You were a little dizzy now. Gabriel had gotten you a blanket to sit on and was off grabbing more stuff, and there was an Athena drone hovering beside you, her guns in plain view. Zenyatta stayed at your side. He'd already staunched the blood flow and now he was trying to mend the bone. The bullet had gone through your arm, but nicked a bone on the way out, causing more damage than the last time you were shot.

You wanted a painkiller very badly, but you couldn't afford to have a fuzzy head if anything else went wrong, so you sat there, grinding your teeth, and wishing you had something alcoholic to drink. Instead you sipped bottled water, your stomach uncomfortably empty.

"Here," Ziv stood in front of you, hand extended. "I got some over the counter stuff. So you won't get loopy and over-share anything from your personal life. Because no one wants to hear that shit."

"I think some of that was because of the blood loss too," you said, managing a crooked smile as you accepted the pain pills.

"Whatever, you're a reckless idiot. It's not like Morrison can't take a few hits," Ziv sniffed. "You're always saving him, but he's the goddamn super soldier-"

"He's had my back plenty of times and you know it. But thanks, Ziv," you said. "For looking after me. I'm sorry I worried you."

He blinked, eyes slowly narrowing. "Oh no, you don't. You don't get to act all reasonable and shit, and expect me not to be pissed off that you went and got yourself shot again."

"Don't be jealous," you told him with a laugh. "I'd still take a bullet for you."

"I don't know why you think that's an acceptable measure of affection!" Ziv snarled, grabbing your collar. "I don't want you taking bullets for anyone! What the fuck kind of declaration is that?!"
"Please don't jostle my patient," Zenyatta said mildly. "I'm at a very delicate juncture."

Ziv's stiffened, quickly letting you go. "Sorry," he muttered, and you suspected that wasn't just meant for Zenyatta.

"Were you talking to me or her?" Zenyatta asked, not looking up from his work.

"Both of you. Mostly her, since she's the one in pain," Ziv scowled, crossing his arms and looking away. Because he had to know by now that ambiguous apologies were not very good apologies, right? "Look, you were supposed to be careful. And I know you suck at it, but can we have a mission where you don't get fucked up, please? Let someone else have a turn."

You snorted. "Ziv, I've been on plenty of missions where I didn't get hurt. Lay off. You're giving me a headache."

"No, that's your low blood sugar, idiot," he huffed. "For fuck's sake, where did Reyes and Brant get to?"

Gabriel returned then with an emitter, a bottle of blue electrolyte, solution and a military-issue chocolate bar. It was a terrible flavor combination, but you still wolfed down the chocolate and gulped the drink rapidly.

Gabriel watched Ziv, somewhere between tolerant and amused, as your hacker went off to find someone else to yell at.

"You realize he's probably going to find the shooter and kick him a few times," Gabriel told you.

"Eh, if he's tied up, Ziv should be fine. He does know how to kick things without hurting himself."

Gabriel shook his head, looking slightly amused. "He'll have to get in line."

"Yeah, I got dibs," you said, looking at your arm.

"You know it doesn't work that way," Gabriel said, shaking his head.

"It should," you said, maybe sulking just a little.

Brant approached, a beacon of mussed ginger hair and sheepishness. He had a hunted look on his face and kept glancing over his shoulder, like he expected to be ambushed at any time by your surly hacker.

"I found a box of Oreos and an unopened bag of Cheetos in my car," he said, looking a little awkward. "I know it's not much..."

You extended your good hand. "Give."

Gabriel opened the packages for you and you ate, because calories were calories, and emitter healing in addition to whatever Zenyatta was doing, was making you hungrier by the second.

Brant watched you eat, relaxing just a smidgeon. "So, good work getting those school kids out. But they're already saying some pretty FBI agent in a dress saved them. I'm afraid you might not get credit for it."
You almost shrugged again, but remembered to hold still.

"Is this really the time?" Gabriel glowered, his hands wonderfully warm against your back.

"I uh...no, but I have to ask about something else. Umm..." Brant tugged at his collar, face turning pink. "So, um...why is the Strike Commander wearing the Hope Diamond?"

Zenyatta had gone off to help the other injured, and you wondered when he was going to take time to rest or recharge. Kwento and Jack were in serious discussion with Lacroix, but Gabriel lingered with you, unwilling to leave you alone with Brant. Athena had reassured him a few times that the jamming device was not affecting her now, but he lingered.

Ziv was also in the area, watching you like a hawk. He thought he was being sneaky, so you pretended not to notice.

"So, did you happen to salvage anything else?" Brant asked, as you watched thick clouds of black smoke pour out of the shell of the Natural History Museum. You felt a pang of sadness at the thought of all those cool displays and artifacts going up in smoke. Just another heinous crime to lay at Talon's feet.

You yawned, and ate another cookie. Nothing good ever came from admitting anything to law enforcement and you didn't have to say a word.

"She did," Gabriel said, much to your dismay. "Wendigo is a detail person. She just doesn't think she can trust anyone in the FBI."

Brant winced at the low blow. Normally you would have told Gabriel to behave, but you weren't feeling very forgiving right now. Even if Brant had brought you all the junk food in his car.

"Snitch," you said, under your breath.

"They belong in a museum," Gabriel told you, and you wondered how long he'd been waiting to use that line.

You sighed and looked at Brant who was trying very hard not to laugh at you.

With one hand, you took off your belt, opened up certain storage pouches, and dumped out the jewelry and precious stones you'd stashed in there onto the blanket. Brant's smile got progressively more uneasy as the pile grew.

"I was saving them," you said. "We got the message that there were incendiary bombs, and I couldn't get to the fossils... You know, those would have been pretty cool." Come to think of it, you wondered if anyone managed to take any prisoners. Because your team hadn't saved any enemies. Oops.

"I won't ask any questions," Brant said, though you could tell he was struggling with that.

Gabriel patted your back gently. "I'm going to see if we're setting up a base camp, or leaving. Let Prickly Pear or Athena know if you need anything. And if anyone bothers you, you can shoot them," he said, gaze traveling to Brant.
Finally! A Jack, Gabriel, and Lucky exclusive combat mission!

I wrote this before the Brazilian museum fire, and still feel amazingly guilty. Like, "oh let's make a fictional terrorist attack and also burn down a museum." Then sees a real museum burn and feels terrible. Left it though. I know the Smithsonian Natural History Museum only has three floors, BUT this is the future and I'm having fun with making it a bigger, crisper museum. OK, maybe not the crispy part.

Stressing hard core.

Finished Day 5 of a six day stretch. I'm getting over a cold. We still don't know if my cousin is going to lose his job. And I'm so done with people I have been screeching on occasion. I can't customer service any more. I can't. Teenage cousin is not moving in with us, yet. Haven't seen any changes in cat's health since we put him on meds and prescription food, but it's expensive. Dart's sebaceous cyst is oozing sebum, so it's gross, but he seems fine. Ranger has grown another fatty tumor, and I'm like "WHY?"

So applying for more jobs again.

As I was writing this I had to go into the kitchen and found Shepard had stolen a box of Beanboozled flavored jellybeans off the table, tore open the box, and was eating them.

Overall, stressed and grumpy. I'm finally off Wednesday and I need to catch up on laundry, exercise, and finding ways to relax. Bought a Moana Lego set, but too tired to put it together tonight. I don't even usually play with Legos any more, but it was on clearance and I loved the movie.
Chapter 92

Chapter Summary

While Black Abacus is technically a success, things in DC are still a mess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Washington DC was on complete lockdown, and the reason any official help had been delayed was because Talon hit the Metro, with bombs instead of gunmen. The explosions were bad enough, but the subsequent train derailings, fires, electrical faults, and cave-ins just multiplied the death toll. The Archives, the Capitol, the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, and the Smithsonian Museum of Inorganic Life had been attacked. Though the Natural History Museum had seen the worst of it, those numbers paled beside the Metro casualties. You wondered if the American government was going to try to blame Overwatch.

The casualties were in the mid-triple digits. You didn't have the details, but apparently Lacroix had managed to get some USG agencies on board prior to the actual attack and while it had been bad, it could have been much worse. But the hospitals were swamped, many roads were closed, and civilian aircraft remained grounded.

So you sat there in the grass, drinking Gatorade and eating vending machine snacks that Ziv ordered Brant to get for you, while Athena updated you on the situation. Kwento's surviving omnic bodyguard Fennec-7 came by to give Athena a copy of the phone footage they'd confiscated from some of the civilians. In addition to early accounts of the attacks, you got to see your decapitation trick and your meat shield trick in high definition, and it was much better quality than most security cameras.

Kwento had lost seven out of her dozen member entourage. Her assistant and one bodyguard had remained at their hotel working on editing presentations for her meeting, and were confirmed safe. Oladele and Fennec-7 weren't going to be in fighting shape, but they were alive and walking on their own. Zenyatta was still chugging along tending to the wounded.

All Overwatch personnel were accounted for and there had been no loss of life. Epsilon Squad was helping maintain the perimeter on the Mall.

Lacroix's network hadn't been so lucky. The Secret Service agent, the park ranger, and the contractor had all been killed in the fighting. The rest of them were coordinating the response right now, making sure to highlight the interagency cooperation and the heroism of the fallen. It was terribly calculating, but you weren't so naïve as to think you could get through this with good intentions and honesty alone. People had died. The truth was too convoluted for the average person, especially since they were not cleared for all the background information. There would be a call for retribution. And Lacroix had no intention of letting Overwatch be a scapegoat.

Gabriel had quietly informed you that a lot of the National Park Service personnel, including the quirky security guards at the National History Museum, Griffin and the light switch guy, the ones who helped you arrange the evacuation, had died at their posts trying to slow down the attackers. Pistols were no match for pulse rifles, and they had to have known that, but they still
stuck around, buying time with their lives.

You didn't have a response. Not that one was required from you. You just laid down in the grass, drinking your electrolyte solution, and stared at the clouds. It was a beautiful day. You were alive when a lot of other people were not. It didn't feel like a victory, but it was what you had. Suddenly, you wanted nothing more than to hug Jack and Gabriel, but you could not, not in the middle of DC, with so many onlookers. Instead, you combed your fingers through the grass, breathing slowly, while you focused on a cloud that looked something like a rhinoceros beetle. Or was it a stag beetle?

"There you are, sugarpie."

You smiled faintly as Jesse's shadow fell over you, blocking your view of the beetle clouds. He settled down beside you, black serape wrapped around his blue armor.

"That has to be hot," you said, offering him your drink.

He took it with a nod and drained the bottle. "Much obliged." He unwound the length of fabric, setting it in his lap.

"How'd your run go?" You asked, tilting your head up so you could get a better look at him. He was sweaty, his hat askew, and he was sporting a shiner, but otherwise he seemed unharmed.

"Things got a little hairy," he said with a shrug. "They brought in OR-14, and that brought back some bad feelings."

"Same," you said, understanding that hesitance in his voice.

"Had it mostly under control. There was some trouble, when Hanzo ended up taking a bullet meant for Genji and then Genji went batshit. Lots of screaming and cutting. They're going need someone good at jigsaw puzzles to put the bodies back together."

You laughed, though it probably wasn't funny, not really. "Hanzo OK, though?"

"He didn't get shot anywhere important. Bullet just grazed his side. He slapped a bandage on it and just kept shooting. The man has some serious talent with a bow." Jesse gave you a thoughtful look.

"Oh, are you going to invite him to join the "I use outdated weaponry for stylistic reasons" club? Because-"

Jesse snorted, sticking his hat over your face. It smelled like sweat, gunpowder, and cologne. You wrinkled your nose and pushed it out of your eyes.

"Ain't nothing wrong with revolvers, and I'll outshoot you any day to prove it."

You just laughed, mostly because he was right.

"Cleared the Capitol, met up with Epsilon Squad to finish of the guys at the Archives, then made it back here for debrief." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Managed not to burn the buildings down either." He gave you a sly smirk.

"That was not my fault," you scowled. "There were bombs."

"And sleeper agents," Jesse said, the humor draining out of his voice. "How's your arm
"Numb. Zenyatta healed me up pretty good. It'll hurt more later, but I'm managing with basic painkillers."

Jesse nodded, clearly remembering the aftermath of Operation Shanghai Noon.

"Watergate or the Mandarin Oriental?" Ziv asked as he came over to you, holding a few more bottles of Gatorade. He handed them to you and Jesse.

"...What?" You squinted at Ziv.

"We probably aren't getting out of the city tonight, not without kicking up a big fuss, so we need a place to crash and we're not staying at the Holiday Inn."

"Aww, but they have a swimming pool," Jesse said. "And continental breakfast. Who doesn't like free continental breakfast?"

"No cheap tourist hotels, it's a security risk." Ziv massaged his forehead, and was that a vein protruding? Hotels were a security risk in general, but you weren't going to argue if the team wanted to upgrade accommodations. "Kwento's asked to stay with us, for security reasons, obviously. So anyway, Hanzo chose the Mandarin Oriental, Gérard is partial to the Watergate Hotel. Amélie prefers the Four Seasons, but it's kind of far from here."

"What's closest?" You asked, dreading getting up and trudging out.

"The Mandarin," Ziv said. "McCree?"

"The Mandarin then," he said, opening up a bottle and giving you a wry smile. You appreciated the Blackwatch solidarity.

"Got it," Ziv said. He glanced at Jesse. "Good to see you made it back without getting shot. Some agents could learn from you," he said stiffly, before flouncing off.

"Huh," Jesse said.

"Yeah," you agreed. "Should've seen him earlier. Shouting orders at people, terrorizing Agent Brant, and being a vicious mama hen, it was horrifying, but also strangely endearing."

"Yeah, I'll pass," Jesse said with a laugh. He patted your hand. "You can cat nap if you need to," he said. "I'll keep an eye on things."

You weren't entirely sure what Jack and Gabriel were doing right now, only that it was probably very important and paramount to international security. You missed them, but they would join you when they could.

You glanced over at Jesse who had already finished his drink. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, flashing you a tired smile. Just having him here chased the shadows from the edge of your thoughts, and you put his hat back over your eyes, the sun so warm on your skin.

You felt him lay the serape on you, and you smiled faintly, grateful just for this.

You didn't end up at the Watergate or the Mandarin. Brant's patron, Senator Armstrong, got
you an entire floor in the historic Hay-Adams Hotel, which was actually much closer. You were pretty sure it had been comped, because the staff kept hailing your party as heroes and slipping you extras, like blankets, bottles of wine, and fancy chocolates. But there were a lot of wide floor-length windows and rows of balconies, and you really didn't like that right now. Gabriel was working out watch schedules.

Kwento, Zenyatta, and her bodyguards had a suite. Lacroix, Amélie, and Ziv had a suite. Epsilon Squad had two rooms. Jack and Gabriel took the room across from Kwento’s, citing ease of defense. And you were sharing with Jesse, Genji, and Hanzo. Jesse and Genji were on patrol right now, and Hanzo was napping one of the two beds, a satin sleep mask on his face. You discretely snapped a picture.

You sat at an expensive desk and cleaned your weapons, wondering if you should call down to the kitchen to order a meal. The wakizashi had some gunk dried on it and you had to hurry up, slightly concerned that Hanzo would wake up and demand to know why you were mistreating your blade. The guns required less elbow grease, but more disassembly, but it was all old hat. Sure, the work could wait, but you found the ritual soothing: field stripping your guns then using the brushes, the patches, and the Hoppe's No. 9 to clean the parts. Add a little bit of gun oil to polish things up, snap the pieces back together, and everything would run smoother than before.

You were still a little woozy, probably from the exertion, the sun, and all the junk food you'd eaten after combat. The muscles in your back were aching now. You debated asking for more pain meds.

A knock came, and suddenly Hanzo was sitting up, the sleep mask magically gone.

You got up to check the peephole. "It's Gabriel," you said, so Hanzo could relax. You opened the door to see him in sweats, looking worn out.

"Hey," you said. "Did you want to come in?"

He shook his head. "Hotel staff delivered food to Jack and me. Wanted to see if you guys had eaten yet?" He glanced at Hanzo.

"I will order room service in a minute," Hanzo said, his expression carefully blank.

"Well, I'm starving," you admitted.

"Come on over then. You're not a watch till tomorrow afternoon, if we're still here," Gabriel said.

You glanced at the other doors. Shoal had come in sporting a broken nose and wrist brace, declared the day "too stupid to continue," and gone straight to her room, presumably to sleep. Jemison had given you a faintly exasperated head shake, that could have meant any number of things, and followed.

Kwento's door was shut, and you wondered if Zenyatta was finally taking a break. Amélie raised a glass of wine to you as you passed by and you waved back. Ziv was nattering on about something and you could hear Lacroix trying to placate him in low tones. You smiled at that, because they deserved each other. Maybe not Amélie, but she didn't seem to mind them.

Gabriel opened the door for you, and you went in, their room bigger and almost all cream with dark wood accents. There were fresh cut flowers in elaborate vases, several bottles of wine, and a massive cart of food that Jack was unloading onto the dining table. He was also in sweats,
his hair damp from the shower. He was setting a salad bowl on the table, an Athena drone scanning every dish.

He stopped when he saw you, jaw clenching as his eyes drifted to your bandaged arm. Jack took a deep breath, placed the salad bowl on the table, and came over to you and Gabriel. He didn’t say anything, he just pulled you close, arms wrapped tightly around you as he squeezed you too tightly.

Jack took a shaky breath, his face in your hair. "Should tan your hide for pulling that," he rasped in your ear. "My armor is heavier than yours and there was no reason you should have-"

"You're welcome," you laughed. "Come on, you were holding recovered tech," you said, like that was the reason you jumped in front of him. "And I'm too sore and tired for anything kinky tonight."

"Stop that," he growled, pulling away, though he gripped your shoulders, glaring down at you. "I hate it when you're flippant about it."

You shrugged, recognizing that flash of anger. This wasn't the first time you'd been on the receiving end, he'd been a bear after Paris and Belfast too. "You're going to be salty no matter what I say."

He let go of you, and turned away, his face hard. "I don't think you get the position you put me in."

You almost made a joke about you being on top, but Gabriel rested a hand on your shoulder, squeezing lightly. You weren't exactly sure what that meant, but it was probably a hint to stop antagonizing Jack.

"Explain it then," you said.

Jack turned back around, giving you a dirty look. "I shouldn't have to. We've been over this before. I hate knowing that you'll throw yourself between me and a bullet, because I'm your boss."

You snorted. "That's not why I did it, you idiot. I definitely would not take a bullet for Lacroix, and I work for him more often than I do you." You paused. "Besides, Gabriel shielded me from those mines earlier, and ended up with cut up legs for his trouble. I'm not saying that like it's a competition. I just knew I would get to you faster."

You leaned over and kissed his cheek. He held himself stiff, teeth gritted, eyes staring through you.

"This isn't fair," you complained. "I get shot and you're mad at me."

"Those two things are related," Jack said sharply.

You sighed, giving the food a mournful glance. "Do you want me to go? Give you some space?"

"No," he growled. "I want you to be more careful."

You managed a lopsided grin. "Can't be careful in love, Jack. That's just cowardice. You can be mad, but I'm just glad you're here now to be mad at me."

Jack winced then, suddenly deflating. "I-" He turned away from you, but not fast enough
for you to miss the wounded look on his face. The open regret in those deep blue eyes pierced your chest. "I should have taken care of you myself afterward. I'm sorry, I should have come and checked on you sooner, but-

"I didn't mean it like that," you said.

Jack didn't say anything, just wrapping his arms around you, holding you against his chest. Gabriel reached out to rub the back of his neck.

"It's all right, amor," Gabriel said, leaning over to kiss Jack's cheek. "She's OK. We all made it. We're all here now."

"Should have been there with you, not planning counterstrikes and discussing face-saving measures for the American government," Jack grumbled, his voice rough.

"Duty called," you said, kissing him gently. "I get it. People needed the Strike Commander to take control of the situation. I wasn't alone and fending for myself, which I could have done just fine, mind you. Gabriel, Zenyatta, and Agent Brant all helped me out. Ziv also got involved and browbeat everyone into making snack runs for me. And then Jesse showed up and I took a nap."

"I saw you there in the grass, sleeping in his gear," Jack said, his tone funny. "Quite a few people commented on how cute you look together."

"Just Brant and Kwento," Gabriel said, brushing your hair aside and kissing the back of your neck.

You hugged Jack with one arm. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"I'm sorry I bit your head off first thing. Just...too wound up," Jack muttered, rubbing your back. "Shouldn't have done that. Love you, sweetheart. Hate seeing you get hurt. It tears me up inside." He looked down, nose to nose with you, earnest regret weighing heavily in his eyes.

"Food and cuddles then," you suggested. "Because I'm starving."

Jack chuckled, shaking his head. "What? You aren't going to demand more groveling?"

"Sure, but food first," you said. "Then you can tell me all about it. Like is Kwento in our court yet? Because she damn well better be."

"Kwento is all about allying with us now," Jack said, patting your back and you flinched. "Oh, sorry."

"Less business, more eating," Gabriel said wryly, giving the two of you a gentle push. "We can talk and eat too."

You started to head for the table, but Jack guided you to the plush cream couch, his touch firm. "I'll make you a plate. Just relax."

You craned your neck trying to see what he already laid out on the table.

"There's plenty of steak, lamb, duck, red snapper, scallops, sautéed summer vegetables, beet salad, roasted red pepper and tomato soup, mashed potatoes, baked potatoes, pommes anna, artichokes à la barigoule, fregola-"

"OK, I don't know what all that means," Jack said, giving Gabriel a skeptical look. "And I
saw the sweetbreads. I know exactly what those are, thanks to Gérard, and no thank you, I'm not doing that again."

Gabriel's grin widened. "Corazon?"

"I want to try everything," you said, because how often did you get free food from fancy hotel restaurants? Not often enough. You were just a tiny bit jealous of Jack. He got all kinds of nice meals whenever he went out and he didn't even appreciate them.

"They included bread, herb-infused olive oil, some nice wines-"

Jack groaned and lightly shoved Gabriel out of the way so he could pile food onto plates for you. He returned with three heaping plates, and a bowl of soup and set them on the coffee table. You dipped the bread in the soup, grinning as Jack began cutting your steak into bite-sized pieces.

"I can do it myself-"

"Let me help," Jack said. He sat down beside you, taking a moment to kiss your shoulder.

You speared a large scallop with your fork, rolling your eyes at him. The shellfish was wonderfully buttery, the sauce tempered with white wine and sparkling with lime. You sighed happily, spooning some orange risotto into your mouth, and it tasted of butternut squash with a hint of ginger.

Jack offered you a bite of steak and you took it. Gabriel brought over a few more plates, and wine glasses. He set two in front of you, a mellow red and a sparkling white you suspected to be champagne.

Gabriel nudged you into the middle and sat on your other side.

"Did you order all this or-?"

"They sent it up. I think they're trying to use up food before it expires: this attack is going to be bad for business. Gérard probably just told them to give us everything they could spare and go heavy on the protein," Gabriel said, cutting himself some lamb. He offered a piece to Jack, and Jack leaned over you for his bite.

"Everyone else is getting fed too, right?"

"They know they can order up," Gabriel said. "The only people I'm worried about right now are you and Jack." He sighed as he ate his steak. "I noticed that you didn't empty your pockets when you were returning all your...salvage to Agent Brant," he said.

"I noticed that you're a snitch," you said with a sniff. You took a slice of duck breast in red wine sauce.

"I wouldn't care, except it was a museum," Gabriel said and you couldn't really argue with that logic or morality. So you took a bite of his lamb instead. "I hope you didn't keep anything too recognizable."

"Don't know what you're talking about," you said, because you'd only kept loose stones, since they were harder to trace.

Jack sighed. "I returned the Hope Diamond, after explaining that one of my agents saved it
and handed it off to me for safekeeping."

"Well yeah, you were wearing it broad daylight. The radiant Hope Diamond adorning our very own beacon of hope in a troubling time. It kind of blended in with your armor to be honest, maybe we should have white armor for our white knight." Jack wrinkled his nose at you. "Obviously, you weren't trying to do anything shady with it," you said cheerfully.

"You're such a little shit," Jack murmured, lips warm against your throat. "I already told Gabriel about the suicidal odds you took in the fossil exhibit. Five on one was beyond stupid."

"Now hold up," you said, shaking your fork at him. "I killed two, got the a fifth grade class evacuated, then got cornered by those three while trying to get a straggling kid out. That was not my fault, and it wasn't five on one odds."

"Doesn't matter," Gabriel said, resting one hand on the back of your neck. "Didn't you promise me that you weren't going to get hurt?" His voice was a low rumble in your ear, and you shivered.

"You can't be mad at me about that. I wasn't taking stupid risks, I was protecting Jack!"

"I didn't say I was mad, I'm just disappointed," he murmured and you winced, because now that Jack's emotional minefield had been navigated, you had to face Gabriel.

"I'm sorry," you said, knowing better than to be flippant this time around.

"That's what you said earlier," Gabriel said mildly.

You exhaled slowly, because that was your fault. "I really am sorry. I didn't mean to get you hurt-"

Gabriel said nothing, just taking your left hand in his and kissing your gloved prosthetic fingers. He smiled faintly. "It's nothing compared to these."

"...Gabriel, no," you said, voice quivering. "We're not playing that game. We're not keeping score."

"To quote a particularly stubborn individual, "that's not why I did it, you idiot." He laughed softly at the look on your face. "If given the choice, I will always take the damage, rather than let you do it," he said. "I can't be mad at you for protecting Jack, but I was so looking forward to having you fuss over me tonight." His eyes sparkled as he offered you a bite of seared red snapper.

You glanced down at your left arm. It was still pretty stiff. "Do you want me to help you remove any splinters?"

"I already did it," Jack said. "Figured you wouldn't be up for it with your arm." He rubbed your low back. "Maggie and Michael send their love. Checked in with them as soon as I could. Your heroic rescue clip hasn't made the news, the FBI is trying to keep a lid on it, and I'm willing to let them in exchange for some concessions." He winced then. "Unfortunately, they aren't willing to let us take the shooter into our custody. Lacroix gets first crack at him though."

You shrugged. "Lacroix will be way worse than anything you could do, golden boy," you said kissing his cheek. "He's in terrible hands, and I have no regrets."

Gabriel laughed. "I told you she'd say that. Keep in mind, they probably won't let Lacroix torture him."
You blew a raspberry. Maybe you were a little disappointed, but being sandwiched between Gabriel and Jack, with more gourmet food than you could eat, went a long way in improving your mood. You ate your fill, watching as Gabriel goaded Jack into trying new things, though Jack didn't actually seem to mind. He'd take a bite, and if he thought it was good, he'd offer you a portion.

By the end of the meal, you were drowsing between them. "I should go," you yawned, resting your head against Gabriel's shoulder.

"You can stay," Jack said softly. "Epsilon Squad is being dispatched first thing in the morning to escort Kwento to her Senate committee meeting, as long as it isn't canceled."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Neither Epsilon Squad nor Kwento's entourage knew about your relationship. You didn't want to take unnecessary risks.

"Worst case scenario, I gave you my bed because Hanzo Shimada snores like a rusty chainsaw," Gabriel said. "And you were simply too polite to wake him. Genji will back you up on it."

You laughed at that.

"Besides, I've missed you," Jack murmured, cupping your face. "Both of you." He kissed your throat, his mouth firm and insistent against the sensitive skin, and you squirmed.

"Jack," you shivered, gripping his forearms. "I don't know if we should-

"Sorry," he rumbled, releasing you. He gritted his teeth, giving you a rough smile. "Being in expensive hotels, with you and Gabriel, does something to me."

"How Pavlovian," Gabriel laughed, gently stroking your back. "Sore?"

"Yeah," you admitted, though seeing Jack all worked up made you think that maybe it would be worth it to power through the pain.

Jack sighed. "Gabe is too, though he'll deny it."

"We don't have to go all out," you said, holding his hands. "I've missed you too."

"I want nothing more than to pin you to the bed and pay you back for everything you've done today," he said, smoothing your hair back. "Love seeing you mewling under me. Want you so bad I can't think straight." His eyes stayed on your face. "Want to watch you and Gabe too. I can't look away when you're touching him. The two of you are so good together." His breath caught and he gave you a sheepish look. "But you were right. It's a bad idea. We're on high alert. You and Gabe are injured. And I'm all wound up. Once I get started..." He rubbed the back of his neck, his cheeks pink. "Well, I think I'm going to need another shower," he said ruefully. "A cold one."

"We could just-"

"You're already falling asleep." Gabriel laughed softly. "Let's go to bed. A little anticipation is good for Jack."

You lay on your stomach beside Gabriel. He was on his front too and wearing nothing but
boxers. His legs seemed to be healing fine, but you studied the healing skin, with a guilty look.

"I'm fine, *corazon*. Just superficial wounds, honest. But you're welcome to look closer." He flexed his thighs and calves, and you shivered.

"Are you trying to tease us?"

"Just Jack," he said with a wink. "Let him stew in it. It'll be worth it when we get home."

You rolled your eyes, your sharp words cut off by a yawn. "I wouldn't have minded a little fun," you said. "Jack can be gentle-"

"You know how I am after an op," Gabriel said. "Jack's the same way. And he's plenty frustrated about how today went."

Your lips quirked up. "You're just making me more interested."

"Unless you want the entire floor to hear us, I think we better take a rain check," Gabriel said, at least a little regretful.

"Damn," Jack sighed, as he stepped out of the bathroom, toweling off his hair. He wore a t-shirt and boxers. "I was hoping you two would be making out."

Gabriel laughed softly and scooted over. Jack crawled in between the two of you and rolled onto his back, opening his arms so you could snuggle against him.

"Missed you both," he said, leaning over to kiss Gabriel's forehead. Gabriel chuckled and lifted his head, so he could kiss Jack back.

"When we get home, we can make up for lost time," Gabriel said, running his fingers through Jack's hair. "Your sacrifice in this time of turbulence is appreciated. You are a true American hero."

" Shut up," Jack laughed. He squeezed you both. "Lucky needs to sleep."

"You guys keep saying that, but I'm-"

"Really grumpy when you're injured and you haven't had enough rest," Jack finished. "Be good and I'll get you cake for breakfast."

"Of all the patronizing things to say-" You growled. Not just because it was condescending, but maybe because it hit a nerve. Were you that predictable? Would Jack really try to withhold cake from you?

"Mouthy girls don't get cake," Gabriel said, reaching over to ruffle your hair. "They get plain oatmeal. No maple syrup. No fruit. *Nothing*."

"You both suck," you grumbled, burying your face in Jack's chest.

They were still laughing at you while you drifted off, but you found that you didn't mind. Especially if there would be cake.

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You sat on the couch, wearing a clean uniform, sans armor, and eating cake with your
breakfast. You weren't on the watch roster till this evening, and that made you feel a little guilty. The other night at the hotel, Gabriel had let you sleep and taken your watch shift then. You didn't mind special personal treatment, but it felt weird bleeding directly into work. You weren't entirely sure how to address it yet. So you'd wait till you had better words.

Jack had donned his armor and sat beside you, reading the newspaper. The headlines screamed in huge bold font about the five hundred plus death toll. You weren't quite ready to read the articles or watch any news reports. They wouldn't be accurate anyway.

Gabriel sat at the table, eyes only half open as he inhaled the coffee steam. He sipped it slowly, eventually noticing the plate of beignets Jack had left for him. He flashed Jack a tired smile, but Jack was frowning at the paper, newsprint rustling as he flipped through the pages.

"Are there comics?" You asked.

Jack handed you the funny pages without looking up.

You looked at the comics, realizing you didn't recognize or follow half of them. You read them half-heartedly and then set them aside as soon as your food was gone. You'd pass them on to Jesse later.

You turned on your tablet, skimming the reports that had already been submitted to Blackwatch. You had already dictated your post-mission report to Athena yesterday. It would be important to see what everyone else had observed.

Richard Prince, cyborg mercenary, and Nguyen's apparent black ops man, was conspicuously absent from any of the reports. Was he going to go after Kwento personally? Or was there a part two in the works?

There was a knock at the door, and you glanced at Gabriel and Jack. Gabriel was still waking up, and Jack was focused on the news. So you put your tablet aside, drew your pistol, and checked the peephole.

Zenyatta floated outside, looking serene as ever.

You opened the door, pistol still gripped loosely in your hand. "Good morning," you said.

Zenyatta tilted his head to the side. "Good morning, Agent Strike. I was looking for you. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Sore, but other than that, I'm fine," you said.

"I was going to check on you last night, but you weren't in your room."

You blinked. "Hanzo snores like a rusty chainsaw," you said, automatically. "And he talks in his sleep. It's kind of scary, to be honest." You glanced discretely down the hall, hoping no one else heard your lies.

"Does he?" Zenyatta floated there, too serene for your liking. "I didn't hear anything like that."

"He let you in there while he was sleeping?" You hoped your skepticism covered any discomfort.

"I am more sensitive to some frequencies than others," Zenyatta said. "I just wished to
make sure you were all right."

You blinked, wondering if his auditory sensors were strong enough filter out white noise and eavesdrop through the goddamn vents. Or if he just knew you'd spent the night here. Suddenly, you were very glad you had not gotten up to anything last night. "Filching food from my COs and working on reports," you said. "I'm living the dream."

"If this is the dream, what is your real life like?"

You weren't sure what to say to that. "Zenyatta, I have not had enough caffeine to handle your philosophical subtext yet."

"Well, I am relieved to see that you are doing well. I actually came by to let you know that Adaeze would like to speak to you later," Zenyatta said, sounding almost uncomfortable. "I am going to one of the hospitals to help treat the wounded. But I would consider it a great favor if you waited for me before having that discussion with her."

"Yeah, sure," you said, wondering what the hell Kwento had to talk to you about. Maybe it was just a "thanks for saving me" and "are you getting along with Zenyatta?" You weren't going to say anything nasty about the omnic monk, not after he fixed up Daniels. And certainly not after his help yesterday.

"We will meet later then," Zenyatta said cheerfully.

Chapter End Notes

My cousin is not getting fired. Hooray! But we've had two more people put in notice/get fired, so we're understaffed.

Pets are doing OK right now.

Went to a wedding yesterday. Wore my inflatable T-Rex costume part of the time. It was pretty epic, till the reception when the children caught me and wouldn't let me go. I was in a dress underneath, running down a gravel road, screaming for my cousin to start the car because I was being chased by kids. He has a convertible, so he put the top down and we drove half a mile with me in the suit. Those inflatable T-Rex's have no natural predators, so they have no real defense mechanisms, and their tiny arms make it impossible to escape tail-pulling children.
Chapter 93

Chapter Summary

Zenyatta's true motives come to light. Or do they? You can never tell with him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Athena was your best resource on keeping track of everyone. Kwento and half of Epsilon Squad were having an expanded meeting with several senators, Armstrong included. Lacroix and Amélie were making rounds in the intelligence community, both gathering information and engaging in diplomacy. You understood that Lacroix had his "visit" with your shooter later today. You looked forward to hearing all about that.

Blackwatch and Kwento's remaining guards were maintaining the hotel perimeter. Jack was fielding several calls, mostly from American politicians. Some of them were thanking him for his service, others blaming him for not doing enough, and one particularly shortsighted asshole even demanded that Jack resign from Overwatch and come back and protect Americans. To his credit, Jack handled each one politely, and you made an expanded list of the politicians whom you did not like.

Ziv and Athena were monitoring all kinds of signals intelligence, Ziv sending you FBI updates with malicious glee. Apparently, the higher-ups were still having a meltdown, ordering an agency-wide investigation, and doing a lot of finger pointing. It was quite the cock-up, and Ziv now had access to all their correspondence. You weren't going to question that too closely. Lacroix would have to rein him in.

Lacroix's network sent regular updates about their agencies' policies. The survivors had come out on top, and their respective employers were eager to take the lifelines Lacroix had offered. You knew he'd attached several strings to the aid, of course. You were counting on it.

You also had several personal messages. Távio, Tataryn, Daniels, and Riggs had all sent you some variant of "I just heard what happened, I hope you're OK." Távio had included a message from Reinhart and several pictures, since Reinhart was the one pet-sitting Isha and Bandit the most. Winston was stepping in to help when Reinhart was busy, and Tataryn? Well, no one had complained about him yet, but it had only been five days.

There was a shot of Isha and Bandit curled up on the couch napping. Then one of them both in Reinhart's lap, all three of them napping. And then there was one with Isha in black ballistic armor, little metal tips covering her claws. Torby was also putting a similar getup on Bandit, complete with little Blackwatch crests. You shook your head, unsure of what to make of that. Távio said that the armor was custom-made, and functional.

There was a message from Captain Amari too. All it said was, "She's still with us." And you swallowed carefully, thankful for that little bit of information. That didn't mean she was OK. That didn't mean the surgery had been a success. But Lao was still alive. You knew there wouldn't be any more information till you got home. The situation here was precarious, and while Athena seemed to be a secure way to communicate, you still weren't sure how they managed to block her
from her drones within the Smithsonian. The jammer Jack secured had been carefully packed up, and Ziv was studying it.

"...I'll be back. You stay here, sweetheart," Jack said, looking up from his tablet.

"Where are you off to?" You asked, trying not to sound suspicious.

"Got some VIPs in the hotel conference room," Jack said, massaging his forehead. "They want a debriefing and probably some kind of concession for aid and a joint task force to respond to the attack. It'll mostly be posturing and the beginnings of negotiations. I doubt anything concrete will be achieved today."

"I'm going with him," Gabriel said, already standing up. "We do a decent good cop/bad cop routine. You can stay here. It's going to be a lot of handwringing and hypotheticals."

You frowned. "Do you need an intimidating bodyguard? Or flaky arm candy?"

"Genji is on patrol and Epsilon squad will pick up Overwatch Barbie on their way back," Gabriel said a little too smugly.

Jack laughed, partially at Gabriel's joke, partially at the look on your face. "Relax sweetheart. I know you're working on one of Gérard's projects. We've got this."

"If you show up now, you'll just get more entangled in their convoluted political games," Gabriel said, no longer smiling. "You're the Overwatch agent shot by one of their own. Different factions will want to use that in all sorts of ways, and it's best if you keep a low profile for now. We may have to politicize the incident as a bargaining chip, but I'd rather your actual involvement was minimized."

"...OK," you said, blowing out a breath. That was a fair assessment; you were trying to preserve some anonymity. And you were still trying to track down Richard Prince, but Athena and Ziv had not had much luck.

Both men donned their blue Overwatch combat armor, and you wondered then just how many changes of clothing Gabriel had brought along. Jack leaned over to kiss you goodbye, while Gabriel tapped his lips, grinning cheekily at you. They both got kisses and left looking awfully smug.

Shaking your head, you went back to your reports.

There was a knock at the door and you drew touched your holstered pistol as you got up to check the peephole.

It was Kwento herself, in a black suit, her hair coiled in a complicated pinned up braid and secured with a headband. You opened the door, wondering if you should explain that Hanzo snored.

"Agent Strike, just the person I was looking for," she said, smiling pleasantly.

"Oh, Zenyatta said you wanted to speak to me." You stood there, deciding not to invite her into Jack and Gabriel's room. "Is everything all right?"
"I...don't want to have this conversation in the hallway. I understand you're doing work for Commander Reyes, but perhaps you can spare a few minutes?" She didn't actually make it sound like a request. You pondered that for a moment.

"Oh, yeah, we can wait for Zenyatta-"

"That isn't necessary," Kwento said. "I understand you've had some...rough patches with him. We don't need to-"

"I don't mind," you said. "Zenyatta is pretty great. You don't need to tell him I said that." There, you hadn't badmouthed him, no matter how irritating he had been. That was good karma, right?

Kwento pursed her lips, a brief flash of annoyance on her face, and then it was gone, covered by a diplomat's smile. "This regards things Zenyatta finds...distasteful."

You blinked, curiosity piqued. "Oh?"

"I think you'll be very interested in what I have to say." Kwento

You rested your hand on your hip, wondering what she could be hinting at: was she finally going to confront you about Petras? You typed out a quick message to Lacroix on your tablet, and set it down. "You know I'm not authorized to make decisions on behalf of leadership, right?"

"I just want to have a chat," Kwento said lightly, as she stepped back and opened the door to her room. "Please, come in. Would you like something to drink?"

"I'm fine, thanks though," you said, as you followed her.

Kwento's quarters were as luxurious as Jack and Gabriel's, the color scheme all pale greens and bright yellows. Kwento gestured for you to sit and you did, blinking as Oladele and Fennec-7 emerged from the back, the omnic stationing himself beside the door, Oladele coming to stand beside Kwento.

You didn't quite like the way they were looking at you. You rested your hand on the gun on your hip.

Kwento set a stack of papers down in front of you. "Ms. Strike, I am going to be candid. We know what you've been doing. We know you ingratiated yourself into Commander Reyes' inner circle. We know you're reporting to Director Petras. We know you aren't whom you say you are." And then Kwento called you by your real name, the one that only three people in the world still used, and two of them were your lovers.

The only real surprise was her use of that name. How had she found that out?

You blinked, watching Fennec-7 out of the corner of your eye. Oladele was injured yesterday. You could take him if things got ugly. Fennec-7 was mostly intact, though still blackened with burn marks, and a human-sized omnic, so he would be trickier than a wounded man.

You glanced down at the papers, printouts of your "reports" to Petras. Well, Lacroix had been right to court Kwento. Her people did good work, except when the jumped to the entirely wrong conclusion. You wondered if you needed to defend your cover, or if this was another elaborate trap. Just how many plots within plots did you need to keep spinning?
"No one ever has to know," Kwento said, mistaking your pensive silence for fear. "You give me what I want, and resign, and I won't let Commander Reyes know what you've been up to. I hear he takes betrayals very personally."

"Huh," you said, because she wasn't wrong. "This is some very interesting conjecture."

"Stop with the act, please. You're wasting my time and your own." She crossed her legs. "It's a bit too late to play stupid," she said. "You have to understand, I only want information. There's no need for this to get ugly. I can even help you disappear, if you're worried about retribution."

"I bet you could," you said dryly.

"That wasn't a threat," Kwento said, actually looking offended. "I understand your concern. You could have a very comfortable, if discrete lifestyle. You've already shown that you have no real loyalties. I must admit I was a little shocked by your behavior yesterday, but then, you are very good at maintaining cover. I would expect nothing less from one of Gérard Lacroix's agents."

"What is it you want?" You asked, wondering why they had gone to all this trouble to try to leverage you instead of turning all this in to Lacroix. You kept an eye on Fennec-7. He wasn't reaching for any weapons, but he would try to stop you if you decided to walk out that door now.

"I've already said it: information," Kwento said, her eyes narrowed.

You scratched your head, trying to figure out Kwento's angle. What did you know that made such a difference? Why you and not one of the higher-ups? Was it because you were the "weakest link" once more?

"You know, you've got it all wrong," you said mildly, after a moment. "But we can wait for Lacroix or even Commander Reyes to get back. They'll set you straight," you said pleasantly. "I'm not authorized to talk about such things."

Kwento narrowed her eyes. "You expect me to believe that you won't try to run or destroy the evidence?"

You shrugged. "I'm not actually worried-"

"Because you're working with Nguyen, Petras, and Talon?" She spat, fury twisting her features. "You think it makes you untouchable? You think your stunt with the Strike Commander will protect you?" Her voice grow louder with every question. "No. You will not walk away from this. I've worked too hard." She was on her feet, a gun in her hand, and you froze, torn between defending yourself and not killing your principal whose safety and cooperation you'd been trying to attain for months.

There was a knock at the door.

"Ignore it," Kwento snarled. "I want answers," she said, jamming the gun in your face.

Your gaze flicked to Oladele, who watched you with cool eyes, his gun also pointed at you, in case you tried to disarm Kwento. He was favoring his left side still. If you were fast enough, you could use her as a shield, but...you ran the risk of her getting hurt, or worse. Where the hell else were you going to find another high-ranking politician to support your cause? So you kept your hands up, smiling politely.

"What do you want to know?" You asked, stalling for time.
She took a deep breath, shoulders shaking as she glared at you. "What happened to Chibundo Nwazue? What did you do to my nwa nne?"

Of all the things you had expected to hear, that name was not one of them. You felt your eyes widen, and your jaw go slack. You sat back on the couch, staring at Kwento's furious face. Her features were broader, her mannerisms nothing like Nwazue's. Nwazue had been thin and sharp, all edges. She had been cool, reserved, and unbothered by anyone's opinion. Kwento radiated sophistication and charisma, and was obviously a powerbroker. You weren't entirely sure what "nwa nne" meant, but you understood now why Kwento had been so keen on including you. She had all the pieces, she'd just put them together wrong. Not bad for a politician, but too sloppy for espionage.

"Surprised? She told me about you, Lucky Strike. The scoundrel that her captain recruited: fortune's fool, unreliable with explosives, and so clever it made you reckless."

You sighed, not denying the description. It sounded like something she would say, disapproval clear in her voice.

"Are you struck dumb? Do I need to bring up the others? Aishani Patel. Simon Razafindraniatsimianiry. Julio Valdez. Lao Yue. And I heard you were especially fond of Sato Shin." She glared at you. "Or at least you seemed to be. Who can really say?"

You clenched your fists at that.

There was a pounding on the door, and you glanced over, teeth pressed together tightly. "Well, that's certainly a low blow."

"Don't try to change the subject!" She snapped, gun still pointed at your head. "She was an agent of Blackwatch. She was a brilliant engineer. She was like a sister to me, and all our family received was a letter."

You flinched. There hadn't been enough of her left to send back. Not after the explosions.

"I want answers-" Kwento hissed.

And that's when the door flew off its hinges, nearly flattening Fennec-7.

To your surprise, it was Lacroix who stood there holding a tactical, single-person battering ram. Amélie was behind him, rifle cocked, and Ziv had a pistol.

"That was unnecessary," Zenyatta said, hovering there behind them. "I have a keycard..."

"Now he tells us," Ziv griped, but no one actually looked disappointed by their dramatic entrance.

"Chanceux, can we not leave you unsupervised for an hour?" Lacroix sighed dramatically. "Madame Kwento, could you please stop pointing that gun at my agent. With the way your hands are shaking, you are making me terribly nervous."

"Can you not piss off everyone you meet?" Ziv asked.

"Huh," you said, because that description fit him better than you.

Amélie just kept her gun up, flashing you a wink and a sharp smile.
"Adaeze, I asked you to wait for me. Agent Strike does not respond well to antagonism or threats," Zenyatta said, and you found yourself agreeing with him.

"I have been amazingly polite," you said tersely. "I haven't tried to kill anyone. I haven't reached for my gun. I certainly haven't stabbed anyone through the throat. I've been so fucking civilized, it hurts."

"Growing pains," Lacroix said cheerfully. "I am so very proud of you. We will get you cake to commemorate the occasion. Come now Madame Kwento. Please put your weapons down. We don't want anyone to get hurt."

Kwento shot Zenyatta a furious look, but the omnic just hovered there, serene as a swan in water. Angrily, she and Oladele set their guns on the table.

Lacroix strolled past Fennec-7. Ziv elbowed the omnic on the way past, then made a face, probably because it hurt. Amélie stayed in the hall as Zenyatta entered. He glanced down at the printouts. "Well, it seems we were too convincing, Chanceux. You do excel at exuding a certain...unsavory air."

"Thanks," you said dryly.

Kwento narrowed her eyes. "She's a double agent."

"Triple, actually," Lacroix said. "And we wrote those "reports" together with some significant...exaggerations of the truth."

"I told you, Adaeze. Yes, Agent Strike is sneaky, combative, and stubborn. But she is also loyal, awkwardly kind, and possesses her own convoluted code of ethics. Honestly, I thought you trusted my judgment," Zenyatta said, the sheer mildness of his voice a reprimand.

Kwento sat down, shoulders slumped. "I do. But you're so damn compassionate."

"Yes, I am compassionate, not blind," he said and Kwento winced. It was kind of nice to watch his overly pleasant admonitions being turned on someone else. "If you had decided to listen, I could have told you that she personally recruited Ziv Mihret, Agent Rivka Cohn's grandson for some kind of mission. And this is the prodigy who turned down offers from the Mossad, Shin Bet, INSA, NISS, and a few others. Whatever she offered him had to be very important, probably personal. Those are not the actions of a traitor."

Ziv shrugged, trying not to look too pleased with himself and failing. "They were all assholes."

You pointedly did not look at Lacroix, who was the biggest asshole you knew.

"I could have told you that your cousin's other squadmate Lao Yue is still alive, and in Blackwatch custody, though I haven't been able to ascertain the reasons."

Kwento's eyes widened. "Was she the one?"

You shook your head. "It's very complicated."

"And I also could have told you that she's in serious a personal relationship with both Strike Commander Morrison and Blackwatch Commander Reyes. We all saw how well they worked together yesterday. Just like we saw how she reacted to someone threatening Morrison. I told you that wasn't a calculated move, Adaeze. The look on her face said it all."
"She looked angry," Oladele said. "Which is a reasonable reaction to getting shot. I'm not sure what you think you're seeing. Have you ever been in a romantic entanglement?" The man scoffed.

"She looked determined," Zenyatta said. "The body language is there."

Oladele glanced at Kwento who shook her head. "I don't buy it, Zenyatta. Maybe one or the other, but not both."

"We can rewatch the footage if you like," Zenyatta said.

"No need," Lacroix said brightly. "I can confirm that she is indeed in a relationship with both of them."

You tilted your head back and stared at the ceiling. You knew letting Zenyatta hang around HQ would compromise security. you just hadn't realized how much. How had he found all this shit out? And why was Lacroix outing you? Goddamnit, he had a plan. And he didn't think to run it by you at all. That bastard.

"Do they both know?" Oladele asked, shock permeating his words.

"I would assume so, considering she slept in their room last night," Zenyatta said, his tone not changing one bit.

You could feel everyone staring at you now. Amélie giggled from the door. "We just slept!" Panic edged your voice.

"Is that all?" Amélie murmured, sounding disappointed. "Poor Chanceux."

"That is unusual. Is there a problem? Untreated injuries perhaps? Or do I need to have a talk with Jack and Gabriel?" Lacroix was laughing at you. You rested your face in your hands.

"Shut up," you grumbled. "Hanzo snores!" Desperation meant you were going to throw Hanzo under the bus over and over again, as many times as it took, and you had no regrets.

"He doesn't, that much," Zenyatta said, ruining your cover story. "But he does say some strange things."

"That's creepy," Ziv said, wrinkling his nose. "Athena could teach you something about privacy protocols."

"The walls here are thin and I have increased auditory sensitivity because of the security situation. I wouldn't have mentioned anything, but this information was integral to proving Agent Strike's innocence," Zenyatta said.

"Not really," you muttered. "All you had to do was ask Lacroix or Gabriel. They would've filled you in, if this was such a concern."

Kwento was watching you, the anger filtering away. She rubbed her temples, squeezing her eyes shut. Oladele gently patted her shoulder.

"This is an impressive compilation," Lacroix continued. "I am most curious about your sources. We were wondering who had sent those inquiries about Chanceux in her birth name. That security breach truly worried us. We assumed it was from a faction with ties to Talon. This is a relief."
It clicked then. Back when they'd changed your name officially to Lucky Strike, it was because someone was sniffing around your real name. It had been Kwento then, hunting for answers.

"But please, ask your questions," Lacroix continued. "Like you should have in the beginning of our talks. Because we would have answered them with honesty." You didn't know if that was true, but you did enjoy watching Lacroix use that manipulative shaming on someone else. "Fennec-7, if you would be so kind as to activate your white noise field, if you haven't already?"

"Mine has been up," Zenyatta said. "But another layer wouldn't hurt." Fennec-7 looked at Kwento, and she nodded. The field would jam signals and muffle your voices outside of the room.

"...We all know Petras is a snake in the grass," Kwento said. "And it worried me that we had a traitor in your inner circle. We couldn't tell for sure if Reyes or anyone else was actively working with Talon. It seemed wisest to leverage her for answers."

Lacroix nodded sympathetically. "An understandable position, but completely unnecessary. You are asking about the operation codenamed Shit Spiders." Lacroix gave you a conspiratorial grin and you sighed, hanging your head. "Chanceux inspired the name, though she was heavily drugged at the time. I can give you a full briefing later. It will take some time."

"I just want to know what happened to Chibundo Nwazue," she repeated, looking at you, her voice tight.

You sat there for a moment, wondering where to start.

"You have permission to share," Lacroix said, mistaking the reasons behind your long pause.

You nodded. Ziv glanced at you, jaw clenched, his hands balled into fists.

"Your suspicions were right. We were betrayed," you said, the words flowing easily off your tongue. "Commander Reyes and I were both at Black Base Delta. We got out together." You paused there, unsure of how much else you should share.

"Lao Yue was taken prisoner during the attack, and subjected to...highly unethical experiments," Lacroix said. "Though we did not learn of it till much later."

Ziv crossed his arms, looking away. He'd tucked the pistol in his waistband, and you realized you were going to have to buy him some nicer holsters.

"I wasn't there when Nwazue died," you said, after Kwento cleared her throat. "I only know what Captain Patel told me, and what we managed to reconstruct after the fact." So you told her, about Nwazue luring the mercenaries into the lab, and destroying it, while she was remained inside. Then you told her about Simon, and Valdez, the parts you had managed to figure out. You took a deep breath, and you finished the story, sharing the facts of what you had lived through. Shin. Captain Patel. The destruction of the base. Lacroix nudged you, and you took off your gloves, waving your metal fingers like some kind of consolation prize.

You didn't mention your guilt or your grief. You recounted your losses with an almost clinical detachment, because you did not want to share your feelings with these people that you barely knew. That sorrow was private.

Kwento sat there, wiping her eyes, refusing to look up. "Thank you," she said, that rich voice shaky with grief. "I...I think I need a moment."
"And a new door," Oladele said, under his breath.
Lacroix nodded. "I will contact the concierge."

"I will ask for that briefing later," Kwento said, her eyes dull.
"And I will prepare materials," Lacroix said, not unkindly. "We have much to discuss."

You left, drained, but confident that your alliance was now cemented.

You sat in Amélie's room, drinking the minty cocktail that she made for you. Ziv kept busy fiddling with that new jammer, though he was hovering right beside you, his eyes darting between you and Zenyatta. Lacroix was also drinking, his tie loosened, his eyes shut as he rested his head on the back of the couch.

"...I honestly thought she was only concerned about your "working relationship" with Petras," he sighed. "Her family is enormous. I did some cursory research, but didn't find anything that raised any flags."

"Agent Nwazue was a distant relation on her mother's paternal side. However, they were raised together," Zenyatta said. "The Igbo kinship ties are complex."

"I should have looked closer," Lacroix muttered. "I expected more trouble from her politically active cousins."

"Wrong side of the family," Zenyatta said. "They have less influence than you would expect."

Amélie laughed and kissed Lacroix's cheek. "It will be fine, mon loup. Chanceux is safe. Madame Kwento will come around. The alliance is on track. And you have learned something."

Lacroix chuckled, leaning over to rest his head on Amélie's shoulder. "You are right, of course. Unless, there is something else I should be concerned about?" He gave Zenyatta an inquiring glance.

"She will need some time. She was very close to some of her security detail. Adaeze works best when she has a mission, and her mission was to find out what happened to her cousin. Now that she has, she will have to take the time to deal with the tragedy we faced yesterday."

You understood that perspective. Mission first, feelings later. "Thanks, I guess, for spying on me and deeming me trustworthy."

"I wouldn't go that far," Zenyatta laughed.

You gave him a look.

"You cheat at cards, steal from museums, and are known for your vindictiveness. You are a black ops agent specializing in underhanded tactics, subterfuge, and there is much chaos within you."

"OK," you said, a little sharply. "I get it. I'm no one's rolemodel."
"Maeda Vargas," Ziv coughed and you glared at him.

"That being said," Zenyatta continued, as if he hadn't heard a thing. "I have enjoyed our time together."

You sighed. "Yeah, you're pretty OK yourself."

"Though I distinctly remember asking you to wait for me—"

You groaned. Because he had, and Kwento had played you like a fiddle. Zenyatta will find this distasteful, she'd said, like you were sharing a goddamn secret. "Yeah, I know. She made it sound...pressing," you said, not wanting to admit the reason why you'd gone along with her.

"Adaeze is very good at being persuasive," Zenyatta said. "I was a little surprised to see the guns. More surprised that you hadn't reacted violently."

"I was tempted," you muttered. "But I'm a professional." You loosened your collar and drained the rest of your cocktail.

"We should wait till later to mention this confrontation to Jack and Gabriel," Lacroix said with a heavy sigh. "After yesterday, I fear they will not react well."

"Hmm." You thought about that. "No, they'll be angrier if we wait." And honestly, you were fine if they were annoyed at Kwento instead of you.

"Yes, but I don't want them around Kwento...enraged while she is emotionally compromised." Lacroix gave you a look.

"They're adults," you said. "They understand reason. I trust them to behave."

"Under normal circumstances, I'd agree with you. Jack and Gabriel have superb self control. But when you're involved..." Lacroix gave you a wry grin.

"Just inform them that you had a confrontation with Kwento and the root causes. You can share the detail about the guns after we've parted ways. You can promise them the whole story on the trip home," Amélie said. "We should be leaving soon anyway."

It was a good suggestion. You took a deep breath. "I think they can handle it."

"You think or you hope?" Lacroix asked, without batting an eye.

"I know they can handle it," you said, hoping you sounded reasonably certain.

"Would it be easier if I ordered you to delay your report?" Lacroix asked, giving you a side eye.

You rubbed your forehead. "Do you lie to Amélie? Especially about things that would upset her?"

Lacroix frowned. "No, of course not."

Ziv looked on, not even bothering to hide his interest.

"You see my problem then."

Lacroix sighed. "Fine, I will urge Kwento to keep a low profile. It will make things terribly
awkward, but I suspect she understands that she overstepped and will want to ensure this alliance lasts."

"Yeah, like I want my relationships to last," you said darkly.

Lacroix smiled faintly at that. "So I see."

The hotel sent up another generous cartload of food for the Strike Commander, even though you were the one doing the ordering. You set the table, knowing that bad news was best delivered after they'd eaten. You had to think about your actions, because there were faint lines between manipulation, good sense, and self defense. You certainly weren't scared of how Jack and Gabriel would react: you trusted them. And you weren't trying to guilt or bribe anything out of them, not anything that they normally wouldn't give. No, you were just taking precautions because hungry super soldiers were moody, and Lacroix wasn't wrong to worry about how they would react to Kwento pulling a gun on you.

This was ethical, you decided, though it took some time to come to that conclusion.

You could have taken Amélie's suggestion. She wasn't wrong, and it was good advice. But after taking Gabriel to task about Lao and being honest in a timely manner, you'd be a hypocrite. Maybe you were being too rigid. It would be best to tell Gabriel and Jack after Kwento was out of strangling distance.

The door opened and Jack walked in briskly, glancing over his shoulder with a panicked expression. Gabriel was close behind and he shut the door behind him, lifting one finger to his lips.

You sat at the table, blinking as Gabriel glanced out the peephole and quickly turned around, holding his hands up to signal more silence.

Jack crept over to you, carefully setting his jacket on the chair. He gave you a quick kiss, looking over the table with interest.

After a few minutes on door duty, Gabriel took a deep breath and smoothed his hair back, flashing you a wide grin. He swaggered over and kissed you hard, before pulling out a chair and sitting down.

"So...?" You asked, not entirely able to form words.

"Very dogged reporter," Gabriel said. "We left her Ainsley and ran."

"...I see," you said, brow furrowing.

"We told her to delay," Jack said. "She's actually pretty good at charming the press."

Now Ainsley was at the hotel. Great.

"Don't worry, we're leaving tonight. I'm shipping her back with Epsilon Squad. Told her it was for her own safety," Jack said. "Jemison might kill me for it later, but, it'll be worth it."

You smiled at that. "How'd your meeting go?"
Jack groaned and Gabriel rolled his eyes, already making himself a plate.

"You, me, everyone here is up for some kind of heroism awards. The FBI situation is getting messier by the moment, with some people trying to say that you and Gabriel should have just complied-"

Gabriel snorted. "Of course."

"But preliminary reports are showing that Special Agent Peters has been influenced by an "outside" power, and he had orders to destroy the jamming tech we recovered."

"...So he wasn't actually trying to kill you," you said, a little relieved.

"It would have been a bonus," Jack said with a shrug. He put the entire bowl of lobster macaroni and cheese in front of himself and stuck his spoon in it. "Senator Armstrong has been an invaluable ally."

"He's eyeing the presidency," Gabriel said thoughtfully. "I know he wants an endorsement from us."

"If he's good at his job," you said with a shrug, not quite caring. "So Ainsley is here now?"

"And she's been asking about you," Jack said, his expression funny. "Is Agent Strike all right? She wasn't hurt, was she? I heard she rescued an entire bus of orphans from the terrorists!" Jack mimicked her voice, sounding both breathless and awestruck.

You blinked. "...What?"

Gabriel nodded. "Maybe Petras realized that seducing you was out, so he sent Ainsley to do it instead. You know, since he thinks you're a man-hating lesbian." He chuckled. "What an idiot. It's obvious that you prefer brunettes."

"Hey!" Jack scowled.

You blanched. "That's not funny. Overwatch Barbie is not in love with me!"

"You did save her life," Gabriel teased. "That's always an aphrodisiac. I would know."

"I hate you," you said, burying your face in your hands. "Yes, Ainsley's been following me around lately, but that doesn't mean-"

"Better you than me," Jack said, looking way too pleased. "The meetings were stupid. I'd rather be here with you actually planning an effective response instead of playing politics. They wanted us to make a press appearance, but we're going to wait till we get to Zurich, that way no one politician can hijack our conference and use it for personal gain."

"Makes sense," you said. Overwatch needed to be seen as an independent operator, not subject to the whims of the American government.

"And there were no snacks," Gabriel said. "So thanks for ordering."

"Any word on Richard Prince? Or more motives?"

"There were two kinds of bombs. The crude homemade ones were used against the buildings with proper shielding," Gabriel said. "And those buildings survived, so Luminescent Holdings' value has skyrocketed, as we predicted. Both the Metro and the Natural History Museum
suffered from high-tech incendiary devices, and lacked the shielding. It's hard to say whether the shield tech would have made a noticeable difference, but information about the two types of bombs is classified."

"So Luminescent Holdings gets to look good for the public," you scowled.

"For now," Jack said. "As for Prince, we know he coordinated the Metro attack. It's not common knowledge yet and we're not sure if he's planned a follow-up elsewhere, but we think he's slipped the net."

Nodding, you helped yourself to mushroom ravioli in a cream sauce, and listened to their updates. For several hours of "work," that committee hadn't accomplished very much.

"One senator tried to congratulate us, claiming this was how America got shit done," Gabriel laughed. "Jack put him down nicely." He leaned over you to kiss Jack's cheek. Jack turned a slight shade of pink as you smirked at them both.

"But Jack's so diplomatic," you laughed.

"Oh he was," Gabriel said, gaze shrewd. "He played the humble CO, giving his people all the credit, and every time guy tried to say "Americans won this," he would redirect. "Oh, Agent Shoal handled that, she's from the UK. Oh, that was Agent Lacroix who coordinated everything, he's French. Oh, Tekhartha Zenyatta is part of the Numbani delegation, but I think he hails from Nepal..." Gabriel chuckled. "And every time the bastard tried to backtrack or insist Jack should take more credit, he just looked like a bigger asshole. It was masterfully done."

Jack shrugged, looking bothered. "It wouldn't be right for me to benefit from a stance like that. Anyway, it's not like I singlehandedly saved everyone. You guys were integral to the team and the plan. I wish I could give Blackwatch more credit, but..."

You shrugged. "Operational security. We don't need the spotlight."

"And I'm not letting some shortsighted xenophobic weasel disrespect my people," Jack said, cramming another spoonful of macaroni into his mouth. The dish was already half gone.

"You gonna share that?" Gabriel asked, his tone teasing. "Or do you need mac'n cheese, a cold beer, and a half gallon of ice cream to get you through the rest of the day?"

Jack blinked as he looked down at the bowl. "Oh, sorry. Did you guys want some?"

"Yes," Gabriel said, laughing as Jack handed him the bowl and looked around the table, like he was finally noticing the dozen other dishes. "But just a bite, I'll give it right back."

You quickly cut Jack a slice of quiche. He accepted it, but looked far happier when Gabriel handed the macaroni back.

"I wouldn't say no to some Rocky Road," Jack said with a sigh. "But we need to get ready to go. We have a press conference in Zurich tomorrow morning, and I have to go over the speech."

"How was your day?" Gabriel asked.

"...So I found out why Zenyatta's been such a pain in the ass," you said, slicing yourself some bread and covering it an herbed butter. "But he ended up being my character witness. Which actually worked out pretty well for me."
Jack frowned and blotted his mouth with his napkin. "I wasn't aware you needed a character witness."

Gabriel sat back in his chair giving you a thoughtful look. "So Kwento knows you're not really a spy for Petras now? I don't see why she needed the omnic to harass you to figure that out. She could have just come to us." He narrowed his eyes. "Or is there more to the story?"

"Kwento had tasked Zenyatta and some of her personal security to help her investigate the mysterious death of her favorite cousin, Chibundo Nwazue." You rubbed the back of your neck. "She was our demolitionist under Captain Patel," you said mostly for Jack's benefit.

"I know," Gabriel said. He set his fork down. "...And Nwazue mentioned "Lucky Strike" in letters home, didn't she?"

"Got it in one." You took a bite of your bread.

"Did she just politely apologize for misjudging you?" Gabriel asked, his tone low.

"Zenyatta let me know that Kwento wanted to talk to me. He asked that I wait for him, but we all I'm not great at following directions," you said. "So when Kwento came over all friendly and mentioning that she wanted to discuss some thing he wouldn't exactly approve of, I agreed."

Jack's frown deepened. Gabriel narrowed his eyes.

"She then showed me all the documentation of my treachery and tried to leverage me for information. I wasn't expecting to hear her mention Nwazue and ask about what really happened to Black Base Delta." You shook your head. "And I really wasn't expecting there to be guns involved. But she was understandably cautious, given my apparent reputation. And she was upset too," you added hurriedly.

Gabriel looked over his shoulder in the direction of Kwento's room, his expression harsh. Jack put his fork down.

"I'm fine!" You added quickly, before they could interrupt. "It didn't come to any violence, except for the part where Lacroix broke down her door and set everyone straight. Zenyatta helped too." You held your hands up. "It's been resolved. Big misunderstanding. Got to watch Zenyatta use that disapproving teacher tone, the one he's been using on me, with Kwento and it was worth it. Lacroix went ahead and cleared me to give her the details on Nwazue and what went down at Black Base Delta."

Gabriel glared at you, the set of his jaw harsh. Jack glanced over his shoulder, in the direction of Kwento's room.

"I wrote up a report on the whole encounter. Interestingly, she'd offered to give me a way out, so you wouldn't kill me for my betrayal. I don't know if she meant it, but it was a nice touch." You were talking too much now, anxious to keep Gabriel from reacting badly.

Jack picked up his fork and carefully cut himself a small piece of quiche, though he didn't pick it up to eat it. He just poked at it. "Judging by your conciliatory tone, you're really hoping we don't go make a scene, aren't you sweetheart?"

"Yup," you said. "Kwento's pretty upset from losing her security personnel. Apparently, they were close. Her delivery was a little heavy-handed for such an accomplished politician, so I'm pretty sure she wasn't thinking straight-"
"Then she should have taken our advice and not come to DC in the first place," Gabriel snapped, pounding on the table. "This could have been avoided if she hadn't tried to pander to a political agenda-"

"The attack would have happened either way, Gabe," Jack said, taking a deep breath. "At least we were here to mitigate some of it."

"Not the point," Gabriel said sharply. "She shouldn't have been meddling in our business. And if she cared so much about her people, she should have listened to us."

"And she definitely should not have been pointing guns at our girlfriend," Jack said with a gentle smile at Gabriel. "I know. I'm not happy about it either."

Gabriel turned his head away, holding himself stiffly.

You reached over and patted his hand. "Hey, I was irritated too. But I get it. She's on the same revenge quest we are, so she's on our side, and now she owes us a few favors-"

Gabriel got up, walked into the bedroom, and shut the door.

You sighed.

Jack patted your shoulder gently. "Give him some time to cool off. He's not mad at you."

"There was some debate about whether we should tell you the details right away," you admitted. "But I'm trying to be honest and open. But I know I'm bad at being diplomatic. Am I doing it all wrong?"

Jack shook his head, his gaze drifting to the bedroom door. "No, you did everything right, and I appreciate it. He leaned over and kissed your cheek. "Gabe will too, once he's had some time to think about it." He picked his fork up, his quiche now in tiny shreds, and you couldn't tell how much he'd actually eaten. "I take it Gérard was concerned."

"Yeah," you said, not wanting to go into detail. "Oh, and Zenyatta knows about Lao's existence and about us. Which he announced to Kwento and her remaining bodyguards. I don't know if they know about you and Gabriel, but Zenyatta told everyone that I slept here last night."

Jack nodded. "I think they can keep our secrets. And they definitely have incentive to do so." He rubbed his temples. "We can work with Kwento. That was the goal after all. This isn't terrible."

"I think Zenyatta is the one to keep an eye on," you said. "Not that I think he's going to run to the press, but...who can say?"

"...Damnit," Jack sighed. "Do you want to handle him? Or do you think he'd respond better to me or Gabe?"

"I'll talk to him. I don't think either of you need to be involved," you said.

"Keep me apprised then."

"Yes, sir," you said, with a cheeky wink.

Jack's frown deepened and he glanced at the bedroom door.

"Should I go so you can speak with him?"
Jack shook his head. "No, I'll talk to him later. I know we're all still recovering from yesterday. It was a shit show. Today wasn't as bad, but..." He swung around and touched his knees to yours. "For the record, I'm pretty pissed at Kwento too, but you're trying so hard to keep everything low-key, so I can put that aside for the moment." He nuzzled your neck. "Mostly, I'm too tired to go over and shout at her right now."

"I appreciate it," you said, as running your fingers through his hair.

"Missed you," Jack murmured. "Next trip, I'm bringing you. Gabe can have Ainsley."

You laughed, trying to picture that scenario.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late post. Closed at work tonight, opening tomorrow morning. Had to do some edits and make myself this soup I'd been mentally constructing for the past week. It was a smoked turkey, kale, orzo soup and I made it spicy, because why not, and it was really good. Never cooked with orzo before and I rather like it. It's not rice...it's an im-pasta.

...Sorry.

I had something else I was going to share, but I have since forgotten in my sleepiness.
Chapter 94

Chapter Summary

Black Abacus brings its own set of complications.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With the exception of Epsilon Squad and Ainsley, everyone rode back on the same transport. You watched Ziv and Lacroix out of the corner of your eye, Ziv speaking in sharp whispers as he jabbed a finger in Lacroix's side. Lacroix just laughed and patted Ziv's head while Amélie leaned over to kiss his cheek. Ziv shrunk down, expression flashing rapidly between mortified and euphoric.

Genji held a fish torpedo in his lap, rolling his eyes while Hanzo lectured Jesse about something. Jesse just grinned, winked at you, and pulled his hat down over his eyes. Hanzo threw his hands up, muttering something unflattering in Japanese. But he stayed with the group, pretending to ignore Jesse and Genji's playful banter. To your surprise, Zenyatta drifted over to them, making quiet comments to Hanzo.

Kwento sat with Oladele, Fennec-7, and another woman and omnic you didn't recognize. The woman wore armor, the omnic wore a business suit. The other bodyguard and the assistant, you presumed.

You carried your gear bag and suitcase. You might have lifted some of the nice soaps out of the bathrooms, but you weren't the only one. You were pretty sure that Hanzo had stuffed his gear bag full of bottles of expensive wine, enormous towels, and complimentary hotel toiletries.

You blinked as someone tugged on your bag, and turned to see Gabriel lifting it out of your hands. "I can-"

"I got it, baby," he said, leaning over to kiss you, right in front of Kwento. You stared dumbly as he nipped your bottom lip, his smile playful. Your pulse sped up before he released you, still holding your suitcase. He then turned to stash the bags in the luggage compartment under the seats. You blinked, noting that Kwento and her party were all pretending to stare at the floor, with the exception of the omnic assistant. Oladele smacked him in the arm, and the assistant quickly turned his head to the side.

"Gabriel-" you began.

"Sorry about earlier," he said, eyes gentle as he smiled down at you. "You were right, of course." He smoothed your hair back, looking way too amused by your startled expression. "I was just hungry."

And petty. God, this man was so petty. And you loved it. You shook your head, as he walked with you to your seat. "Are you saving a spot for Jack too?" He asked, innocently, his eyes big, his smile wide. That expression didn't suit him at all. He just looked like a smug asshole who was laughing at his own jokes.
"Of course," you said, not sure where he was going with this.

Gabriel just chuckled. "I was just thinking, since we're unexpectedly sharing a transport," he glanced at Kwento's party. "There might not be enough seats, so you can sit on my lap if you like. I'd probably be too heavy for yours."

You rested your face in your palm. "Gabriel-"

"No need for that look. It was just a suggestion," he said, sounding all too pleased with himself.

Shaking your head, you took your seat, setting your gear bag in your lap, just in case he got any smart ideas. Gabriel sat down beside you, resting one arm over your shoulder. You sat slightly diagonal from Kwento's group, facing them. You got your tablet out of your bag, not quite sure you wanted to see the looks on their faces.

"All right, we're cleared to go," Jack announced as he boarded. He put his bags away. Then he plunked down beside you, leaned over, and cupped your face. His severe expression melted away. "Thanks for saving me a seat, sweetheart." And then he planted a scorching kiss on your lips, his gloves rough against your cheeks.

You swallowed roughly as he released you, his smile downright evil. "What are you two doing?" You hissed.

"Gabe's idea," Jack whispered out of the corner of his mouth, also resting an arm over the back of your seat. "This is the PG version."

You caught sight of Lacroix chuckling. Ziv just shook his head, looking vaguely disgusted. But Amélie clapped and blew you a kiss. Your Blackwatch companions were pointedly not looking in your direction, and neither was Kwento's party. Zenyatta nodded at you though.

"Aren't you going to hold my hand?" Gabriel asked, nudging you.

"Oh, me too," Jack laughed.

But then you couldn't hold your tablet. You exhaled slowly. Gabriel was turning his anger into trolling. And while it wasn't directed at you, you weren't too sure you liked this plan.

"How am I going to read?" You asked, because you were trying to catch up on the reports Athena was filching from the FBI.

"You can talk to us instead, snugglebuns," Jack said cheerfully, brows arching mischievously at the pet name.

"No one will ever find your body," you growled.

"Don't be like that, sweet cheeks," Gabriel purred, nibbling on your ear and making you jump. You glared at him.

"Yeah, I have a very nice body," Jack laughed, squeezing your fingers. "Relax. Everyone here knows about us already." He flashed Kwento a sharp smile. "No reason to be shy now."

"No reason at all," Gabriel echoed, his voice low as he gave Kwento a hard look.

You glanced between your very smug Boyfriends and rubbed your forehead, your fingers
still linked with theirs. It was going to be a long ride home.

You eventually fell asleep against Jack's shoulder, drooling on his coat. You woke up with one of Gabriel's hoodies draped over you, and Jack and Gabriel still holding your hands. You knew they were super soldiers, military strategists, and trained killers: you just never realized how much they could weaponize PDA.

Jack and Gabriel wore terribly smug looks, and you wondered what other misbehavior they'd gotten up to while you were napping. Judging by the slightly queasy look on Jesse's face, they hadn't just sat there quietly.

"You know, you're going to make them think I'm some kind of quadruple agent if you keep this up. Like I beguiled you with my wiles or something," you said as Jack kissed your nose.

"You mean you haven't?" He blinked. "It must be all the sex then."

You nearly choked on your tongue. "Jack!"

"That's not fair," Gabriel said dryly. "We seduced you, not the other way around."

"Yeah, but she gives as good as she-"

"I'm going to go sit with Ziv," you threatened.

Gabriel raised a brow, skepticism clear on his face. "You'd rather sit with l'enfant terrible and Gérard?"

"But honeybunches-" Jack laughed, doubling over.

"Don't you even-" You jabbed a finger into his side and he yelped, laughing harder. That traitor Gabriel pulled your attacking hand back to his side, firmly squeezing your fingers.

The PA chimed. "We are beginning descent into Zurich. Please remain seated with your seatbelts fastened."

You glared between the two smirking men.

Gabriel just rubbed your stiff neck and Jack kissed your temple.

"Appreciate you humoring us," Jack said softly. "For the record, I like being openly affectionate with you." He gave you a lopsided smile.

"Yes," Gabriel agreed, his voice low. "I think our message has been received." He gave a wistful sigh. "It's back to business as usual."

When the craft landed and they both released your hands, you hesitated for a moment, reluctant to let them go. Gabriel grabbed your bags. Jack patted your back, his expression polite and impersonal. And the three of you disembarked, stoic and professional once more.

Maybe you would miss the fussing, just a little bit.
It was just past midnight. Captain Amari led the greeting party. Reinhardt was there with Távio, Torby, and Winston. To your surprise, Tataryn leaned against the wall, giving you a smug look. You hadn't expected him to be here to welcome you back.

Bandit barked, jumped out of Torby's arms, and raced to Jesse. He was wearing a little red sweater that looked an awful lot like Torby's. Had his wife Lucia made it for him? Or had Torby? You knew better than to ask in public.

Laughing, Jesse crouched down and hugged his dog to his chest. You didn't miss how Genji and Hanzo had to reach over to pet Bandit too.

"Ma'am!" Távio ran up to you, holding Isha. She was also wearing a little red sweater, and she shrieked when she saw you, flapping awkwardly. You blinked. She had more feathers than before, having lost most of her fluffy down. But the feathers were coming in unevenly, and she looked like she'd been trimmed with a weed whacker then fluffed through the dryer for good measure. Still, she was your dinosaur, and you had to be supportive of her awkward phase.

"How's my adorable murderbird?" You cooed, and Távio released her.

She started to run to you, then narrowed her eyes, adjusted her trajectory, and raced past you to Jack.

You stared, mouth open, as she latched onto Jack's boot and completely ignored you.

Smiling apologetically, Jack lifted her up and scratched her head. She thrummed happily and rubbed her snout against his cheeks.

"How's my bitey death chicken?" Jack laughed, cuddling her.

Gabriel gave you a wry smile, and reached over to pet her. Isha let him, chirping happily at him and pointedly ignoring you.

"...Really?" You scowled.

"You did abandon her," Tataryn said, clapping you on the back. "She missed you, but now that you are back, you are in trouble. Because she is a wicked, clever beast and you are in over your head."

"I was gone for a week! On a mission! So were they!"

"They are not her mother," Tataryn said smugly.

"She behaved really well for us," Távio said apologetically, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Ignoring the tools she stole from Torby, the tablet she stole from Winston, and all the currywurst she stole from Commander Wilhelm. He didn't seem to mind though."

You sighed. "Thank you guys," you told your friends. "I will replace your stuff."

"She gave everything but the food back. Made us trade her more food for it, but it is all good," Reinhardt laughed. "She is very cute, and she stayed with Bandit most of the time."

"Except for when I took her for training," Tataryn told you. "I think you'll be pleased with her progress." His smile was too smarmy, and you wondered exactly what he'd been teaching her.

You sighed as Isha snuggled up to Jack, giving you a cool look, before returning to rubbing
her face against him. She even let Ziv, Lacroix, and Amélie fuss over her, while still pretending like she hadn't seen you.

Shaking your head, you walked up to Captain Amari.

"How is she?"

"Come see for yourself," the Captain said, her smile gentle.

Lao was asleep. You stood in the doorway of her room, trying not to be creepy. The left side of her face was still bandaged, and you wondered if Angela had been able to remove all the residual circuits. She looked peaceful, her breathing regular, her color good. She was still too thin, though you realized that was probably just her build. You still wanted to sit her down and feed her dumplings and kimchi pancakes.

There was a shiny neon yellow composite prosthetic on the bedside. It looked like it had a screen built into the forearm - perfect for your hacker.

Captain Amari stood behind you and you started to leave, trying to quietly shut the door.

"I know you're there," Lao said sleepily, right eye still shut. "I told you not to be creepy."

"Sorry," you said. "I'll go."

"You don't have to." Lao opened her eye, yawning. "I've been dozing all day."

"I just got in. Heard you were alive, and that's all they told me," you said. You stood in the doorway, and did a doubletake, because Captain Amari was already gone.

"You can come in," Lao said, reaching for a glass of water. "I don't really want to shout."

"OK," you said, shutting the door behind you as she flicked on the overhead lights. "If you're sure." You pulled up a chair. "I would have brought flowers or something, but I just got in."

Lao studied you, her expression really hard to read with half her face covered. "You were in DC, weren't you? Saw the news. Recognized some of the assholes responsible." She glared at the wall.

"It was bad," you agreed. "They burned down a museum."

"Those turtle fuckers," Lao scowled. "The death toll was high. Anyone we know?"

"No Overwatch casualties. Some of Lacroix's allies didn't make it. A lot of civilians died." You leaned back in the chair, remembering that tiny bloody sneaker with a wince. "They killed pretty indiscriminately."

"They do that," Lao said, her voice distant. "Heard Overwatch was involved in the counterterrorism efforts. Had a feeling you were there. You're good at finding trouble."

You shrugged, not sure how to take that.

"See anything cool?" Lao didn't look at you, though the question didn't seem entirely forced.
"Uh...some fossils, the Hope Diamond, and really good French food," you said, deciding to keep it impersonal. "Got to take in some of the DC monuments, but wasn't too concerned with sightseeing at the time."

"...When did you get so boring?" Lao shook her head, but there wasn't any real heat in her voice. "You know, I'm not a kid. If you, for example, cut off some cyborg's head in a really cool way, you could say that."

"...Maybe," you said, wrinkling your brow. "Who showed you that?"

Lao laughed. "You think Ziv can keep that kind of thing to himself?"

"He's "Ziv" to you now?" Your voice went a little high. "I thought he was an utter piece of shit-"

"Oh, he is," Lao said, with a nod. "Especially since he said there was more footage of you doing stupid shit, but he wasn't allowed to share that."

You groaned, knowing exactly what footage he was referencing. Lao did not need to see that video of you getting shot. You weren't sure if she would have flashbacks from Shanghai, and you'd rather not find out. You folded your hands in your lap. "So how are you feeling?"

"Sore and stiff," she said. "But I can feel my legs and wiggle most of my toes, so that's a plus." She looked at the prosthetic arm. "Your friend Lindholm helped Dr. Ziegler with that. It's...a civilian model. No fancy armaments or hidden weapons, but I don't want anything military grade."

"It's pretty cool," you said. "I've seen some light up ones, and some partially hollow composite limbs with designs etched into them, and also-"

"You recommended this to Lindholm, didn't you?" Lao asked, her voice flat. "You just couldn't leave it alone. You had to get involved."

"I just showed him some of the designs from the civilian side. Torby's stuff always has great function, but he doesn't put as much effort into aesthetics," you said. "But Gen- I mean, another friend with prostheses, made the recommendations. He thought you might like something more customized. I heard Torby put some of the designs in a portfolio to run by you," you said. "But I didn't compile it. Anyway, that one suits you."

Lao bit her lip, and then swallowed whatever bitter comment had sat on the tip of her tongue. It must have been bad, because she made a face. "Yeah." She studied the arm. "I like it."

You sat there in awkward silence, unsure of what you could bring up. You wanted to tell her about Kwento and Nwazue, but Lao wasn't cleared for that kind of information right now, and maybe she wouldn't ever be.

"Surgery went better than expected," Lao said. "My vision is still a little funny. I might have lost my sense of smell. Kind of twitchy, can't really control it. Dr. Ziegler is waiting to see if the effects are temporary. But I'm alive. I'm not paralyzed. And the spinal cybernetics have been replaced with base models to compensate for some of the nerve function. But no more control chips."

"That's a relief," you said.

"Yeah." Lao looked over at your gloved hands. "Why don't you have more funky designs?"
You blinked. "Guess I'm still just self-conscious about the loss." You shrugged, studying the arm. "I know, it's just fingers, not a whole-"

"Missing parts are missing parts," Lao said. "It's not a competition, Lucky." She rolled her eyes at you, and for half a second, you were back in Canada, watching her program security drones and sneak your beer.

You smiled. "Yeah. You're right. But I've got a toolkit built up." You took off your left glove and flicked your finger. A blade popped out, and Lao's eyes widened. "You see, I'm handy to have on ops."

"What the fuck?" Lao stared at you in outrage. "Did you just pun at me?"

"...Yeah, I guess I did." You frowned. "It's been a long week. Just be glad I'm not wearing socks with sandals."

"Why the hell would you even think- No, don't answer that. I get it. You've changed. A lot." Lao narrowed her eyes. "Like, the trauma from everything really did a number on you, didn't it?"

"I-I guess." You rubbed the back of your head, unsure of what you were supposed to add to that. "I was pretty fucked up that first year after the Ninth Circle." You stared at your boots. "Still not quite right, but-" You shrugged, lapsing into silence. Lao didn't want to hear this stuff. And you didn't want to hear her scorn.

"Captain Amari told me some things," Lao said after a few minutes of awkward silence.

You sat there, wondering what Captain Amari had said.

"She's a lot like Captain Patel," Lao said. "Smother though. Better at mind games too. Captain Patel would kick your teeth in. Captain Amari could easily kick your teeth in, but she prefers to make you question whether or not you had teeth to begin with. And then if you don't learn your lesson, then she'll pull your teeth out one at a time..."

"Yeah," you laughed. "That sounds accurate."

Lao gave you a lopsided smile. "She's a good CO."

"She is," you said. "They saddle her with the problem cases."

"Like you?"

"Yeah," you said, leaning back in your chair, just enjoying talking to Lao without all the barbs. The last time things felt good between you was in Canada. And then something awful occurred to you. "Hey, are you still drugged from your procedures?"

"A little," Lao said.

"Oh." You stared at the floor, wondering if sober Lao would hate you for being so familiar. "Should I go? I know my presence bothers you sometimes. Often. I don't want to impose."

Lao's brow furrowed and she looked away.

Had you said the wrong thing and ruined everything again? Or was this the right thing to do? Because in a day or two, when she was no longer on the heavy painkillers, you couldn't predict
how she would react. Casual? Forgetful? Furious that you'd violated her privacy?

"I know I've told you that I hate you. And I wasn't lying when I said that shit. I really meant it, in the moment. But...I don't think I meant it forever. You know, it's not fair to make me talk about this now: I'm drugged," she complained.

"Sorry," you said. "I wasn't trying to-"

The door opened, and Angela marched in, glaring at you. Her hair was back in a frizzy ponytail, with bags under her eyes. And you knew then that it was sheer exhaustion that kept her from murdering you. "Lucky, what do you think you are doing?"

"I..." You trailed off, wondering if you could blame Captain Amari for letting you into Lao's room, and expect to live through the experience. If Angela didn't murder you for the protocol violation, Captain Amari would for snitching. But it was way past visiting hours. And Lao had just come out of major surgery... Oops. "I'm sorry," you began, trying to look contrite.

"You were shot two days ago! And did you got to the hospital? Nein! Did you ask for a doctor? Nein! Did you even try to wear a sling-"

"Zenyatta patched me up," you said, shrinking down in your chair, also lacking a defense plan against that angle of attack. You'd kind of forgotten about that whole getting shot ordeal: Kwento, Gabriel's pettiness, and Lao's condition had overshadowed it all. "And the hospitals were packed! It was a very hostile environment. I couldn't just call up a medic and-"

"You were shot?" Lao raised her voice. "Where?"

"Just once in the arm," you muttered. "My armor caught the rest. I've got good armor for a reason."

"What the hell?" Lao shouted. "Why are you like this?"

"And now, you're upsetting my patient," Angela snapped. "Shut up and go sit in that exam room." She pointed straight across the hall.

"Yeah," Lao scowled. "You fucking irresponsible idiot."

You stared at the two women, their expressions murderous. And then, very meekly, you retreated to the exam room, wondering if you could barricade the door.

Angela let you go after a thorough exam, begrudgingly congratulating you for getting Zenyatta to patch you up. Aside from another nanite injection and an emitter, there wasn't much else you could do now, besides take it easy. She put you on med leave for the rest of the week and kicked you out, telling you to come back during regular visiting hours.

You got a glimpse of Lao, as you left, because Angela had left the door open, and you were pretty sure Lao had heard her berate you for the entirety of the examination. You waved, and she shook her head at you, glaring at you from her bed.

"I'm OK!" You called out, waving your healed arm.

"No, you're terminally stupid," she snarled, and rolled over, giving you her back.
In a rare display of diplomatic acumen, you decided to leave before you made things worse. Lao was mad. Angela was mad. Lao probably would need a few days to cool down, and what the hell was Ziv doing sharing that video with her?

You were halfway to Jack's quarters when it hit you. The Lao from before would have also been furious at you for getting shot. Maybe it was just because she was drugged. Maybe in two days she would pretend that she didn't care. But this was progress, you realized. And you smiled then, because it was more than you'd had before.

You reached Jack's room, yawning as you input the code. You entered, the bedroom light was on, and you could hear him talking softly.

Kicking off your shoes, you headed over and stopped at the threshold.

Gabriel and Jack were both sitting up in bed, Isha on Jack's lap. She was definitely bigger than when you left, almost turkey-sized. Her feathers were coming in at odd angles, and you weren't sure she was going to stay all black. There were iridescent patterns on the feathers, somewhere between an oil slick and a goth-tinted rainbow. Jack held the tablet up, letting Isha see whatever was on the screen.

"And that's your mom being cool," Jack said, shooting you a bright smile. "She didn't want to leave you. But she had a job to do."

Isha cocked her head to the side and watched that accursed museum video of you beheading a cyborg. She rewound it a few times, her delicate little hands now adept at working the screen. Then she kicked, sickle claw slicing through the air. She looked at Gabriel expectantly and he laughed, patting her head.

"Like that, yes. But your long claw is more for gouging than slicing." Gabriel mimicked each motion and Isha watched intently. "Gouge," he said, curling his fingers, and digging them into Jack's forearm. "Slice or slash." He demonstrated a knifehand strike, showing the motion slowly then faster than your eyes could track. "You should stick to gouging."

Isha chirped.

"What are you teaching her?" You scowled. "And I thought there were no dinosaurs allowed in the bed?"

"We're watching a movie," Gabriel said, without missing a beat. "She can go sleep in her kennel afterward. She is fully litter box trained now. Tataryn managed to make that lesson stick." Gabriel chuckled. "I'll let him give you the full story later."

You blinked, taken aback. "Oh."

Isha glanced between you and the screen, vocalizing rapidly.

"Yeah, he was a bad guy," Jack said. "He hurt people. He would have hurt us."

Isha hissed and then chattered at you. It sounded like some kind of lecture, so you just shrugged as you changed into a t-shirt and crawled onto Jack's other side.

"Hey murderbird," you said, leaning over to pat her head. She crossed Jack's lap and poked
your left arm, making a soft thrum, then she crawled behind you, nosed your back. You glared at Jack. "You showed her that video?"

"Of course not. I just told her you got hurt, protecting me. Gabriel helped me demonstrate." Jack gave you a smug look. "And it worked, because she's not mad at you any more."

You sighed as Isha curled against your stomach, headbutting you. You weren't sure that she understood Jack's story, but Isha was on speaking terms with you again, so that was something. "I missed you too. I don't know what Jack thinks he's doing, but-"

Isha nuzzled your hands, chewing lightly on your metal fingers, like when she was a tiny baby hatchling monster.

"No biting," you said, flicking her snout.

Gabriel laughed and leaned over to pet your feathery menace. "Looks like you're off for the rest of the week. Angela catch up to you?"

"Yeah. Any idea who tipped her off?"

"My money is on your favorite AI, though Mihret does like starting shit," Gabriel said.

"Athena, did you tell Dr. Ziegler I'd been shot?"

"No, Lucky, I merely made the video of your injury available and requested her medical analysis."

"Really?" You shouted at the ceiling. "Come on! Why would you do that to me? She damn near bit my head off!"

"I...feel like I might be interrupting your personal time. I will leave your privacy protocols on now. Winston needs my assistance on the quantum dilution problem. I should go. I may be occupied for some time."

"Athena, I wasn't done-"

But there was only dead air.

You exhaled, glaring at the wall. That was a bullshit excuse if you'd ever heard one. Athena was fully capable of multi-tasking; she was just counting on your laziness to save her. You probably wouldn't get out of bed and track down a drone to yell at now. You would probably be calmer in the morning. She had probably calculated this awhile ago and goddamnit, she was right. When you looked over to the side, both Gabriel and Jack were trying to smother their laughter in the pillows.

Isha glanced at the ceiling, then you, her chirrup very questioning.

"I'm going to go brush my teeth," you said.

"Oh, that's what she needs," Jack said, snapping his fingers. "A little toothbrush. We used to brush Atticus' teeth all the time. It really helped with his breath-"

"What?" You stared incredulously at Jack.

"Good idea," Gabriel nodded. "Good oral hygiene leads to better health in general. We want to cultivate good habits."
"I bet she'd like bubblegum flavored toothpaste," Jack said.

"...That's disgusting," Gabriel said. "No one over four likes that."

Jack rubbed the back of his neck, totally not looking self conscious at all. "Yeah. Well, she's not over four."

Shaking your head, you left the bedroom, wondering what the hell had happened to your life.

"You did what?" You nearly dropped your bagel into your coffee. The three of you sat in Tataryn's room, and you were slightly amazed that Isha didn't try to destroy anything. Instead, she eyed Tataryn resentfully, till he got down a box of biscuits.

"She is very clever, and it was for the Blackwatch Prank Club," Tataryn said, sipping his tea. He offered Isha a little buttery cookie and she snatched it out of his hands. "I had to remove the toilet tank cover, but it was Min's idea. Teaching her how to do an...upper decker, as they call it, was a real bonding moment for us. I think it was the first time she truly understood that there were different tiers of acceptable places to relieve oneself."

Isha crunched away at her biscuit, completely ignoring him.

"And Min deserves some of the credit. She gave the demonstration." Tataryn winked.

"...Eww," you said, shaking your head. Though, Isha was now using the wood chip litter boxes religiously. It was so much easier to clean up after. So you weren't going to complain.

"And she is beginning to understand how to operate a camera. She was also able to let us into the apartment as well. We put her in through an open window. We could have done the entry ourselves, of course, but she wanted the practice. And she did such a good job." Tataryn reached over and chucked Isha under the chin. She grabbed his fingers, and growled, not letting go till he gave her another biscuit.

"Huh," you said, studying her reaction. She listened to Tataryn, but it seemed to be more of a business negotiation, with hints of a dominance struggle, than straight affection or eagerness to please. It was very different from her interactions with you, Jack, and Gabriel.

"She has very good instincts," Tataryn said, approvingly. "You can make deals with her and she understands."

"Well, thanks." Tataryn had been amazingly helpful. You weren't expecting that. You felt a slight pang of guilt for underestimating him. He wasn't the most...ethical friend. But you could rely on him when it mattered.

"You're welcome. It was very impressive. I sent Kseniya many pictures. She was pleased."

"Who made the sweaters?"

"Lindholm," he laughed. "He seemed to have fun creating miniature battlegear for Isha and Bandit. The dog would make a decent courier, but this one," he gazed at Isha shrewdly. "She has potential in the field."
You frowned, not liking the idea of putting your baby raptor in danger.

"Anyway, you should stop by and see what he made. Though if you say anything smarmy to him, there is a high chance he will smash your knees." Tataryn rubbed his thigh, wincing. "So consider yourself warned."

"Thanks again," you said. "I appreciate it."

Tataryn fluffed his hair, smiling brightly at you. "Of course. Anything for my favorite Lucky. You are always so dependable. The heart of Blackwatch. The devious, cake-loving, petty heart of Blackwatch."

You narrowed your eyes. Nothing good ever came from his compliments.

"If you wished to help me out a little, Family Day is coming up. And Kseniya would love to attend..."

You groaned, realizing that, of course, there would be a catch. When it came to Tataryn, there always was.

"Honestly, Agent Shimada, either of them, is a better melee fighter," you told Távio as you both left the gym. "And I can get you a dispensation for Commander Reyes' unarmed combat classes, if you like that brand of suffering." You draped your damp towel over the back of your neck. You were going to need a shower after this.

"Sure. But I still want to train with you." He grinned up you, sweaty and looking way too pleased with himself. He had put on some muscle - probably Reinhardt's training regimen and ridiculous diet: currywurst and carbs for all! And now Távio hit harder than before, like he wasn't actually worried about hurting you. You appreciated the respect, but damn you needed to ice your knee soon. And your arm. It twinged, and you winced, rubbing it. You'd managed to talk Angela out of making you go to physical therapy, since you already knowing the exercises from the last time you were shot. But if she found out you were actually sparring, not just euphemistically, she would probably stuff your head in a jar or something else vaguely medical and creepy.

You took a detour toward the staff kitchen, Távio following. "I mean, if you have time. I need all the help I can get. Commander Reyes says Sergeant Chang is real hardcore."

"Yes," you said, nodding. "But treat her with respect, and she'll be a good CO. That includes following her orders, both in spirit and detail. Understand that she's not as forgiving of sneaky overzealous smartasses as I am."

Távio laughed weakly.

"Lucky!" An awfully familiar voice called out across the mess hall and you sighed, rubbing your forehead. You couldn't just flee, not with your knee throbbing from Távio's well-placed snap kick. And you'd get laughed out of Blackwatch for running away from Overwatch Barbie. So you stopped, taking a deep breath and steeling yourself for the encounter.

Távio cocked his head to the side, his face politely blank.

"Lucky! I've been looking all over for you. Shouldn't you be resting? You're on medical leave!" Ainsley caught up to you, looking oddly efficient in a well-tailored black suit with a silver
tie, sapphire blue vest, platinum cufflinks, and white gloves. She wore black leather ankle boots and you narrowed your eyes, realizing that this ensemble looked oddly reminiscent of your Assassin Butler outfit, if tailored to fit Ainsley's style a bit better. Worse, it looked very good on her.

"...That's my fault, ma'am. I asked for some additional training. Agent Strike was kind enough to give me some pointers." Távio stood extra straight, his expression business-like.

You shook your head. "It's no trouble, Agent Maeda Vargas. Dr. Ziegler is just taking extra precautions."

Távio's eyes narrowed slightly at the formal title.

Ainsley looked between the two of you, her gaze questioning. "Hi, I'm Ainsley. I work in the Strike Commander's office." She extended her hand to Távio.

He smiled politely and shook. "Agent Maeda Vargas, ma'am. I've seen you in passing. I work for Commander Wilhelm right now."

"I thought you looked familiar," Ainsley said brightly. "Have you known Lucky long?"

"Since basic," he said with a nod, notably not giving a timeline.

You crossed your arms. "Did you need something, Ms. Petras?" You asked sternly, and she flinched.

"You can just call me "Ainsley," you know," she said, looking wounded. "I mean, you did save my life after all. You don't have to be so formal."

You rubbed your forehead, feeling an oncoming headache.

"Are you all right?" Ainsley asked. "I know you're probably sore, at least from the injuries you sustained in DC."

Távio looked between the two of you, and you could see him already speculating, his little brain on fire with bad ideas.

"All of that is classified," you reminded her. Because while Maeda Vargas might know some of the story, he wasn't supposed to, and if he did, you would be talking to Reinhardt and Ziv about keeping their damn mouths shut and not sharing every damn video that crossed their screen.

"It's not all classified. That story might be, but she saved a bunch of kids from the terrorists too," Ainsley said. "And she's terrible at taking credit for her heroics. Agent Shoal told me all about it. Do you know she's saved the Strike Commander's life on at least three separate occasions? Probably more than that, but she won't talk about it."

Távio's eyes widened.

You were going to kill Shoal. Slowly. With your ice pack, after you were done with it.

"Ainsley, I wasn't even supposed to be there," you scowled, though that was a massive oversimplification of the situation. "Of course, I can't go taking credit for a damn thing. Not unless I want to draw attention to my questionable activities."
"That's stupid," she sniffed. "I could talk to my uncl-"

"Don't you dare," you snarled, hands balled into fists.

Ainsley actually took a step backward, her eyes wide. "Oh. OK. I...I won't?" She glanced at Távio questioningly.

Távio's eyes darted between the two of you, and he hunched over, trying to make himself invisible, and failing that, at least he would present a smaller target.

"There are several operations in play. It's all extremely convoluted. Nothing is resolved yet," you said stiffly.

"The Strike Commander gave a press conference this morning," Ainsley said. "He already said Overwatch is going after the terrorists too and would happily assist the US government-"

You nodded, not pointing out that you'd seen it already. That Jack had practiced the speech in the mirror this morning. That you'd watched the live broadcast anyway, because it was always fun to watch him work a crowd.

"...But I guess it's really naive of me to just barge in and try to tell you how to run things," she said, a little dejected. "I'm sorry. I'm trying to help. Really." She blinked rapidly, lower lip wobbling.

"OK, thanks." You said, quashing that pang of guilt you got from the hurt looks she gave you. It wasn't your fault rich girl feelings were so damn fragile. The shock was real, but you weren't sure that the guilt trip wasn't intentional. "But please don't draw any more attention to me," you said. "My job is hard enough. I don't need additional scrutiny from anyone." Especially not the goddamn director.

"I'm really sorry," Ainsley said, turning away. "I...I should go then."

Távio bit his lip, giving you a questioning look, like a worried puppy. He jerked his head to the side, his expression clearly saying, "Are you really going to send her off like that? That was kind of harsh."

You gave him a sharp glare, but he didn't back down. When did he grow a conscience? Goddamn Reinhardt and his touchy-feely wholesomeness, high-minded ethics, and white knight delusions that were corrupting your Blackwatch agent-to-be. You should have assigned him to Tataryn instead. Wouldn't have had this problem.

"Ainsley," you said, measuring your tone. You didn't sound too bitchy, but you took a deep breath and tried to turn the setting up to friendly. "If you want to help, we can talk strategy later. When I'm back on duty, all right?"

She spun around, nodding frantically. "Of course. I am so sorry. I didn't even think about that. I know I say that a lot. But I'm trying. I really am."

You almost asked what exactly she was trying to do, but thought better of it. Instead you nodded. "All right. I'll see you later."

"Yes, of course. I'll...write up a brief with some of my ideas. Which you don't have to take. They're only ideas. But I'd love to get your perspective," she said quickly.

"OK, thanks," you said trying to smile, as you turned to go to the staff kitchen. Távio had
questions, and damn your knee hurt.

You sat down, icing your knee and your arm, as Távio pulled up another chair, and set it in front of you. You propped your leg up, and sipped a cup of oolong tea you'd made from Jesse's stash.

"Sorry," he said, shooting you a guilty look.

"You damn well should be," you said. "Now I have to meet with Ainsley, and I've been trying to dodge that bullet since the last time she cornered me in my office."

Távio rubbed the back of his neck. "Umm...permission to speak freely?"

You groaned. "If I say no, are you going to make sad puppy eyes at me for the rest of the day?"

"And then go commiserate with Ainsley," he added with a cheeky grin.

"Don't you dare. I will send you to Antarctica." You scowled at him. "I have my reasons for distrusting Overwatch Barbie. Also, she once spent half a night telling me about her delusional love life-"

"I understand. Everyone knows that she had it bad for the Strike Commander," Távio said with a shrug. "But everyone also knows he didn't return those feelings. Possibly because of someone else." Távio winked at you. "Not that I'm questioning his decision at all. Nope, I like living."

You leaned back in your chair, sipping your tea, wondering what kind of smartass bullshit your former student was going to try to pull out of his butt.

"I don't blame you for not liking her," he said. "But things have changed."

"If you tell me that she has a crush on me, I'm done. I'm switching to whiskey and I'm not stopping."

"No," Távio said with surprising certainty. "Well, I could be wrong, but I don't think that's it, well not all of it."

You inclined your head back. "Go on."

Távio squirmed. "So uh...this is kind of embarrassing."

You raised a brow.

"Ainsley, uh, well, she really wants your approval. Like she looks up to you," Távio said, staring at the floor. "The way she looks at you. The way she's trying to dress like you. The way she wants to talk about how great you are. It's hero worship. I know it's awkward, but I get the impression that she's not the kind of person who's really thought very hard about other people's feelings, you know? This is all new to her and she's really stuck on you. I guess it's because you saved her life once?"

You took a drink of tea, realizing the weight of Távio's words. Because Távio would recognize hero worship directed at you. He would know that behavior from firsthand experience.
As much as you did not like Ainsley, you couldn't mock her, because Távio was right and he was sitting in front of you, guilty of similar behavior.

It was weird coming from either of them, but you liked Távio.

Ainsley wanted to be like you, or whatever she thought you were like. Who actually knew? The realization took a moment to sink in. Groaning, you tilted your head back and stared at the ceiling.

"I don't think it's a crush," he said. "I had two moms, and there was...a different dynamic altogether. I could be wrong though. I was pretty young when they died."

You sighed, shaking your head. "We were in Paris. I had to be up early to guard Jack. She kept me up half the night, making her tea, while she nattered on about how disappointed she was that Jack wasn't the man of her fantasies. Keep in mind, I wasn't in a relationship then. It hadn't even occurred to me that such a thing was a possibility. I just had a job to do, but I had to babysit her on top of it, and she didn't even help me clean up when we were done."

"Spoiled rich girls," Távio said with a shrug. "What do you expect?"

"Exactly, best to avoid them all together," you said. "Babysitting them isn't my job, and I don't have the temperament for it."

"But people change. Sometimes for the better. They need room to grow and it isn't always pretty. They're going to fuck up, and while it's not your job to look after every idiot that stumbles across your path, you can't expect them to do better if there's no one to show them how." He scratched his chest, not making eye contact with you. "Having you for an instructor really...helped me. I mean, I think you know I wasn't really a model student, but you didn't care..."

"You were different," you said. "You weren't helpless, you just needed a perspective adjustment. And I liked you."

He smiled shyly, staring at his lap. "I know she's awful, but she's trying really hard. But yeah, she's so bad at it, that even I feel sorry for her."

You almost pointed out her bloodline, but he wasn't cleared for Shit Spiders yet. It was a different situation. You could never afford to trust Ainsley Petras. At worst, she was a well-trained double agent, playing a long game. At best, she was a Trojan horse, and an incredibly annoying one at that.

"I'm not saying you need to mentor her or anything," he said. "Just...don't crush her. She really looks up to you."

You wondered how much of that was projection. You would have to talk to Lacroix. He had a better eye for this kind of thing.

"You've made your point," you said. "But...for reasons, don't get too close to her, Távio. You know whom her uncle is, and he is not our ally."

Távio's eyes widened. "The director...?"

"It's politics and the nastiest kind," you said, because you could not let him go in blind. "But keep that to yourself."

"Ma'am," he said, nodding. "I...OK, I think I understand part of your concern now. I'll be
careful. I won't invite her to create a fan club or anything, don't worry.” He smiled brightly at you.

Suddenly, you were very worried.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like really sick, and I'm not sure if it's something I ate or just the weather and stress catching up to me. I was going to write a longer passage, but I'm really not feeling so great right now.
Chapter 95

Chapter Summary

Jack has some issues.

Chapter Notes

It has been brought to my attention that Jack's middle name is "Francis." That will be acknowledged eventually, much to Jack's dismay. That is all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Isha was going to need a new kennel. The one in your room was big enough, but the one in Jack's quarters was not. You contemplated penning her in the bathroom, but you weren't sure how Jack would feel about that. So far, she'd been behaving, using the litter box, not destroying his property, and cuddling her stuffed dog.

She had not even tried to steal the pizzas that you'd gotten for dinner. Instead she sat on the floor, watching them out of the corner of her eye, waiting for permission. That was progress.

The door opened and Jack groaned, tossing his coat onto the back of the couch and kicking off his boots. Isha ran to him and he scooped her up, planting a kiss on her snout.

"Favorite death chicken!" Jack gave her a squeeze and set her down. "Favorite girlfriend," he said, and leaned over the couch to kiss you. He sighed when he saw the pizza. "You're the best."

He rolled over the back of the couch and flopped over in your lap, closing his eyes. "Gabe's going to be late."

"You OK?"

"Long day," he said. "Petras wants in on the negotiations and I can't actually block him, but...well, it's going to be exhausting."

You nodded sympathetically.

He opened his eyes. "Missed you. And glad to see you're here." He then reached up and tugged on a lock of your hair. "Oh, hey, I meant to talk to you about something earlier."

"Oh?" You asked, trying to remember this morning. No one had wanted to get up, but Jack and Gabriel had dragged themselves away to their jobs, and you'd had to put on another hoodie after they left because the bed was too cold.

"Something's been bothering me." Jack sat up, his smile lopsided and losing its humor. "This isn't anyone's fault. At all. So don't worry. I just wanted to mention it because...good communication."
"OK...?" You said, suddenly very anxious.

"I know you and Gabe work together. I know it made sense to put you two together for Black Abacus. I'm not mad or resentful," he said carefully, staring at the table, hands folded under his chin. "But...I missed you both. And you guys had some fun together, sharing a hotel room, eating out, picking on that poor redheaded FBI agent. And, well, maybe I kind of, sort of, feel a little left out." The words ran together, and it took you a moment to untangle them in your head.

"Oh," you said, blinking. "I'm sorry. We didn't mean to-"

Jack sighed, shaking his head. "No, that didn't come out right. I...didn't word that how I wanted. I'm not mad. I don't want you to be sorry. Don't feel bad, please. I just want to spend some more time with you now that we have the chance."

"Do you need more one-on-one time with Gabriel or-?" You stared at the pizza boxes, trying to wrap your mind around this. You'd always felt a little bit like the outsider in the group. Not that Jack and Gabriel neglected you at all. It was the awareness that you were the radical addition to an established relationship. That Jack had felt excluded was an alarming realization.

"I want both of you," Jack said. "If only one of you is free, I get it. But you know, just...we're all due some post-combat leave. I have a few important meetings tomorrow morning, but barring any major crises, I'll be done before noon. Just...would like to come back here and stay in, with you and Gabe, when he gets a chance."

"Sure," you said quickly. "Whatever you want."

Jack smiled at you. "Need some time with you both." He leaned over and kissed your cheek. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"What would you like to eat?"

"You," he grinned, nibbling on your shoulder.

You laughed and smacked his wandering hands. "What kind of food did you want to eat?"

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Stock up on whatever you want. As long as I have you and Gabe, I'm happy." The boyish openness on Jack's face made him look ten years younger and your chest clenched.

"Do you want us to fuss over you a lot? Spoil you rotten?" You brushed his hair out of his face, leaning forward to kiss him. "Blowjobs, backrubs, and buttsex?"

"I'd like all of that," he said, chuckling. "But you don't owe me that. I just...just want the time together is all." He held you against his chest, squeezing you tightly. "Just...need you." The tips of his ears were red as he finished his confession.

You kissed his chin. "All right. It's a date."

You stocked up on sandwich ingredients, snack food, and cake. Then you swung by your room for clothes and supplies for Isha. Amélie had volunteered to watch her after you'd explained the situation. In fact, she seemed downright enthusiastic, telling you that red sweaters were fine for winter, but your murderbird needed seasonally-appropriate wear, and just to let her handle it.
You'd been slightly worried, but Amélie had met you at the door with a cheese plate and after that, Isha was literally eating out of her hand. You decided then that if Isha happened to damage Lacroix's stuff, you didn't really care.

There were several messages from Feng, Michael, Maggie, Bayan, Jeong, Lowell, and Agent Brant. Your favorite FBI agent had messaged you to remind you to return the ID badge. You laughed and just sent a smiley face as a response. They would deactivate it, of course, but it was your trophy. Or you could get Athena to do it, so Brant didn't get in trouble.

Dressed in an oversized Overwatch hoodie that might belong to Jack, you snuck back to his room to set up, then shower, and change clothes.

You made several tea sandwiches, cut small with the crusts removed. You had beer in the fridge. You weren't sure if any of this was really "romantic," but you knew Jack would appreciate the convenience over anything too elaborate. You set half a dozen votive candles in his room, and closed the blinds, though it didn't look as nice as you'd imagined. Maybe you should have gotten flower petals too? But that seemed more like a mess than a romantic gesture. Your other supplies sat in a basket on the nightstand.

After your shower, you eyed your outfit choices. Gabriel would have appreciated something well-coordinated and sophisticated, with accessories all chosen by Amélie. You could get away with just wearing one of Jack's t-shirts and nothing else. But you were really trying, so you slipped into one of the racy negliges Amélie had persuaded you to buy. It was formfitting black satin, with sheer panels along the side and lace trim. There was nothing modest about it, the hem barely covering your ass. You took off your gloves, because they wouldn't work with what you had planned.

You were putting on red lipstick when you heard the door open. Peeking your head out of the bathroom, you saw Jack already shrugging off his coat.

"Welcome home," you called. "I'll be out in a minute." You fussed with your hair, checked your makeup, and emerged, wondering if the lingerie was too much.

Jack looked up from the couch, his whole face lighting up when he saw you. His smile went from tired to wicked and he was on his feet immediately, not giving you time to reach him. Laughing, he scooped you up, hands skimming your hips as he leaned in for a hungry kiss.

When he released you, his cheeks were flushed, pupils wide, some of your lipstick smeared on his mouth. He was still wearing his black fatigues and you nibbled on his neck, not missing how his breath caught and his fingers dug into your skin.

"Missed you, beautiful," he said, pressing his forehead against yours. "Spent the whole morning thinking about you and Gabe-"

"What a coincidence. I was thinking about the two of you as well," you said, arms around his neck as he spun around to carry you to the bedroom.

"Let me show you what I was thinking about-"

"Nope," you said, wiggling out of his grasp, your bare feet hitting the floor. You ducked under his reaching arms, neatly slipping away from his attempt at recapture. "You need to eat first. And then I'll massage your back, because I know the last week has been incredibly stressful. You're so tense, and all that stiffness is what causes your headaches."
Jack groaned. "Sweetheart, come on--"

"I spent the morning trying to make things nice for you, and if you take me to bed right now, I won't have the energy to take care of you afterward. I made plans and bought supplies. So you're just going to have to wait," you told him firmly.

Jack's eyes flashed and gave you a slightly feral smile. "I don't need any of that stuff--"

"So all my work was in vain?" You asked archly. "Because I was trying to do something special for you."

Jack froze, his well-honed super soldier instincts sensing the danger ahead. "I guess I did get a little carried away," he said, sighing sheepishly. "Can't think straight when you're wearing that."

"You really need to work on your patience, sir."

Jack frowned at the teasing, expression too severe to be called "pouting." But that's precisely what it was.

"You need to eat," you scolded. "Come on, let me take care of you. Food first, sex later."

Jack narrowed his eyes and flopped over on the couch, his pants not hiding his arousal at all. "Yes, boss," he said sullenly, crossing his arms.

You placed a plate of sandwiches in front of him, with cold beer, chips, and cookies. "I know it's nothing fancy," you said, though you also knew that was how Jack preferred it.

"You cut the crusts off the sandwiches," he said. "That is fancy."

"I tried," you said politely, because Jack's idea of "fancy" worried you.

"It looks very pretty. Like you. But I guess I'll have to content myself with eating sandwiches first. Dessert later." He gave you a wry smile and shook his head. You sat beside him, grabbed a cucumber, mint, and cheese sandwich and offered it up. Jack took it delicately in his mouth and reached for his beer.

"Need me to feed you, baby?" You asked, laughing as his teeth grazed your fingers.

"Tease," he sighed. "Are they all vegetarian?" He asked, wrinkling his nose as he found a watercress, chèvre, and egg sandwich. He still ate it in one bite.

"Of course not," you said, rolling your eyes. "But you need to eat your vegetables. I know what you ate in during Black Abacus and it wasn't healthy at all."

Shaking his head, he selected a small ham and Swiss cheese, garnished with dill pickles. "You weren't kidding about the fussing." he said, but didn't sound displeased. He just rested his head on your shoulder. "Thank you. I appreciate you looking out for me. Don't mean to seem ungrateful. Just can't think about much else with you in that getup." He kissed your cheek.

"Next time I won't get dressed up then," you said.

Jack shook his head rapidly. "Message received. I will behave," he said, quickly grabbing a random sandwich and stuffing the entire thing in his mouth. He winced, turning a little red. After a few coughs and another sandwich, he was able to speak. "Horseradish?"
"With roast beef and cheddar. Was that...too spicy for you?"

"Wasn't expecting it," he laughed, shaking his head. "It's good though."

You picked at the sandwiches, not as hungry because you'd already eaten while making them. Jack went through the first plate in record time, making sure to stop every few bites to compliment your efforts. It wasn't necessary, but your chest warmed each time he smiled at you, said "thanks," and went back to eating.

When he was done, he blotted his face with the napkin and tried to coax you onto his lap. Laughing, you smacked his hands away and instead pulled him to his feet, and led him to the bedroom.

He raised a brow as you lit the candles, and you wondered if you should have left them burning despite the hazard or if you should have snuck in ahead of him? That would have been smart, but timing was complicated. You should have planned it better.

"Hey, why are you frowning?"

"Logistics," you muttered.

"Well, you look sexy in the candlelight. You look sexy in any light." Jack wrapped his arms around you from behind. "Bed?"

"Yup. Lie on your stomach," you said, disentangling yourself and tugging on his shirt. He let you pull it off, along with his belt. He stripped down to his boxers. You hugged him from behind, kissing the back of his neck.

Jack gave happy groan. "Baby-"

Gabriel was absolutely right. Anticipation was good for Jack. You were enjoying watching him squirm. "I'm trying to pamper you and you're being difficult. Stop complaining and cooperate, sir." You gave him a light shove.

Laughing, Jack fell shirtless onto the bed, and gave you knowing look over his shoulder. He practically glowed against the soft gray bedding, his skin golden in the candlelight. "All right, sweetheart. I'll play along, for now. But I want you to know that I'm going to get you for this."

"Ingrate," you said, rolling your eyes. You opened a bottle of lightly-scented massage oil. It warmed your skin on contact, and you coated your hands. Jack watched you intently from the bed, resting his chin on his forearms.

You straddled his low back, focusing your attention on his taut shoulders and neck. There were so many well-defined muscles in his back, and you intended to work on each group. Jack groaned underneath you.

"Sweetheart, that's..." he sighed. "OK, that's not bad at all."

"Of course not," you said, putting more power into it. "You love back rubs."

"I do," he murmured. "Love you too."

You kissed the back of his neck. "Yeah, I know."

Jack snorted.
"I love you, but you're getting your massage first," you told him, digging your knuckles into his shoulders.

"That's some tough love." He chuckled. "Wouldn't...have it any other way." He grunted at your forcefulness.

You worked your way down his back, returning to some of the stiffer areas to loosen him up. After about thirty minutes, Jack lay boneless on the bed. You wouldn't say he was like putty, because all those relaxed muscles were still rock solid. But he'd gone from bantering with you to mumbling incoherently into his pillow.

You kept going lower, kneading his thighs and calves. You squeezed his firm ass a few times, and that got you some petulant looks, but you just stared back innocently, and continued working on his legs.

"Do you want a foot rub too?"

"Baby, you're killing me," Jack sighed. "And I'm too damn comfortable to do anything about it." He huffed in frustration, but it was a soft sleepy sound.

"Roll over. I'm almost done," you told him, slapping his ass, the sound of the smack making him jump.

Jack growled at you, but complied. He watched you with sharp eyes, no longer quite so relaxed.

Feigning ignorance, you continued massaging his thighs, your hand brushing against his erection, but not paying it any special attention. Jack bit his lip, brows furrowing.

You placed a kiss on his ridged stomach, just over his belly button, and he shuddered beneath you. You ignored it, straddling his knees, fingers working on his hips and quads.

Jack's breathing grew heavy, and he gazed up at you with glassy eyes and flushed cheeks. His hair was mussed and you bent over to kiss him, one palm pressed against his chest for balance.

Jack moaned into your mouth, hands gripping your forearms. "Sweetheart, are you going to keep teasing me or-?"

"You're so greedy, soldier," you murmured, sucking on the side of his neck. "You need to lie back and let me take care of you. That's an order."

Jack released your arms, instead grabbing fistfuls of the sheets as he stiffened beneath you. "Whatever you want, boss. I'm your man." He stared up at you, a dazed, almost dreamy smile on his handsome face.

You kissed a trail down his chest, leaving lipstick marks on his fair skin. You tweaked his nipples and he shivered, breathing growing more ragged. Back down his abdomen, to his hips, and you had to pause. You tugged on the waistband of his boxers and Jack raised up, letting you strip the underwear off quickly and toss it aside. You poured more oil on your hands, and kissed Jack's hips, ignoring his cock bobbing there, precum already glistening on the tip.

You moved down to his inner thighs, nibbling on the sensitive flesh. Jack squirmed beneath you, panting.

"Please sweetheart," he rumbled. "I've been good for you."
"Obedient," you agreed. "But not good." You gripped his cock in your left hand, and ran your tongue over the tip.

Jack’s eyes rolled back and his hips shook, but he tried to hold still for you. A pink flush crept across his cheeks and chest. You knelt between his legs, tongue swirling against his shaft, your metal fingers brushing against his puckered hole.

Jack snarled your name, nearly arching off the bed, but you kept your motions light and teasing, and he settled back down, breathing hard.

"Don't worry, baby," you told him between licks, your oiled fingers already pushing into his warmth. "I'll take good care of you till Gabriel gets home."

Jack moaned softly, one hand over his face. "Goddamn tease-"

"So eager, soldier," you said, taking his cock down your throat. Jack shuddered as you bobbed your head, moving your fingers at the same speed, swirling them inside him, slowly stretching him open. You moved faster, getting him nice and slippery. His ass sucked your fingers in, and he jerked underneath you. Jack rocked his hips, trying to hold steady, your lips around the base of his shaft.

There was a gentle tug on your hair, and you looked up, letting Jack fall out of your mouth.

Eyes half-open, lips parted, Jack shook his head at you. "Wait. Let me be inside you, please," he panted. "It's been too long-"

"All right," you said, kissing his weeping cockhead. "After I'm done here." You scissored your fingers, inside him, and Jack dropped flat against the bed, eyes squeezed shut.

"If you do that thing, I won't last."

"I won't," you said pleasantly.

Jack groaned loudly, and you couldn't tell if that was disappointment, relief, or a combination of the two. You contented yourself with teasing licks along his shaft and balls, while you stretched his ass. Jack's thighs shook, bumping your shoulders. You bit him in retaliation, and he gave a breathless cry.

"Behave yourself," you said, kissing the spot.

"Baby, please-"

You just smiled at him, and withdrew your fingers, getting up and going to the nightstand. You wiped your hands clean with sanitizer, then got out a deep blue plug. It was new and you licked it, not missing how Jack's eyes widened. You coated it with more lubricant and then returned to your spot between Jack's legs.

He took a deep breath and relaxed, making a soft whine as you pushed the toy inside him. You knew Gabriel was a lot rougher with Jack, and that he could handle it, but you still liked going slow, watching him gradually take the entire toy.

"Such a needy soldier," you murmured, stroking his cock.

"Fuck, that's so good," Jack exhaled. "Thank you, boss."
"You're so well-mannered today," you purred, kissing his inner thigh. "But I guess that's easy when you're getting exactly what you want."

Jack nodded fervently. "I can't complain." He smiled weakly at you, cheeks red. He was so damn adorable, and you couldn't wipe the stupid smile off your face.

You started to pull off your negligee, knowing exactly what was coming next.

"Wait, please," Jack said, his voice hoarse. "Please leave it on."

You pretended to look conflicted. "I don't know, Jack. You still haven't replaced the other pieces you destroyed."

Jack shuddered, drawing shaky breaths. "I'll get it done this week. Promise. Just...please." He watched you with pleading eyes, his expression hopeful.

You grabbed something off the nightstand, and then straddled Jack's hips, slowly lowering yourself onto his slick shaft. You were wet from just watching him react to you, but the initial stretch - you forgot how big he felt inside you - still made you gasp. Jack stared at your face, eyes dewy and smile bright, but he held still, letting you inch down onto him, his shaft dragging against your walls.

"I was worried, boss. You didn't let me prep you, but you're so wet for me," he licked his lips, an obscene moan escaping his throat.

"I know what I'm doing, soldier." You placed one hand on his stomach to brace yourself, till you found your seat, your knees bracketing his hips.

Jack sat up, tugging gently on the collar of the negligee, letting your breasts spill free. He leaned in, squeezing them gently, taking one nipple in his mouth at a time. You shivered, enjoying both the look on his face and the heat and pressure on your sensitive flesh.

You sighed, letting him play for a moment, before you pushed him back down.

"Come on, boss. I know you like it when I suck those pretty tits. Love how much tighter your pussy gets when I'm playing with them. Makes me want to hold you down and focus on nothing else till you're begging me to-"

You didn't have to look at the remote in your free hand. There was a power button and two arrows to adjust the setting. You'd left it on medium. You clicked the power button and braced yourself as Jack's hips snapped upward off the bed. The plug buzzed in away in his ass and you gave a sharp cry as his fingers gripped your hips.

"Goddamnit!" He stared up at you, eyes wild.

You smirked down at him, breathing shaky. "You just lie there and concentrate on not bucking me off, soldier. Let me do the work."

"You fucking minx," he growled shaking his head. "I love you so damn much."

"That's your dick talking," you said, tone playful.

Jack frowned for a moment.

"Don't look so petulant," you laughed. "Where are your manners, soldier?"
Jack relaxed then, a crooked grin creeping across his face. "Sorry, boss. Got carried away. Because I love you so damn much."

You laughed, leaning over to kiss his jawline. "That's better."

He shook beneath you, skin flushed, radiating heat as he struggled to hold still. Under normal circumstances, he would have flipped you over and pounded you into the mattress by now. But this was your game, and your rules, arranged explicitly for him. And if he messed it up, you'd be very irritated. Besides, there'd be time for other games later.

Taking a deep breath, you raised your hips and dropped back down, an undignified squeak escaping your lips as you took him to the hilt. Jack twitched underneath you, tension coiled through his body, from his bent knees to the veins in his jaw. He was struggling to hold still.

"Such a good soldier," you cooed, not missing how much he enjoyed the praise. You cupped his face. "Look at you behaving. I love you too. Next round is yours, don't worry. You just have to leave the plug in for Gabriel."

Jack kissed your palm. "Thank you, boss. You're so good to me."

You just smiled and rocked your hips faster, the angle just right. Each stroke made you ache, and you bit your lip, focusing on taking him deep. Your breathing was too erratic, and sweat trickled down your back, the satin fabric clinging to your body. But you rode him hard, your eyes widening as he began to rub your clit.

"Want to feel you come with me," he said roughly. "Love the view right now. Watching you bounce on my cock, that look of rigid concentration on your face. But the next part is even better: I love seeing you come apart." His fingers sped up, and you squeezed the remote, turning up the power on his plug. "Fuck!" He gave you a savage smile. "Oh baby, I'm not going to last, but neither are you-"

You dropped forward, both hands flat on his chest as you speared yourself on him, teeth clenched as you bucked your hips faster and faster.

"Oh fuck, baby-" Jack kissed your throat, his fingers speeding up to match your pace, the pressure wonderfully insistent. Your thighs shook, muscles burning as you kept a frantic pace.

Jack canted his hips, and began to thrust upward, his breaths harsh as he rose to meet you, his cockhead hitting your cervix.

"Jack," you panted, your voice strained.

He chuckled, kissing you then. "Right here, I'm with you. After this, I'll take good care of you, don't you worry. Just want to see you coming on my cock, boss. Want to feel that hot little pussy clenching around me. Because I can hear how wet you are, and it's driving me crazy-"

Jack calloused fingers manipulated your nerves with practiced ease. You threw your head back, body trembling as your orgasm hit. You stiffened and jerked forward, equilibrium lost. Jack kept thrusting, one hand still stroking your clit, the other steadying you as you struggled to stay astride him. He arched beneath you, eyes staying on your face as he shuddered, and you felt the rush of liquid heat filling you up.

Panting you let yourself collapse against his chest. Jack squirmed underneath you, taking short sharp breaths and it took you a moment to retrieve the remote and turn down the plug to a mild hum.
Jack narrowed his eyes at you, but you held onto the remote, kissing his forehead.

"You were supposed to let me take care of you," you said.

"You did," Jack said, with a contented sigh. "Your cunning plot to turn my muscles to jelly nearly worked." He kissed your knuckles, squeezing your hips. "It wouldn't have been fun if I didn't get to watch you too, baby."

"Fair," you said as you slowly pulled yourself off him, thick cum trickling down your thighs. You looked around for Jack's shirt to clean yourself up with.

"You going to turn that off?" He asked.

"I don't know," you laughed, already knowing what was coming next.

Jack moved then, flipping you onto your back. You kept a firm grip on the remote, but he didn't try to take it from you. Instead, he hovered over you, breathing hard. He cocked his head to the side, eyes dark.

"All right, sweetheart, you've had your fun, it's my turn." He gathered your wrists in one hand, pinning them over your head, but the remote stayed where it was.

You glanced at it, then him. You both knew he could take it from you if he wanted to do so.

"You can hold on to that, sweetheart," Jack murmured, eyes locked on yours. "You can even use it if you feel like it. I won't stop you." A wicked grin spread across his face. "But push me too hard, and I will break you," he purred, stroking your cheek with his free hand.

You shivered, not even questioning Jack's recovery time. No, you were used to the super soldier stamina now. It still impressed you, but you knew what to expect. "Understood, sir."

Jack chuckled, and stroked between your thighs, scooping up the mess of cum on his fingers. He pressed them into your mouth, and you licked them, holding his gaze the entire time. You smiled, finishing up by sucking each digit clean. Jack groaned, his cock pressing hard against your stomach. "You're so well-behaved today, agent. Have to say I was expecting more attitude."

You bit your lip, searching Jack's face for a cue.

He just smiled, tilting your chin up and kissing you gently. "I'm not complaining." He nuzzled your throat; his love bites and hard kisses would leave marks later, but you squirmed beneath him, his knee holding your thighs apart, your wrists firmly pinned to the pillow. He moved back up, his mouth tracing your jawline, nibbling on your ear, and then dropping back down to the base of your neck.

"You make such cute noises," he said softly. "And I'm not even touching that needy little pussy yet."

"Please, sir," you said, not sure what you were asking for, just that he'd hurry up and stop teasing you.

"You're asking so nicely. Feeling eager?" He looked far too pleased. He sat back on his heels, giving his cock a few quick tugs. Then he lifted your left leg over his shoulder and pushed back inside.
Your vision went white and you keened as he split you, his cock going deeper than before.

"Surprised that you're being so good," Jack said, voice a little hoarse. "But then, I think you already know that you're in trouble for what you pulled in DC."

Your eyes flew open and you gave him a sharp look.

"You apologized, and I know you even meant it. But you still scared me silly," he murmured, forehead pressed to yours.

You knew Jack needed some control back after operations went awry. Or more specifically, whenever he thought he hadn't done a good enough job protecting you. But you weren't sure you quite liked the set of his jaw or the hunger that gleamed in his eyes.

"You know, I might be misunderstanding things, sir." You smiled wryly. "But generally when someone does something nice for you, you don't get to punish them."

Jack raised a brow. "I'm talking about your solo match versus the cyborgs."

"Oh." You wondered if he meant it or if that was a convenient excuse. "I did appreciate the rescue, and it wasn't like I went looking for that fight, sir. But, you're in charge."

"I know," he smirked. "So what you're saying is that I should leave all the punishment up to Gabe," he said, and your breath quickened. "By your logic," he grinned. "My job is to indulge you." His gaze turned thoughtful. "Is that what you need, sweetheart? Do you need me to take care of you?"

You stared up at Jack. He wore a cocky grin, but the look in his eyes was serious and alert.

"I'd like that, sir," you said cautiously, a little unsure about this sudden shift. "But today is about you-"

Jack cupped your cheek. "Don't need to hear a debate club presentation, sweetheart. A simple "yes" or "no" will suffice." The rawness in his voice took the sting out of the curt words.

"Yes, please," you said, because what else could you say to that offer?

"All right," Jack said and snapped his hips forward.

You stiffened, muscles burning as he pushed your left knee against your chest, cock driving deep inside you. He bottomed out early and it just was too much. You arched beneath him. "Jack!"

"Does that hurt?" He murmured, slowing down. "Too deep?"

"Too deep," you exhaled, thighs already shaking.

Jack kissed your forehead. "Got it." He didn't shift positions though, he just rocked his hips, subtly changing the angle and dialing back the intensity. He gave a light thrust, hitting your g-spot. "Better?"

You nodded, panting.

Sweat beaded along Jack's temples, but he looked so very relaxed, pinning you to the bed. He began moving again, his cock pressing against the right spot. He smirked as a low whine escaped your throat.
"Is this what you wanted, baby?" His fingers stroked your throat, and you shivered, as he leaned in for a kiss. You moaned into his mouth. "Is it?" He murmured, focused on your reactions.

"Oh fuck yes, sir." You swallowed roughly. "You uh...you don't have to hold me down. I'll be good."

"I like doing it," he said. "Or did you want me to do something else with my hands?" He reached between your thighs and began to rub your clit with his free hand. You bucked your hips, sinking into the pillows as Jack cheerfully started thrusting harder. He lowered his head to your nipples, sucking the hard points between his teeth.

"Jack-" You swore a streak of babbling curses, having no leverage or ability to get the bastard back.

"Shh," Jack purred in your ear. "You just lie back and enjoy yourself. I love seeing you like this. Love it when you're cooperative, sweetheart. Oh it's fun when you fight and goad me, but I do appreciate it when you just give yourself over to me like this. You should do it more often. I promise I'll take good care of you."

Something clicked in the back of your head, but you were too wound up to focus on it. Instead you nodded frantically. "Please," you managed to get out. "Need you. Whatever you want-"

Jack smiled indulgently. "That's what I like to hear." He continued pumping steadily in and out of you, his hands gripping your limbs tighter. "Should have put a plug in you before I started. Give you a taste of your own medicine."

You grinned at him and squeezed the remote, feeling him stiffen as the you turned the power up a few notches.

Growling, Jack slammed his hips into you, and you gave a strangled cry. His grip on your wrists tightened, and he gritted his teeth, eyes squeezed shut as he shuddered. "Is that how you want to play?" He pulled out leaving you empty for half a second before pushing himself all the way back into the hilt.

You squealed as he pounded you, arching and bucking as he held you down, fingers rubbing furiously at your clit.

"And you were being so good-" he said tersely.

"Thought that-" The words came out as hiccups, his thrusts making it hard to speak. "Thought that was a hint, sir. I'm trying to be cooperative. Do you want me to turn it down?"

He opened his eyes, an edge in his smile. "Leave it. But later I'm going to tie you down and see how many toys I can I fit inside you. Going to see if we can make you squirt. It might take a few tries, but I'm a patient man."

You moaned, as Jack's thrusts grew more frenzied. "Please-"

"Tie you up, gag you, leave you squirming and shaking for Gabe-" Jack growled. "And still dripping with my cum." He kissed you hard, his shaft gliding smoothly in and out of you. "You're fucking soaked, sweetheart. Do you like that idea?"

Your head bobbed weakly as Jack fucked you into the bed. "Yes, sir," you panted and clenched your inner muscles, trying to milk his cock, to make him feel it. "Whatever you want, sir."
"Such a good girl," Jack sighed. He released his grip on your wrists. You took the hint and put the remote down. Jack gently wound his fingers with yours and pushed your hands into the pillow, clasping them tightly as he covered your face with kisses. "So good to me."

You gripped his hands tightly, vision blurring as he sped up. Sweat trickled down his brow, and his lips parted as he drew short rapid breaths.

"That's it, come on sweetheart. Need you here with me. Need you to know that." His blue eyes locked onto yours, his gaze shining with warmth and unguarded affection. It was startlingly clear, so much so that it almost hurt to look at him. "Don't look away. Stay with me now."

"Jack-" You whimpered, your eyes fluttering as you tried to keep your eyes on him. He didn't stop moving, the rhythm of his thrusts pushing you higher and closer to the edge. Jack was your focus, and even as you felt yourself start to fall.

"With me now-" he breathed.

You gripped Jack's hands, sobbing as he kept going through the throes of your orgasm. Each stroke seemed to drag it out, and you thrashed beneath him, spouting curses, pleas, and utter gibberish.

Jack held you down, his mouth on yours, his body quaking as he spent himself inside you.

Gradually, you began to come down from the high. Your thighs ached, and you blinked wearily as Jack rested his head against your shoulder, his fingers still entwined with yours.

"Gabe's right," he said softly. "You do like holding hands."

You almost pulled away, but he raised your left hand to his lips, kissing both flesh and metal. He reached up and switched off the remote. Then he began to disentangle himself, lowering your leg, and then rolling onto his side, his head back on your shoulder. He held you loosely, giving you room to breathe.

Aftershocks still ran through your core and you trembled as you rolled onto your side to face him. You smoothed his sweaty hair back, kissing his chin.

"Was that what you wanted?" You asked, a little self consciously.

"Baby, anything that involves us doing sexy things together is what I want," Jack chuckled, pulling you closer.

"I mean...the submission part," you said, not looking up from his broad chest. "You were kind of on edge."

Jack's hand warmed the small of your back, and he moved it in slow deliberate circles. "You scared me in DC," he began.

You almost apologized again, but kept your mouth shut, because Jack wasn't done.

"The FBI shooting happened so fast. You were in the way, and then you were OK, and I had an urgent job to do." He sounded distant. "I was angry, still am. Mostly at myself and the FBI. But that wasn't anything compared to the museum."

You took a deep breath.
"Walking into that room, finding that cyborg bitch perched on top of you, and not knowing if you were alive or-" He trailed off. "She had her blades out and I just ran. I didn't know if I was going to make it in time." He squeezed you then. "But then you looked up, bloody but alive. And I could breathe again. Of course, you started up trying to downplay your injuries, like none of it was serious, even though she'd damn near cut your throat, among other things. The entire situation was a mess," Jack sighed. "And I didn't have time to deal with any of that till...till later."

You lay there beside him, recalling that terrifying moment of helplessness when you thought you were going to lose more of yourself. You didn't take any solace in the idea that you were "doing the right thing." Because you weren't a hero. You didn't harbor any particular love for strange children, but your decision in the museum didn't fall in some kind of gray area. A person was defined by their choices: either you were the kind of person who tried to save a child, or the kind of person who left one to die. And you knew firmly which kind of person you did not want to be.

"I was scared," you said, your voice small. "And I was so happy to see you. I was in over my head, but running away wasn't an option. Not with the kid there. And definitely not with the cyborg pinning me." You stared very hard at Jack's chest. "So thank you for the save. I'm really sorry I needed it."

Jack yanked you into a crushing embrace, his breathing shaky. "You goddamn idiot," he whispered, tilting your chin up. "I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to be safe." He resumed rubbing your back, his touch to hard and clumsy.

You looked up, taken aback by the rough emotion in his voice.

"Not mad at you," he said mournfully. "Just...was terrified for you."

"I know. I'm still sorry."

Jack sighed, hugging you to his chest. "I know. I'm sorry I get...growly and forget to use words the right way."

You clung to him, unsure of what else you could say. "I love you."

"Love you too, sweetheart," he said, voice soft. He exhaled slowly, grip relaxing "Thank you for letting me take control. It helped." He smiled at you. "But I think talking about things, like this, is good for us too. I'm sorry if I'm too wound up at first to do that."

You nodded, tucking your head against Jack's shoulder. "I kind of am too. I mean, being a smartass is just another coping mechanism, you know? I don't do it just to piss you off."

Jack shook his head. "I...know. But I lose sight of that in the moment. It's a good thing we had Gabe to intercede." He gave you a wry smile. "Though I think you handled the FBI situation very well. Not the getting shot part, the keeping Gabe from murdering everyone remotely involved part."

"I appreciate you doing the same after we talked about Kwento," you said, rubbing the back of your neck. "Though I'm still not sure about the wisdom of cozying up to me in front of an audience."

Jack didn't look the least bit bothered. "It best that they know where we stand. Don't need anyone misunderstanding your relationship with McCree," he said so plainly that you rolled your eyes. "Besides, we're quite the team, you, me, and Gabe."
"I think we did pretty well together," you said, wondering if it could ever be just the three of you running missions again.

"Yeah." Jack kissed you softly. "I think so too."

You curled up against him, sighing happily as he pulled the covers over you both.

Chapter End Notes

Work screwed up my vacation time again. *facepalm* So done.

But I do have an interview next week. Please wish me luck/less freaking out and panic-talking, because I do that something awful.
It's Gabriel's turn.

We've broken 700k and it looks like the final product is totally going to be more than 800k. Why am I so bad at estimating wordcounts?

You awoke to the soft sound of kisses, kisses that you weren't getting. Opening your eyes, you stifled a yawn and turned your head. Gabriel was on the other side of Jack, playfully nuzzling his face, while Jack shook with silent laughter. Jack was barely wearing a sheet around his hips, but Gabriel sat shirtless, on the bed, hat still on his head for some reason.

Gabriel's smile widened when he saw you watching. He leaned over Jack and ran his thumb of your swollen lips. "Did Jackie wear you out, hermosa?"

"How long was I out?" You sighed.

"Little less than an hour," Jack said. "You drooled on my arm. It was cute."

You wiped your mouth, mortified to find the corners damp.

"So who was pampering whom again?" Gabriel chuckled.

"Lucky was taking care of me," Jack said with an entirely too pleased grin. "But I had to reward her for all her hard work."

Gabriel raised a brow.

"She pointed out that it's not nice to punish someone for saving you," Jack continued wryly. "So we worked out that it was my job to reward her, but since she broke her deal with you and got herself injured, well, you get to punish her."

"Wait a minute, I didn't agree to that-"

"You weren't arguing," Jack said smugly.

"We were in the middle of sex," you scowled.

Gabriel watched you with heavy-lidded eyes, his arms crossed. "You did agree to avoid getting injured. Playing samurai with cyborgs was reckless enough," he said. "But then you went and got yourself shot. Again."
You blinked, adjusting your surprisingly still-intact negligee. "I'm sorry I got you hurt-" Your voice was thick with guilt.

"That's not what this is about," Gabriel purred. "*That* is irrelevant to the point. This isn't about some silly flesh wounds. This is about our agreement. The one that you broke." He rose, crossing over to your side of the bed. "Jack's right, baby girl. I think we need to settle this."

"On the mats?" You wondered.

"Nope," Gabriel's smile was wicked. "Come here."

You pushed the blankets off, and crawled forward, not missing how Gabriel's nostrils flared at the sight of you in lingerie. You sat in front of him, not entirely sure where this was going.

"We're supposed to be looking after Jack," you reminded him.

You felt Jack's hands on your shoulders.

"I don't mind just watching," he said. "I think you and Gabe need to take care of things first. Then you can both make it up to me." He nipped your ear and you jerked forward into Gabriel's lap, your hands scrabbling at his thighs. His shoulder was right in front of your face and it was drawn tight.

Gabriel didn't move, he just watched you, eyes flicking between you and Jack.

"What do you mean by "settle this?" Because it's pretty hard to disentangle you getting hurt from the entire situation. And I'm honestly not entirely sure how to make it up you," you said, not even playing at being coy.

"Did you forget what I told you in the hotel room? Be reckless and I'll edge you till you cry," Gabriel said gruffly. "Or maybe you just need a good hiding."

"Kinky, but I don't know if I'm up for that right now." You rubbed the back of your neck. "I do seriously feel bad about it, Gabriel. I don't really want to make a game of it." You rested your forehead against his shoulder.

"And how do you think I feel knowing you got hurt on my watch? Or that you were threatened by someone who was supposed to be our ally? And that I wasn't supposed to do anything about it?" Gabriel clasped the back of your head. "If you feel bad, how do you think I feel?"

You flinched. "I don't want you to feel guilty either."

"I know," he said, stroking your hair. "Doesn't stop it though."

You nodded, mouth downturned.

"I think I know how she can make it up to you," Jack said.

You looked up as Jack leaned in, one arm over Gabriel's shoulder while he whispered something into the other man's ear.

Gabriel nodded thoughtfully as Jack continued his plotting. But when you tried to listen in, Gabriel put his whole hand over your face and gently pushed you backward.

"Hey!"
"It's impolite to eavesdrop," Gabriel smirked.

"You shouldn't be whispering in front of me. That's rude too!" You crossed your arms. "Come on, Jack, spill it."

"No, it's a surprise. A good surprise," Jack said as he pulled away, looking smug. He kissed Gabriel's cheek and flashed you a happy smile. "It'll be fine, sweetheart. Honest."

"Lie flat on your stomach," Gabriel said. "Try to get comfortable."

You hesitated.

Gabriel sat there, looking oddly relaxed. His lips quirked up when he caught you staring. "Go on," he said, giving you a sour look, impatience starting to shine through.

You moved the blanket aside and took a deep breath as you crawled forward, half-expecting one of them to slap your ass. No one did, and you turned your head to the side, resting your cheek on a pillow, your fingers already gripping the sheets.

"Raise your hips," Gabriel said.

You obeyed, and glanced back over your shoulder as he slid a pillow underneath you. He studied your back with grave concentration.

"Didn't I tell you to lie flat?" His voice was barely above a bass rumble, and it made your inner muscles clench.

You dropped your head back against the pillow, teeth gritted as you felt him push the negligee up past your waist, then higher along your back, till it was bunched around your breasts.

A rough finger traced a constellation on your back. Your nerves lit up along the pathway, each stroke radiating heat and making you shiver. You buried your face in the pillow breathing hard as Gabriel kept his touch feather light.

"That asshole fired six shots total," Gabriel said, his voice distant. "One went wide and hit a tree. Four hit the back plate of your armor. I can still see the hints of bruising underneath, despite all the medical treatment." You felt him lean in, his presence warm. He continued tracing the same pattern, and your breath caught as he gently kissed each bruise. "You're fortunate he only had a pistol and hollow points."

"Gabriel-"

"Shh," he said, nipping your ear, and you jerked forward into the pillow. "I'm not done."

You swallowed roughly, breathing heavy as he kept drawing the same pattern with his finger. It wasn't sexual, not quite, and it wasn't tickling either. There was something sensuous about the slow repetitive motions. The lack of pressure made your nerves more sensitive, more receptive. Each stroke echoed, the very feel of it lingering on your skin, though his hand had moved on. You bit your lip as he kissed the back of your neck, his mouth hot and demanding.

Another finger rested on your left arm. But he didn't stop touching your back.

"One shot struck here and went through." He kissed the bandaged spot. "Made me think you need more extensive armor, or at least an armguard of some kind. But after some consideration, I realized it would just slow you down. You have to be fast for some of those knife
moves. I don't want to throw off your balance. Tell me later if you disagree. For now, you can just hold still."

You closed your eyes, nerves wired, but oddly soothed by his hands. Your breathing stayed erratic, and the muscles in your back quivered.

"I know your injuries could have been much worse," he said. "I know you did the right thing, shielding Jack. I know you didn't take any careless risks." He sighed softly, kissing the back of your neck again. "But it still haunts me." He took your left hand in his, and you understood exactly what he meant, and it wasn't just about what happened in Washington DC.

You wanted to interrupt, to tell him that he was being ridiculous, that none of your trauma was his fault, but he squeezed your hand.

"I know what you're thinking, corazon. But we both know it doesn't work like that." He kissed the back of your neck again. "So I'm going to ask you to take better care of yourself, because I think now you understand what seeing you hurt does to me. It cuts deep."

"Gabriel-" Your voice broke and you raised your head.

"Lie flat, stay quiet, and don't argue with me," he said sternly. "You'll get your say in a minute." He released your hand, and took his hand off your back.

You drew a shaky breath, and squeezed your eyes shut. Gabriel gently rolled your negligee back down, his hands smoothing it along your hips. It still rode up, and you could feel the cool air on your inner thighs, but you didn't move. He released you and from the way the mattress shifted, he had sat back on the edge of the bed.

"It's OK," you heard Jack murmur, and you knew then that Jack was right behind you both. You snuck a peek over your shoulder. Jack embraced Gabriel from behind, and Gabriel had his face tucked against Jack's neck. Jack kissed his forehead, and caught your eye. He shook his head, waving you back down with hand. "We're all home now. Everything's going to be fine," he said, in Gabriel's ear, his eyes on yours.

Gabriel lifted his head, and you quickly buried your face in the pillow. "Blaming yourself is about as accurate as me blaming myself for Captain Patel and Shin," you said, your words muffled.

Gabriel moved back up the bed, and you felt him hovering over you. He exhaled slowly, one hand on your hip. "It makes me happy to hear you say that. But we both know that you do it anyway."

"Working on it," you said, not looking up from the pillow.

"Same," Gabriel said. He gave a soft sigh. "We're quite a set."

"I'm not insanely overprotective like the two of you," you said, and immediately regretted it.

Jack snorted.

Gabriel just laughed at your obvious lie. "Now, corazon, I've caught you checking the backs of my legs these past few days. It was cute waking up to you peeking under the blankets with that worried face, but it was completely unnecessary." His fingers moved down your thighs, along the backs of your calves and up again. "None of my scars are from DC. You can stop searching. All those wounds were gone by the time you woke up in the hotel for breakfast. They were only
superficial. Emitter and accelerated healing took care of most it. I didn't lie to you."

"OK," you said, voice raspy.

His hands hesitated on your scarred calf. He rubbed it gently. "Now we're going to review what occurred when we stormed that emplacement in the museum," he said. "The initial operation went according to our very hasty plan." He seemed very amused by that. "The three of us did a good job eliminating the hostiles, and more importantly, we didn't get in each other's way. You did well, making precise shots at difficult angles and finding that tripwire. Jack and I would have discovered it, even if you weren't there. But you did it quickly and took care of it efficiently."

You relaxed a little as he rubbed your low back. "Thank you."

He kissed the side of your neck and you stiffened.

"Now, you could have told us you were opening the door, and that is a small protocol violation," Gabriel said, and you winced. "But we were all on alert and could clearly see what you were doing. So it wasn't an issue."

"But the proximity mines-"

"Jack and I wouldn't have expected them there either, and even if we had, there wasn't much we could do to circumvent them with the equipment we had on us," Gabriel said firmly. "On top of the claymore and the turrets, proximity mines were overkill and a waste of ordnance. If we'd had a functioning Athena drone, yes, she could have detected and disarmed them. But we didn't. Whether you were there or not, one of us would have been first through the door, and one of us would have gotten hurt."

You bit your lip.

"It should have been one of us through the door first anyway," Gabriel said. "We all know that Jack and I wear heavier armor than you do and we can take more damage than you can. In the future, on a straight combat run, you let one of us go first."

"I...OK," you said.

" Doesn't apply to your stealthy tricks," he said. "And I am aware that we may need to make other exceptions in the future. I get it. This is a just a guideline. So don't start arguing with me, not unless you really want me to punish you."

"Understood," you murmured, a relieved smile playing on your lips.

"That covers the basics," Gabriel said. "We can discuss it more...in-depth later. But now I've got other things I want to focus on." He squeezed your ass. "Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know, baby, that's Jack's preferred title," Gabriel said, hands kneading your thighs.

"I'm sorry, papi," you said, stifling a moan as he ran a finger along your slit.

"I bet you are," Gabriel rumbled, his chest against your back, his hands cupping your breasts as he began grinding against your ass. He was still wearing pants, though you could feel exactly how excited he was through the fabric. "I like the outfit, it's soft, pretty, and barely covers anything."
"Amélie's recommendation," you said, then realized maybe you shouldn't be talking about other people while he was seducing you.

"Next time let me take you shopping," Gabriel murmured. "Or invite me along. I'll behave. Probably." His playful tone did not reassure you of that at all. But the warmth of his body spread across your back, and he continued teasing you from behind. You weren't going to focus on that conversation right now.

"Oh god." You squirmed, pinned between him and the bed. He didn't put his full weight on you, but you couldn't buck him off. He began kissing the side of your neck, his fingers pinching your nipples while you moaned into the pillow.

"You're dripping all over my pants," Gabriel groaned. "All ready to go again?"

"Please, papi," you clawed at the sheets, whimpering as his teeth grazed your shoulder. "Need you too."

"What do you need, baby girl? Do you need me to wreck that sweet little pussy while Jack watches? Because that's precisely what I'm about to do."

You gave a whine of protest as Gabriel pulled away, leaving you too cold. He laughed as you tried to raise your head, and pushed you back against the mattress. "Gabriel!"

"I told you to lie flat, baby girl. If you're going to disobey me, there really will be consequences," he said, the severity in his voice very convincing. "And I guarantee you won't be sitting right afterward."

You lowered your head, heart beating faster as you heard the rustle of fabric. He was stripping off his pants, you realized. The hot velvety tip of his cock brushed against your folds and you bit the pillow, hands balled into fists at your sides. Your hips jerked as he rubbed himself against your slit.

"Normally, I'd tell you to wrap those pretty lips around Jack's cock, but I don't think he minds sitting this round out. I'll take care of him soon enough. I just want to hear you scream for me this time."

You swore vehemently as he grabbed your hips and thrust inside in one hard motion, his thick shaft filling you too quickly. Your curses cut off into a choked sob and you burrowed deeper into the pillow, trying to remember how to breathe.

Gabriel's words turned into a raw growl, rolled his hips, and drove deeper inside you, stretching your still-sensitive walls. He didn't give you time to catch your breath, he just drew back, the emptiness almost a relief, and slammed back inside you. Your whole body shook from the force of his thrusts.

"Look at her taking me, Jack," Gabriel sounded terribly smug, and you took the moment the catch your breath. "Always so ready and willing. That greedy little hole is just swallowing me up. Can't seem to get enough. Don't worry, baby. Papi will give you all the dick you can handle."

"Jesus, Gabe," Jack groaned, his words breathless and mirroring your own thoughts. But words weren't coming out of your mouth any more, only squeaky gibberish.

"Look how fucking soaked you are," Gabriel said, and began rutting against you once more, his rhythm hard and steady. Each stroke went in smooth, lewd slick sounds echoing in your ears. "Used to worry that I'd tear you in half. But you're always wet enough for me now." He chuckled,
nibbling on the back of your neck. "That tight little cunt grips me so well. You don't want to let me go, do you?" He kissed the spot between your shoulder blades, his mouth hot on your skin.

"Gabriel-" Your voice cracked as you flailed under him, his hard thighs slapping against your ass. You dug your left hand into a pillow, feeling the foam crumple under your metal fingers.

One arm wrapped around your waist, holding you against his body, which was good, because you didn't have the strength to lift yourself and withstand the force of his thrusts. You just tried to ride it out, hips shaking. You could barely wiggle, trapped underneath him. And all the while, the headboard knocked against the wall at a steady pace.

"Look at your cute little ass bounce," Gabriel chuckled, and smacked the tender flesh.

You squealed, your focus just on accommodating Gabriel's girth. He fucked you hard, holding you in place.

"Papi, please-" You begged, though you weren't sure if it was for mercy or for him to go you harder. He seemed to interpret it as the second option.

"She won't be walking right tomorrow," Jack sighed, and he leaned over you. You could hear the wet sounds of kissing.

"You're up next, Jackie, don't worry." Gabriel chuckled, then sat back on his knees, hands squeezing your ass and hips. He hit your cervix every other stroke, and you were writhing under him now, your cries growing louder. One hand slid between your bruised thighs, his calloused fingers giving your clit more delicious friction.

He was relentless. He had an entire op's worth of tension, frustration, and lust built up, and now he was pouring it all into you.

"T-too much," you pled, most of your words incoherent.

"But I want more," he said, kissing your neck and pounding you like both your lives depended on it, his fingers now moving frantically along your folds.

You couldn't last, not at this rate. Your body spasmed around Gabriel's cock, your jaw clenched, eyes squeezed shut so hard that tears smeared your cheeks. You could feel what was left of your discipline unraveling, and you tried to relax, to let the pleasure wash over you, instead of fighting it. The tension would shatter you if you did, and you'd get a leg cramp to boot.

Your walls clamped down around Gabriel's cock, and you bucked your hips, shrieking into the pillow.

"Let me hear you, hermosa," Gabriel demanded, voice hoarse,

Trembling underneath him, your cries turned to ragged moans as your muscles contracted, a pulsing rhythm that Gabriel seemed to have no trouble matching. He purposefully drew it out, hips moving in time with the aftershocks that wracked your body, his fingers still abusing the raw nerves of your clit. He kept pushing you along, though you thought you'd already reached your limit. He dragged it on longer and you screamed, the overstimulation starting to wear on your frazzled nerves. Tension compressed the muscles in your limbs, and they were starting to knot. With your right you hand, you slapped the mattress in desperation, tapping out because you couldn't make your mouth form proper words.

Gabriel immediately froze and took his fingers off your clit. "Hard stop?" He asked,
breathing hard.

You shook your head, trembling as you drew in a few jittery breaths, your throat raw. "Just...needed you to stop winding me up more. Muscles starting to cramp. Give me a second to recover." You wiggled your legs, sighing as Gabriel massaged your calves.

He turned your head to the side and kissed you gently. "Tell me when I can move."

You waited for the spasms to die down, your breathing slowing. Your lips were cracked and your throat too dry, but you kissed him back hard and nodded. "I'm good now. Want you to finish inside me."

"That was the plan." Gabriel began to move again, faster than before, chasing his own release now, the feel of his body agitating your still tender nerves. You shook beneath him, fingers tearing through Jack's pillows.

"Nearly there, baby," Gabriel growled, voice strained. And then he sunk his teeth into your shoulder and you snarled, thrashing as he pumped his hot cum inside you. Your mind blanked briefly, and when you opened your eyes, shredded foam and loose feathers fluttered around your head.

You ached, inside and out. Gabriel very slowly withdrew from you, and you could feel his semen oozing out of your well-fucked pussy. You collapsed against the bed, muscles like wet clay.

Gabriel rolled you onto your back and kissed you hard, his eyes bright, gleeful even. You shuddered as he nuzzled your throat.

"You all right?" He murmured, pushing your sweat soaked hair out of your eyes. "Was that too much for my delicate girl?"

"Shut up," you grumbled and buried your face in his chest.

"You've embarrassed her," Jack chuckled, ruffling your hair.

"How?" Gabriel asked. "I'm not the one who ruined a perfectly good pillow."

You winced as you examined the burst pillow. The stuffing littered the bed, the feathers sticking to your skin and hair. You shoved it onto the floor.

"Sorry. I'll buy you another one," you muttered to Jack.

"Don't worry about it, I'll just rest my head here," he said, and squeezed your breasts.

You groaned, too tired to smack him.

"That was fucking hot, Gabe," Jack said and they shared another kiss, both men lying on either side of you, their hands gentle as they stroked your overheated skin.

"Love you, corazon," Gabriel murmured, pressing sweet kisses all over your face and acting like he hadn't just made you tap out and beg for mercy. "You were so good for me. But next time, I'll tie you up. Less property destruction that way."

You grumbled, not missing that he was already stiffening against your thigh.

"Once more?" He asked, giving you a speculative look.
"I'll die," you said, maybe a smidgeon overdramatic. "Jack should be ready for you though. Put the plug in him myself."

You didn't even see him move. One moment, he was lying next to you, wearing nothing but a smarmy smile. The next, he was on top of Jack, and rolling him across the mattress, pinning the other man on his back.

Jack's delighted laugh made you smile, and you rolled onto your side to watch. Gabriel straddled Jack's stomach, one hand pinning Jack's wrists over his head.

"Lucky's not the only one who acted stupid in DC," Gabriel said, tracing Jack's jawline.

Jack chuckled. "I'm not the one who threatened to feed an FBI agent his "own teeth and my goddamn fist," in front of a crowd of witnesses."

You snorted, having missed that exchange. "You weren't threatening poor Agent Brant, were you?"

"Peters," Gabriel said, glancing over at you. "The asshole who shot you."

You knew the name. Suddenly cold without them cuddling you, you pulled a blanket up around your chest. "Oh, well that's OK then."

Jack gave an exasperated sigh. "You're not mad at me too, are you?"

"Frustrated," Gabriel murmured, nipping Jack's bottom lip. "Lucky's fine backup, but you should have stuck to the plan and kept Genji with you."

"He needed to escort the kid."

"Kid was fine," Gabriel grumbled. "You and Lucky needed a third person."

"That's when you showed up. Impeccable timing, babe," Jack beamed. "And we both know we couldn't send that kid off alone. Maybe I should have sent Lucky instead of Genji."

"Oh no," you said. "I'd be the angry one then."

"See? No pleasing either of you." Jack said. "I had to make an executive decision. And I stand by it."

Gabriel pursed his lips. "Executive decision, huh?"

"Privilege of command," Jack said cheerfully. "You know, because I'm the one in charge."

"You keep telling yourself that, amor," Gabriel laughed, and rolled Jack onto his stomach, already fisting the other man's cock.

Jack rested his head on your chest. Sweaty, drained, and exhausted, you stroked his damp hair, dozing while Gabriel murmured endearments in Jack's ear. He had been even rougher with Jack, savagely plowing him into the mattress while you watched, one of your hands holding Jack's the entire time.

"Still feeling neglected?" You asked.
"Mmm, I could go again," Jack sighed, kissing the skin between your breasts.

You winced, already aching. "I can't."

"Not surprised. Gabe was really worked up. I guess I could have gone first, but you two needed to work out some things."

"What did you tell him earlier?" You asked.

Jack glanced over his shoulder and Gabriel nodded once, his expression suddenly taut and grim.

"We've talked about Kandahar, the incident with the Bastion, and how...badly Gabriel reacted to my injuries. But I know we didn't go into detail."

Gabriel sighed. "It's not a nice story."

"I gathered." You reached over to squeeze Gabriel's hand. "If you're not ready to share it, you don't have to."

"No, it was my mistake, one I've owned and worked hard to correct," Gabriel said, hesitantly. "But Jack can tell it. He does a better job."

"He gets embarrassed." Jack kissed Gabriel's forehead. Gabriel just grunted. "So after that whole debacle with me getting shot up and Gabe beating back the omnis with his bare fists, he dragged me to the infirmary, bitching me out the whole way there. By the time we got there, I had had enough. We really got into it. I was furious that he was overreacting. Gabriel lost his cool. I was classic Idiot Morrison: oblivious and hadn't realize how bad things had gotten. Our...argument came to blows. It was pretty traumatic for everyone."

You watched both men, not sure how much you needed to read between the lines. Jack looked a little sad, Gabriel ashamed. Both men still took their disagreements to the mats, but that was a controlled setting. You suspected there were points when they both threw things or jumped at each other, but maybe this was a lot more violent?

"I swung first. Jack was already injured. There was no excuse," Gabriel murmured, looking away.

"It's not like I curled up in a ball and took it. I gave as good as I got," Jack said. "But after the smoke cleared, metaphorically speaking, nothing actually blew up sweetheart," he added quickly. "We all realized that here was the breaking point. Gabe...wasn't OK. That was when Ana, Gérard, and I insisted that he get help, talk to someone. And he did. We all knew things couldn't go on like that." Jack leaned over and kissed Gabriel's temple. "It was a rough slog, but he was committed. Things got better. Less nightmares. Less...anxiety. More talking things over with me. It took time, but we got through it."

Gabriel clenched his jaw. "I'm not proud of how I acted. I wasn't very easy to get along with back then. Hadn't been quite right after...Dili. It's not an excuse, but I learned from my mistakes. Had to sort myself out and seek healthier outlets. Had to be more honest about my limits, and you know how hard it is to admit any kind of weakness after going so long on your own. Asking for help was even worse. All of it was...an adjustment, but one I needed to make."

You nodded, because you did know exactly what that was like.

"You know Jack and I both skew more aggressive because of what SEP did to our
hormones, but that's not a pass for bad behavior." Gabriel shook his head ruefully. "Jack was OK, but what if it had been Ana or Gérard? With our level of strength, we can't afford a lapse in control."

"After our...unplanned demolition of the infirmary, Gabriel apologized, agreed to get help, and iced my bruises. I wasn't too badly off, and neither was he, but the shock of how quickly and violently the fight escalated really shook us both." Jack sighed, stroking Gabriel cheek. "I...was scared for Gabriel."

Gabriel said nothing, just kissing Jack, his eyes shimmering with guilt.

"We took a catalogue of both our wounds and made awkward jokes that didn't really diffuse the tension. The touching was...a way to ease into the conversation. We don't do get to do it like that very often, because, well, we heal so fast." Jack shrugged.

"Or you're hurt so badly that." Gabriel trailed off. "Never mind."

You reached over and squeezed Gabriel's hand.

"You know I never want to make you feel unsafe. You know there are boundaries I don't want to cross," he said gruffly. And you understood that they were both so conscientious of boundaries and acceptable behavior precisely because they'd had to learn from experience.

"I know," you said, raising his hand to your lips. "I trust you both."

"Good," Gabriel said, his gaze fierce.

Jack reached over and kissed Gabriel's cheek. He then rolled over Gabriel, laughing as the other man protested. He wrapped his arms around Gabriel's waist, hugging him tightly. "It's ancient history, babe. I nearly fucked things up by letting the job come between us. I know it was silly self-absorbed pride at the core of things. And that's a lot less forgivable."

Gabriel managed a crooked smile. "But still forgivable."

"You don't know how happy it makes me to hear that... Actually, I think you do, but don't correct me. You'll just ruin the moment," Jack murmured.

Gabriel valiantly kept his mouth shut, only rolling his eyes once.

"We've all worked hard to do better. Even me." He kissed the nape of Gabriel's neck and you scooted closer, curling up against his chest.

"And...I really appreciate your guidance," you said, because it was true. "I don't think I would have done this well without your support. I'm just sorry you had to go through all that."

"If it helps you, it wasn't for nothing," Gabriel said, exhaling slowly. He embraced you, kissing your forehead as Jack pulled the blankets up.

"I can't move," you rasped, lying facedown between Jack and Gabriel. Yesterday, last night, and this morning had been spent in the bedroom. Your nightgown hadn't survived an energetic round sandwiched between Jack and Gabriel; hell, you were fortunate the lingerie was the only thing they tore apart. In fact, when you had the strength, you were going to have to lift your head
and give them both dirty looks. Because that was the extent of the offensive maneuvers you could muster.

Gabriel ran his hand down your back, kissing the nape of your neck. "So delicate."

You managed to raise your head and give him a bleary-eyed glare.

"Very scary," he said, patting your head. "Though I bet you could use some water." He got out of bed, pulling part of the blanket off you. You grasped at it, yanking it back over your body. "We should have made sure we had some on hand," he said, stretching his arms overhead, before heading out of the bedroom. You might have turned your head just enough to watch his perky ass bounce as he walked.

"I like it when he walks around my room naked," Jack murmured in your ear. "I like it when you do it too," he added cheerfully.

"Not moving," you muttered into the pillow.

"Should've said something," Gabriel said as he returned with a sports drink and unscrewed the lid for you. "You need to stay hydrated."

You took the bottle and drained it one gulp.

"She had a shower last night," Jack said.

"Normal people don't drink in the shower, Jack," Gabriel sighed, and leaned over you to kiss your annoyingly cheerful boyfriend.

"They do if they're thirsty," Jack said, completely unrepentant. "I think there are more of those sandwiches in the fridge. Do you want some?" He asked, nudging your side.

"Yes," you said, feeling a little more human after the drink. You flopped onto your back, not missing the smug looks Gabriel and Jack exchanged, like they were exceptionally proud of how much they could incapacitate you. But then, they were often like this after a mission. All the adrenaline, frustration, and pent-up emotions got channeled into mind-blowing sex. There were worse outlets. You were just cranky from hunger.

Jack got the sandwiches while Gabriel grabbed more drinks. You could probably use another shower. There was an emitter running, and you devoured the sandwiches at a frightening pace.

"That could have been your face," Jack murmured, elbowing Gabriel.

"No, Jack, she would go after you first. You're the reason she has a sore ass."

"She loved it," Jack laughed, giving you a wicked grin. He leaned over your shoulder, opening his mouth like he was going to take a bite of your manchego, prosciutto, and fig jam sandwich. You crammed the entire thing in your mouth, glowering at him.

Gabriel snorted.

Jack just lay across your lap, grinning up at you, not the least bit perturbed by your feral reaction. "You got something right here," he said, tapping the corner of your mouth.

You wiped some of the sticky sweet jam off your face.
"I realize we're all recovering from Black Abacus," Jack began, his eyes darting between you and Gabriel. "But I appreciate you both spending your off day here and spoiling me."

"Where else would I go?" Gabriel murmured, stroking Jack's hair. He tweaked Jack's nose.

"To watch a movie, do some grocery shopping, maybe swing by a bakery," you rattled off, and Jack made a face at you. You laughed. "But I did that all yesterday, before coming to your room."

"You watched a movie?"

"On my tablet, while making your sandwiches," you said. "Not exactly a cinematic experience, but I'll live."

"We missed you too, *amor,*" Gabriel said, kissing Jack's brow. "You should know, we already intended to spend time with you as soon as we got back from the States."

Jack's expression grew silly and satisfied. "I had hoped, but... Black Abacus was rough. I...didn't want to be alone after all that."

"Planned on spending some quality time with you, terrorist attacks or not," you said, squeezing Jack's hand.

"And I guess now I'm just feeling guilty actually taking my post-combat leave, you know? Especially after Black Abacus," Jack muttered. "Of course, you do. You're both terrible at maintaining a good work-life balance. Not that I can point fingers."

You nodded. "Yeah, well, I guess some of us had to learn, the hard way, that you need to take time for self-care. Otherwise, you burn out. It's easier when I have you two reminding me."

"I could say the same thing," Gabriel reclined on his side, propped up on an elbow while he ate another sandwich.

"I know. You two work too hard."

"And you don't?" You narrowed your eyes at Jack.

He shrugged. "I never feel like I get enough done. Yeah, we mitigated that attack on DC, but now we're drafting up a joint counterterrorism agreement with the US government. Sure, I made some reassuring political speeches and PR appearances, but I'm getting pressure from up top to do an extended tour and station more agents in a number of higher-risk urban areas. Yes, we have Kwento on our side now, but we have yet to sit down and talk strategy."

"Yeah, well, that's your own fault. She probably won't be able to look either of you in the eye for at least another week," you said. "And she's definitely never going to want to see me again."

Jack laughed, not looking the least bit bothered. "Fair enough. But that's just the fallout from Black Abacus. I still need to sign off on Ana and Reinhardt's action plan for the Mediterranean situation, and Gérard has submitted so much paperwork I might have to sign off on it en masse if I ever want to get anything else done, and I dread looking for every possible loophole and angle in his mission proposals."

"Athena is getting pretty good at that," you said.

"Noted," Jack said. "And Winston, Torby, and Mihret are all requesting more funding for
R&D, and while their patents are pretty much paying for their departments, we do need to front the money and I have to justify some of that to our civilian managers in professional terms, if only for posterity. For example, Winston invented a peanut butter gun for...reasons I'd rather not think question, but the technology was modified for mass convenience food production and we're not calling it a "peanut butter gun" any more. Marketing has changed that and we need to update all our forms. But then they'll want to talk about other budget shortcomings. The motor pool needs tracking software upgrades. HR needs new computers, though Ana thinks they could go another year and Reinhardt swears we cannot."

"Neither of them work in human resources," you said scratching your head.

"Yes, but they're still in leadership and both of them make valid points. Also, bureaucratically-frustrated Ana is terrifying, and sad Reinhardt is heartbreaking," Jack said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Always side with Ana, even if she's wrong," Gabriel muttered. "But she's never wrong, even when she's wrong."

"And with that kind of advice, you can see how things get complicated," Jack continued. "I also need to review a purchase request for new high altitude dropships, while ensuring the parts are reliably sourced, the supply chain is clean, and double-checking that the emissions don't violate any Swiss environmental regulations. And there are a lot of those. There are a whole slew of unpleasant necessities: budget meetings, regional strategy forecasts, and jurisdictional negotiations. That's all routine bureaucracy: important, but not the actual point of my job. I get it, and I have good admins; I don't do all the research and paperwork on my own, but the mental load is just draining."

You sighed, because Jack's job was kind of your personal nightmare.

"And Michael and Maggie are coming next week for Family Day, which Ainsley has been handling, but there will be a lot of PR obligations. Not that I think greeting agents' families is some kind of chore-"

"...It can be," Gabriel groused.

"But I'll feel guilty the entire time, because I have a lot more operational work to do, and I shouldn't be having fun or enjoying myself, when there are lives on the line," Jack said with a groan.

"How did he get inside our heads?" You asked Gabriel, knowing exactly how he felt, and knowing that Gabriel struggled with that too.

"You of all people know that we can't run indefinitely. We can't measure our success by how much work we have not gotten done. That's a shit metric. We're enhanced, sure," Gabriel said. "But we need downtime. Sometimes we need to just be people. Otherwise, we start to slip. There will never be a good time for us to take a break. There is always a crisis somewhere. But we can only do so much. Sometimes, I need you and Lucky to remind me of that." Gabriel pushed his curls back, shaking his head.

"And you can't do that if you're wrapped up in work too," you said, stroking Jack's cheek. "Gabriel needs a lot of persuading. He's stubborn."

"And if we're both busy, who's going to watch Lucky?" Gabriel asked, shooting you an evil smile. "You know what happens when we leave her unsupervised."
"Mayhem," Jack said, his smile gentle.

"Chaos," Gabriel agreed.

"...I've done all right," you scowled.

Jack coughed, clearing his throat.

Gabriel just raised a brow, his shit-eating grin making your eye twitch.

"I'm not in leadership," you said, deciding to ignore that argument. "I just do regular agent things. My life isn't as stressful."

"Regular agent things, huh? Such delegating and tasking on highly-compartmentalized operations like Shit Spiders?" Jack asked innocently.

"And Blackwatch administrative duties, bodyguarding Jack, teaching troubled rookies, babysitting some Blackwatch's most eccentric agents-" Gabriel continued.

"Are you talking about Hanzo or Lacroix?"

"Yes," Gabriel said. "And Vo, Mihret, Tataryn-"

"Yes," Jack agreed. "You live a stressful life too, sweetheart. Don't downplay it. You need to take time for yourself too."

"I do. I just don't have time for all that stuff you guys think is a big deal outside of Overwatch: houses, kids, ballroom dancing."

"There will never be a good time to learn a new hobby, teach a rookie agent, or adopt a dinosaur. But you need to make time for yourself and do it anyway. Yes, it's a balancing act, and if you're working too hard, it's our job to remind you to take a break and vice versa," Gabriel said. He cupped your face. "If you don't want to think about houses and kids right now, that's OK."

"She wants a big kitchen and a big bathtub," Jack said with a smile. "Everything else is negotiable."

"The master bedroom would have to be extra large. We'd need a walk-in closet with enough space for all of our stuff," Gabriel said thoughtfully. "I mean, we could use a second bedroom." It was probable, given just how many outfits Gabriel owned. "But it wouldn't be fair to make only one person store their items there. Maybe it could be for formalwear, things we don't use on a regular basis..."

"Separate offices though," Jack said, rubbing his chin. "You know, so we'd actually be able to get work done and not get distracted by each other. And lots of bookshelves for you, Gabe."

"Yes. And we'd need some kind of playroom for Isha," Gabriel said. "Something raptor-proof, which is harder than it sounds now that she knows how to get into the ventilation system."

You sat there, thinking very hard about what they were talking about. You pressed your hands together, butterflies trying so very hard to escape your stomach. You didn't remember eating any butterflies, but maybe you'd fallen asleep with your mouth open. "Don't forget enough outdoor space so Jack can have a garden. Or a greenhouse if the climate isn't friendly. Don't know if you want a sewing room, Gabriel. Kind of figured you liked doing that stuff while we watched movies and talked, but you do have a lot of crafting supplies."
There was a moment of silence and you stared very hard at the wall, focusing on calm breathing.

"Yeah," Jack said, his voice husky. "That's a good reminder. I would like a vegetable garden."

"And I would like a sewing room," Gabriel said, his tone gentle. "But it's not a requirement-"

"No, Lucky's right. You should definitely have one," Jack said enthusiastically. He gripped your hands tightly. "Thanks sweetheart, I never would have thought of that. I'd just be tripping over Gabriel's yarn baskets and stepping on his knitting needles for all eternity."

Gabriel leaned over, his forehead pressed against yours, the look in his eyes soft and warm. "Guestroom upstairs or downstairs?"

"If it's upstairs, farthest from our bedroom," Jack said.

"If it's downstairs, definitely not under the master bedroom," you said.

"So maybe a 'guesthouse' farther out on the property?" Gabriel laughed.

"We could built it ourselves," Jack said. "And a treehouse. Oh, let's make the guesthouse a treehouse!"

"Can you imagine Ana coming over to visit and telling her she had to stay in a treehouse with a ropeladder?" Gabriel laughed.

"You'd have to make it nice, you know with electricity and plumbing," you said.

"There's an entire industry devoted to high-tech treehouses. Ana would be annoyed for ten minutes, especially if she didn't realize it was a fully-equipped residence," Gabriel mused, looking very pleased. "But once she was up there she wouldn't want to come down. It'd basically be a luxury suite compared to her usual sniper's nests."

"Fareeha would love it," Jack said, his expression turning thoughtful once more. "Probably wisest to give Ray some space from us if she stops by. I know my siblings would like it. And it would keep Mihret and McCree out from underfoot."

Gabriel blinked, like it hadn't occurred to him that you would invite Ziv over. He nodded then. "I guess it would be best to keep some of our guests at a safe distance." You suddenly had visions of Ziv in the tree, yanking the ladder up quickly while he screamed insults at Gabriel. Maybe he'd throw water balloons and Gabriel would get a hose. You snickered.

"So do we all think a guest treehouse is the best choice?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes," Jack said.

"Sure," you agreed. You managed a lopsided smile, feeling ridiculous about getting all worked up over a theoretical house, and one that wasn't even for you. But then, only an idiot would think this conversation was just about the layout of a house.

Chapter End Notes
PTSD does some weird things to you, things you don't always notice till someone else points out that habit is unhealthy and...maybe you should stop? And then you get snippy with them for the observation, but maybe later on you realize that they might have a point. Anyway, hope that balanced some of the hurt and comfort in Jack and Gabriel's history. This is the therapy fic, where they are trying to make healthy life choices, and yes, I am projecting.

Job interview tomorrow. Researching the field, the company, my interviewer, rewriting interview question answers, and reminding myself that if I bomb it I also applied for another position in the company and I can try again, because I am so bad at this.

Medical bill from before came around. Not fixed. Though I think they might be trying to double bill me. Will call them tomorrow and maybe get a human? Last time I couldn't.

My plan is do more composing/research tomorrow. I've been studying LTL freight terms and freight classification just to brush up on the subject matter.
Chapter 97

Chapter Summary

There's more to operations than just shooting bad guys. Sometimes, you have to play nice with others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"That isn't funny," you told Lacroix. "None of this funny." It didn't stop his laughter. You almost told him to stop laughing, but realized he would just find that more hilarious. So you just sat back in your chair and waited for him to stop snickering.

"I have to agree with Agent Maeda Vargas' assessment," he said, wiping his eyes. "Ainsley Petras is very focused on you, in a way that does remind me of him."

"It's just for show though, right? Like she has a nefarious angle that she's working and-"

"She could be," he agreed. "She could be a deep cover agent, but the abrupt change in tactics and fixations isn't the wisest choice for such an operation; it is not good cover. Also, that's a long-term strategy, and while those of us higher up in Overwatch need to keep an eye out for that sort of thing, you are...less at risk."

You raised a brow, because he meant "not worth the effort."

"You certainly are a rising star within the organization, and perhaps you should be concerned, but my instincts tell me that this to be too sloppy to be an attempt to entrap you."

"I guess that's reassuring," you said, because you respected Lacroix's expertise, if not the man himself.

"I don't need to tell you to keep your guard up though," he continued as if you hadn't spoken at all. "She does talk to her uncle, so don't get comfortable."

"I haven't forgotten."

"I will take a closer look at this when I have time. I appreciate you bringing to my attention. Lacroix folded his hands on his lap and his smile widened. "But that isn't what I wanted to talk about today."

You sighed. "The FBI-"

"The American response is out of our hands," Lacroix said, shaking his head. "They are very eager to sweep that debacle under the rug. You know they've come out and blamed anti-omnic separatists for the attack."

You snorted. It was the "Martel Liberation Front" all over again. Sure, you'd framed that shitty little xenophobic group for Hoffman's assassination in Cologne, so maybe this was karma. But the American government was blaming the "Organic Life Defense League" for the attacks. Not
a whiff of "Talon" in the media." That told you everything you needed to know about how much you could trust the American government. And not just the Americans. Most major news organizations ran that story without question. The fringe media was rife with conspiracy theories, most of which blamed Overwatch in some shape or fashion.

It was different within the intelligence community; Talon was understood to be the funds and the direction behind the Organic Life Defense League. And what was with that name? You'd looked over their manifestos and found that while they hated omnis, cyborgs were tolerated. But their jingoistic rhetoric and bad writing had given you a headache, so you hadn't wasted too much time trying to read their literature.

"We are in the process of vetting and securing allies in the upper echelons of friendly governments, but those kinds of meetings take time. It's especially difficult since certain elements in various governments are determined to block us. Some of it is just political maneuvering: kneejerk fears that we're chipping away at their sovereignty, hesitation to ratify some of omnic peace accords, dislike of globalization, etc. But some elements within the American Department of Defense and the intelligence community have been extremely hostile. Most governments don't like being told their upper management has been infiltrated by a conspiracy of corruption, even if they know it's true."

"I know that," you said with a groan. You took a swig of your coffee. "But diplomat isn't my role."

"Perhaps not, but you can help the process."

"What do you need? Dirt? Intimidation? Some questionable favors?"

"Adaeze would like to talk to you privately."

You rubbed the back of your head. "I uh...is that wise?"

Lacroix cocked his head to the side. "Do you have a problem with her? Because she has been briefed on all of Shit Spiders, and while she has some serious reservations about Blackwatch methods and our close ties to On Sing, she has thrown her lot in with us."

You shrugged. "I don't have a problem with her, so long as she does what we need her to do, which is politicking."

Lacroix raised a brow. "Explain what you mean by that, please."

"Most of you guys in upper management can finesse people pretty well. Gabriel and Jack, you and Amélie, Rein and Captain Amari: you've all got charisma, though some of you have more patience for that bullshit than others. And if we could spare you guys to do that work, we would. But you guys also have to run Overwatch and participate in a variety of specialized activities, usually involving guns and explosions. Kwento's only fucking job is to charm people and social engineer her way through things. She doesn't have to get up at four AM to kill robots or teach new agents which end of the gun to hold." You set your cup down. "She's important, but she's important because she has a job to do, to keep you guys freed up. If she stops doing that job, maybe she's not as important to me."

Lacroix nodded, his smile pleased. "I won't argue with that assessment."

"But I get the feeling she's going to work out just fine. If she spent all that time digging up dirt on me, because she wanted to avenge Nwazue? Then she'll work just as hard to stick it Talon."
By the way, can I go back to my actual name, or-?"

"Best not to right now, Chanceux," Lacroix said. "You can shed identities if necessary. We have a few backup ones for you if it comes to that. But you're well known within the organization as Gabriel's assistant and a promising agent. No point muddying the water now."

"OK," you said. "What do you want me to say?"

"This is a personal chat. I briefed her on your history, as Zenyatta, Jack, and Gabriel all seemed intent on throwing the cat out of the bag."

"The idiom is-"

"I know," Lacroix said. "But they didn't just allow the cat to slip out of the bag. They shook it up, spun it around, and hurled it across the room while loudly announcing its arrival." He looked pleased by that description, and to be honest, he wasn't wrong.

"So, am I just supposed to make her feel better or-?"

"Say whatever you need to say. I want you to clear the air, because Kwento is with us for the duration of Shit Spiders. I know, what am I thinking? How scandalous! But this is one of the few carte blanche cathartic moments I'll give you." Lacroix rolled his eyes upward. "Honestly, I think you'll find Adaeze to be far more amiable than before. You can even show off some of that infamous brutal honesty you're so good at. Just try not to torpedo our alliance," Lacroix said, not actually looking worried at all.

That was a strange permission. Lacroix was "trusting" you to behave within acceptable parameters. You wondered then if you'd lost your edge.

Adaeze Kwento came from a prominent family in Nigeria, though her immediate family had settled in Numbani. She had a slew of letters after her name, designating all kind of certifications and degrees. Most of the family specialized in some kind of tech field; she was the outlier, going into law, business, and diplomacy. But you understood right off the bat that Kwento had a strong grasp on cutting edge technology and the sciences. She wasn't like poor Reinhardt, muddling the programming of his slow cooker or struggling to change the dancing hamster background on his tablet screens.

The point was, she was out of your social, educational, and economic class. Kind of like Amélie, but older and stuffier. You weren't sure if you could have a real conversation with her, and you were even less sure if you wanted to do so.

But she'd worked tirelessly to find justice for Nwazue, for your entire squad really. If you hadn't survived Black Base Delta, she might have been the one carrying on in your stead. She might have been the one to avenge you all, even if she didn't know or particularly care for anyone besides her cousin. The realization was sobering. So you found yourself feeling a little less hostile than you expected. You sat down in the Blackwatch conference room, an Athena drone hovering beside you - Gabriel's stipulation, not your own.

You settled down in your chair, wondering how not to be awkward. You held your travel mug of tea in both hands. The warmth soothed your nerves.

There was a knock and then Kwento entered the room, Oladele and her other surviving
human bodyguard remaining outside. Today she'd gone with an intricately patterned white and brown dress, with gold jewelry and a white gele speckled with copper beads. It was far more formal than you expected, and you briefly glanced down at your Blackwatch office uniform - cargo pants and a Henley - before standing to awkwardly offer your hand.

To your surprise, Kwento smiled wide, and shook your hand firmly. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. What name do you prefer?"

"I'm Lucky Strike," you said dryly. "What other name would I use?" You meant the words to sound flippant, but the question came out too poignant.

Kwento frowned, brows knitting together. "I'm sorry. I know you have to maintain your cover."

"It's no problem, Ambassador," you said.

"Please, call me Adaeze. I am serious, Lucky. We know far too much about each other to use titles."

You were making a weird face, judging by Kwento's extremely polite laugh. She sat down, her bearing regal as she smiled pleasantly at you. She didn't look nervous at all, but then she was an experienced negotiator.

"I wanted to apologize," she said. "I know I gave some half-hearted version in Washington DC, but I owe you a better one."

You blinked. "I...would have done something similar in your shoes," you said, wondering if that was the right way to respond.

She sat there, polite expression frozen on her face.

"I mean, I have done worse for Shit Spiders," you said, and then winced at your own fumbling.

"Gérard gave me, what I assume, is a fairly comprehensive briefing on Shit Spiders," she said, the words coming smoothly off her tongue, like the operation name wasn't totally ridiculous. "And I completely understand the lengths that you have gone to. I am in no position to condemn you. In fact, I have misjudged your character terribly, and I am very sorry."

You rubbed the back of your neck, a little embarrassed by the earnestness of her apology. "Yeah, you did. I mean, to be fair, Lacroix had me on Petras duty, so I can't really blame you."

"I know, but I still feel guilty. This situation is a terrible burden on you."

You shrugged, being no stranger to that.

"He also briefed me on the story of Agent Lao Yue. I...I want to offer her a place in Numbani, if she can ever be safely released. I'm willing to move her parents there too. I know it's too early to make commitments, but we've already offered her mother a highly-coveted civil engineering position within the city, and I'm working at securing her father an offer from the university, all behind the scenes, of course. I'll make sure that they're comfortable, till the day we can reunite them."

You blinked, having not really thought very hard about Lao's family. You winced then, because though you and Valdez didn't have any family, the rest of your squad did, and you'd made
no attempt to check on them, get in contact with them, or anything of the sort. Granted, the you from before was dead, so you couldn't just waltz up and introduce yourself, but you should have at least been keeping tabs on them, Shin's mother especially. You felt queasy then.

"That's really generous," you said.

"She was very fond of Agent Lao," Kwento said, her voice soft. "I know she could be standoffish at times, but Chibundo had a good heart."

"Lao was the baby," you said, because even Nwazue went easy on her.

"She liked you too," Kwento said, looking up, her expression serious. "She thought you were ridiculous, and sometimes told funny stories about you, but that wasn't out of malice."

You managed a lopsided smile. "That's what I want to believe." You held your travel mug in your hands, focusing on the heat warming your palms.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" She asked. "Because I have treated you unfairly, and also because Chibundo would have wanted me to help you."

You shrugged. "You're supporting us in Shit Spiders. Your delegation is allying with us and is actively against Talon. I mean, that's basically the outcome I was hoping for."

"For you, Lucky. Not Overwatch."

You shrugged, because you had no idea what Kwento could do for you. "You're willing to help out Lao. I'm not really-" You stopped then, realizing that this was her way of smoothing things over with Gabriel and Jack. "Don't worry about the Commanders. They've calmed down and-"

"Gérard said you'd be this way," Kwento said, shaking her head. "I owe you a great deal for what you've already done. I would also like to help you out, because that's what Chibundo would have wanted. My business with Strike Commander Morrison and Blackwatch Commander Reyes is independent of that. Speaking of which, you are...not in an uncomfortable situation with both of them?" She watched you, eyes sharp and speculative.

"...I mean, I don't like everyone knowing about my personal life," you muttered. "But I'm happy with them. I'm here because I want to be. There's no coercion."

Kwento's smile widened. "Well, I can recommend several venues for formal occasions and know of quite a few out-of-the-way relaxation spots, should you wish to take your relationship to a more formal level."

You stared blankly at her.

"I mean, your relationship seems very serious. By all accounts, they are very attached to you," Kwento said, giving you pointed look. "Polyandry is not as uncommon as you may think. The Maasai practice it, and it is a well-known tradition in the Himalayan region."

It clicked then. She was talking about marriage.

You began to laugh nervously. "I uh...wow. That's uh... Well, you see..." You rested your forehead against your hand. "So I work a lot. I uh...haven't really discussed that kind of thing with them just yet. I just got a pet, last month. First one I've had in...years. I'm kind of lagging behind on the domestic stuff."
"Chibundo described your...courtship with Lieutenant Sato in a similar manner. Yes, the attraction and the affection were obvious, but she would often complain that long sermons are not needed for evening services." Kwento nodded, like she completely agreed.

"...I'm not entirely sure what that means," you said, a little disturbed that Nwazue wrote home about your relationship with Shin. In retrospect, it was probably one of the more entertaining things to happen at Black Base Delta, but the thought perturbed you. How would those letters even go?

_Dearest family, it is with great frustration and dismay that I must relate to you the romantic mishaps of the dense and ever-floundering Lucky Strike, who is, as you must have realized from my previous missives, the squad idiot..._

Kwento cleared her throat. "It means that you beat around the bush in romance, especially in situations where such caution is completely unnecessary," she said, looking very amused. "She found it equal parts hilarious and frustrating."

You'd heard that before, from Jesse and others. Shaking your head, you decided you did not know Kwento well enough to enjoy this discussion. "I've heard it from many people and I'm working on it. But honestly we have bigger problems than my stunted emotions." You gave Kwento a sharp look. "Richard Prince and other factions in Talon want you out of the picture. We have worked very hard to keep you alive, and we want you to stay that way. You can do me a favor and keep your head down."

Kwento frowned, like you were being rude, and you probably were.

"Gérard didn't tell you? I have been assigned Epsilon Squad as a bodyguard unit, in conjunction with the bodyguards my cousin's firm provides. As a formality I have rented a residence in Geneva, but I will be spending a lot of time here in Zurich, using my civilian connections to help with Shit Spiders. My cover is improving omnic-human relations, which of course I will also be focusing on."

"Oh," you said, a little dumbly. "That's...good." You weren't sure if you sounded sincere. But you hoped so.

"The climate is not to my taste, the people are unfriendly, and the food is bland, but such are the requirements of the job. I will be able to visit. Perhaps one day I will be cleared to see Agent Lao." Kwento looked almost wistful, and you wondered what Chibundo had put in her letters, or perhaps those letters were Kwento's only lifeline to her cousin.

It didn't bother you that Kwento only felt a connection to you through her dead cousin. Grief did funny things to the brain. You didn't begrudge her that, though you weren't exactly comfortable with the obligation she felt toward you.

You pulled the datastick out of your pocket and slid it across the table.

Kwento raised a brow.

"When we recovered some of the backup data from Black Base Delta, I found a cache of pictures of our squad. There aren't a lot, but there are some of your cousin in there. Lao took most of the photographs." You had not included the ones taken with you, but there weren't many with Nwazue and you sharing any space. So it was fine.

Kwento sat there a moment, her eyes misty. "Thank you."
You didn't do the work, that was Lao. But you said "you're welcome," anyway. Because it was the polite thing to do.

You sat at your desk, drinking lapsong souchang spiked with some of Gabriel's scotch, nodding politely at Ainsley's slideshow presentation. It was an abbreviated timeline of your career, because she wasn't cleared for half of it. She included suggestions about how you could further advance yourself, comments about everything from your attire to your mission selection, and even deluxe business card designs with samples. On top of that, she'd made charts, graphs, animations, and color-coded each section. An Athena drone hovered in the corner, recording the whole damn thing, so others would have to suffer through this too. That singular sense of schadenfreude gave you a measure of comfort, though that could have just been the really expensive scotch.

Ainsley stood in front of your desk, her tablet projecting a the slideshow into the air. She'd worn another suit, modeled after the Assassin Butler, this time with red trim. It wasn't quite like yours, but the similarities were clear enough. And you were itching to know where she was getting these outfits.

"In conclusion, I think you are definitely on the right track: your name appears on several high-profile cases, internal files only, of course. You have been seen in the public eye working with the Strike Commander numerous times. You have a good record, at least the things I can see. And you're smart, determined, and kickass." Ainsley nodded vigorously, a delighted smile on her face. "I think you'd be a shoe-in for Blackwatch Commander."

You blinked, then set your cup down. "I...what?"

"My uncle said you wanted to be the director of Blackwatch," Ainsley said, looking pleased with herself. "And I know you could do it."

Your stomach dropped and you gritted your teeth.

"Ms. Strike. Can I call you Lucky?"

You nodded, taking a deep breath, and waiting for the pitch.

"There is no shame in being ambitious. It's a hard world. I know that doesn't mean much coming from me," she paused, sounding a little uncomfortable. "But you shouldn't be embarrassed that you want to be in leadership. If anything, you should stop being so modest. You're just holding yourself back."

"When did your uncle mention that to you?" You asked, raising your gaze to her cheerful face. Because this wasn't the first time she'd mentioned the position to you.

"Right before I came back," she said earnestly. "Said I should keep an eye on you because you were on the fast track to being promoted. He wanted my opinion on your capabilities. Don't worry, Lucky. I haven't submitted my observations yet. I wanted to run them by you first. I wouldn't do anything like that behind your back." She clapped her hands together. "I'm just so excited. You deserve more recognition."

You took another gulp of tea, wondering how you were supposed to respond. Was Ainsley finally showing her true colors as a witting Petras pawn? Or was she just that ridiculous?

"I see," you said. "I...am interested in the position further down the road, but I have no
problem with Commander Reyes' leadership and am not seeking to oust him."

"Oh." Ainsley put one hand over her mouth. Her nails were painted a pleasant neutral color, and trimmed short, rather modest considering some of the manicures you'd seen her with in the past. "I wasn't implying that you were doing anything like that." She shook her head. "I uh...that would be awkward, wouldn't it?" She looked around, as if she was only now remembering that this was his office. "I can see why you would want to be discrete."

You sighed. "Ainsley, I appreciate the effort you put into this. It's very thorough. I've never had anyone lay out my career path in such a meticulous and orderly fashion. It's very flattering."

She pulled up a chair, shoulders drooping. "But I misread the situation, didn't I?"

You sipped your tea, watching her tuck her hair behind her ear and bite her lip. "A little. You never tell your higher-ups that you don't want a promotion," you said, purposefully keeping your reference to your one unpleasant direct conversation with Director Petras very vague.

Ainsley ran her fingers through her short blonde hair. "No, I think I only heard what I wanted to. My...therapist says I do that too," she murmured, not looking up.

"I'm told that I keep my cards very close to my chest," you said, trying to be polite. "I'm not a fan of politics and schmoozing."

"I understand," Ainsley said. "My uncle is the director. You're going to be careful what you say to him and...to me. I just thought if you were the Commander, maybe we could be a team. Like I could be your assistant. Not like I am for the Strike Commander. He's so formal. You seem more laidback, friendly even." She gave you a weak smile. "And you're kind. I guess I never really paid attention to that before. You know, people are nice to me because of my looks and my status. And you made it pretty clear early on that those things didn't matter to you. But when I was having a hard time, you were nice to me anyway. You would have done it for anyone, because it was the right thing to do. I didn't exactly appreciate that back then. But I do now."

You took another sip of your drink, pondering your options. If she was an actress, she was damn good, and now you were kind of hoping that Ainsley Petras was actually an evil mastermind. Because if she was being sincere, you were in trouble.

"Was that too much?" She asked, and you realized that you'd been quiet for too long.

"No, I was just thinking on...how far you've come," you said. "Look, if you want to help out, we need your expertise as a politics and public relations person. Yes, we have contractors and a PR department, but they don't have as firm a grasp on daily operations. You do, and you are very good at public relations. I've seen you handle reporters. I can't do that." Well, you had a different way of handling nosy pushy folks with too many questions, but that wouldn't look good on camera.

"I know, but I want to do more."

"If you want to start writing up reports on reactions to public relations outreach, political goodwill, or potential hostile UN resolutions, I'd be happy to read them," you said, wondering if you were overplaying your hand. "Your research is thorough and your writing is concise and well-presented. And you come from a civilian background, which gives you insight that the military analysts always miss. You have a knack for that kind of thing. But I don't want to make more work for you-"

"No, it's fine. The new virtual assistant does a lot of my old job," Ainsley said, sounding a
little embarrassed. "I feel like I'm not doing enough." She didn't look at the drone in the corner. "The Strike Commander hasn't complained or anything. In fact, he seems a lot more relaxed now. But I want to be useful."

"As long as you're getting your work done, I don't think he'll care," you said, though you resolved to run this suggestion by both Jack and Lacroix afterward. "I'd start with an analysis of the public response to Overwatch's involvement in the DC attacks, and go from there."

Ainsley nodded enthusiastically. "Of course, that's a great idea."

You watched her pack up and go, and wondered just whose side Ainsley Petras thought she was on.

They arrived separately, the blonde CIA spook first, his demeanor cool and polite, but something about him, the round smoke-colored glasses, the cut of his suit, maybe the tightness of his smile, screamed "DOUCHE." No matter, you weren't working with him for his personality.

The NSA "Silent Sister" was next. She came dressed in a parka, with no hint as to where she'd been before this visit. She shed the cold weather clothes, wearing a muted berry-colored Nehru suit and soft gray kidskin gloves. She wore her long dark hair in complicated braid, and while her skin was a lovely shade of bronze, you had no idea about her origins. Was she a wandering time traveler? A heretical saint? Some goddess of small and bloody things walking the earth? You couldn't tell, but you would have believed any of those backgrounds to be true.

You were a little too scared to ask if the title was a literal thing. She didn't speak. She just smiled like she knew all your secrets and found them to be quaint, even the bloody ones. You escorted her to the conference room, finding her presence both soothing and terrifying in equal measures.

Senator Armstrong arrived next. He was an older African American man, his hair a distinguished shade of steel. He wore a dapper pinstripe suit with a fuchsia boutonniere. Lacroix personally escorted him to the conference room, the two chatting about some new art installation in Atlanta. He had an entourage of half a dozen people that followed, though Lacroix was going to drop them off with Amélie. You weren't sure if that was for their own protection or if she was just going to milk them for information. Either way, they didn't get to sit in on this meeting.

You and Jesse waited in the docking bay, trying not to look smug as a certain redheaded FBI agent disembarked from Armstrong’s transport. You heard he was "technically" not supposed to come, not that that would stop him. He kept gawking, his eyes wide as he tried to take in his surroundings. He was dressed down in a polo shirt and khakis and looked even less like a federal agent than before. You were more inclined to believe that he was a kid playing hooky from his prep school.

"Agent Strike!" He grinned when he saw you. "And Agent McCree!" His smile faltered a little. "You know, both of you are the talk of the Bureau. Total scandals for completely different reasons."

Jesse snorted.

"McCree is the one that got away," Brant said.

You elbowed Jesse. "Someone's got a fanclub."
Jesse shrugged, a wry grin on his face. "Aw shucks," he said, his innocent act not the least bit convincing.

"And you're the one that never should have been in the line of fire to begin with," Brant said, voice subdued. "The brass is terrified you'll release the footage of the shooting just to spite them."

"Can't say that thought hasn't crossed my mind," you grinned at Jesse. "Especially if they continue to bother my very good friend here."

"Or I might do it myself," Jesse said. "Get Ziv to set it to music. Remix it a few times. Maybe add sound effects."

"Uh...Agent Mihret is going to be at this meeting, isn't he?" Brant laughed nervously, looking extremely uncomfortable.

"Of course he is. He's one of our best technicians," Jesse said cheerfully. "But don't worry, we'll protect you. You're our guest, and we take better care of our guests than the feebs," Jesse smirked. "Anyway, Mihret's the one we set on door-to-door salesmen, proselytizers, and politicians."

The three of you walked down the hall, Brant in the middle.

"We have better food than you too," you said. "Like way better. You can get some after the meeting."

Brant rubbed the back of his neck. "Just out of curiosity, are you planning to release the footage? I mean, that's your call, but I'd like a heads up."

"You know, I'm still making up my mind," you lied, because you did not need the media scrutiny and Lacroix wasn't going to embarrass the FBI, yet. "If they're worried, your higher-ups should send you to talk me out of it," you laughed. "Bring cake."

Brant sighed, shaking his head. "I'm not even supposed to be here, though the Senator picked me up on the way out. Otherwise I would have had to sneak out of the country, and that would have been a nuisance."

You raised a brow. "Don't you have access to high level fake IDs?"

"I'm a profiler," he scowled at you. "Serial killers, remember? Not international intrigue!"

"But it's fun, right? Less mommy issues and more "holy fuck, who let that crazycake run anything larger than a popsicle stand?" You grinned at him, noting that he didn't actually deny having access to good fake IDs.

"The body count is higher, that's for sure," Brant said, shaking his head. "I'm...adjusting. I kind of just feel like a fish out of water."

"Choking and gasping for breath? Because that could be an allergic reaction," Jesse said, winking.

Brant shook his head. "I'm behind the learning curve. This is pretty far removed from my specialty. That's partially the reason the Bureau says they don't want me working this." He said that last part reluctantly, because it was clear that was the only legitimate reason they had to hold him back. But honestly? That wasn't good enough.
"I bet Lacroix would make that a condition. We don't talk to anyone, except Agent Gingerbread Brant," you said.

"I thought it was Carrot Cake," Jesse said, a shit-eating grin on his face.


"Whatever," you shrugged, winking at him. Because annoyed Agent Brant was adorably hilarious, and making fun of him would make him less nervous about being around Gabriel and Ziv.

"Is your middle name "Rick?" Because if it is-" Jesse began to laugh.

"I put my career on the line, snuck out of the country, and came to Zurich for this?" Brant rolled his eyes upward.

"You know, I figured you'd get a promotion or something. Between the interagency life preserver you threw them, the civilian rescues, and all those jewels you returned, you're due some rewards."

"Oh, I look great on paper," Brant said, giving you the side eye. "I'm up for several commendations, and I got a nice raise. But they're trying to shuffle me off to the sidelines. I've embarrassed some people, even if we did give them a face-saving measure. And they're afraid I'm going rogue."

"Aren't you?" Jesse asked innocently. "I mean, you hitched a ride with a senator to a super secret meeting called to handle a high level conspiracy that spans several international agencies and governments."

"And you're hanging out with a couple of criminal Blackwatch degenerates. Just you wait. Give us a few weeks and you'll be conducting counterterrorism raids like a pro, while telling the brass exactly where they can stuff their rules. We'll even get you a bigger gun."

Brant groaned as he covered both ears. "Stop tempting me, Satan."

You and Jesse just laughed even harder.

The Blackwatch conference room was packed. Jack, Gabriel, Ana, and Reinhardt sat at the head of the table, with Lacroix and Ziv handling most of the presentation. An Athena drone hovered in the corner. The newly-confirmed UN Undersecretary Kwento sat beside Senator Armstrong, the two chatting amiably. Lacroix's American allies were seated on the other side of Armstrong. To your surprise, General Singh and Captain DeVevo were there as well. The sniper winked at Jesse. You waved back. Lieutenant Jemison had a seat on the other side of the table and Genji and Hanzo next to her. You and Jesse headed over, Brant following you.

"Aren't you just a doll, Wendy?" General Singh grinned at you cockily, despite being the shortest man at the table. "You're so cute when you're not trying to be a ninja. Bet you look real nice in a dress."

"With all due respect, fuck off, General," you said cheerfully.

The room fell awkwardly silent, even as General Singh began to laugh, slapping his knees.
"That's how you do it, Vashtai. "With all due respect..." Ha! That was double fuck you very much!" He grinned at Captain DeVevo, and she just rolled her eyes, a faint smile on her lips. "Reyes sure knows how to pick'em."

"Military diplomacy," Kwento said to Armstrong. "Is its own highly counterintuitive branch of study."

"I am a fan of unorthodox strategies," Armstrong said, looking slightly amused by the exchange.

Gabriel smirked at you, but Lacroix gave you a sharp look. You sat back in your seat, getting a similar glare of disapproval from Hanzo.

"Relax," you told him. "That's what he told us to say if he was out of line."

"He did," Jesse said with a sincere nod. "I was there."

Genji was grinning behind his faceplate, you just knew by the crinkle of his eyes. But he didn't comment.

Hanzo just shook his head. "This is serious business. Treat it as such."

Brant looked a little green around the edges, his eyes darting between all the important people in the room. Jack, no, right now he was the Strike Commander, sat at the head of the table, his face all business. Captain Amari was on his right, Gabriel on his left. Reinhardt laughed at something Lieutenant Jemison said, shaking his head.

You didn't miss how the Silent Sister nodded at Brant, just like the CIA Douche pretended he wasn't there.

Lacroix cleared his throat. "I would like to thank you for coming today. If you're here, then you are already aware of the extensive cover-up the American government has pushed through regarding the events in DC last week."

The mood in the room sobered considerably.

"While we can't attribute all of that to a malicious conspiracy, we are plenty aware of high-level betrayal within their sovereign government." Lacroix had everyone's attention, and he began with the details he had compiled.

Washington DC had a strict no fly-over rule. But the cyborgs had been able to land small stealthed craft containing OR-14s onto two rooftops. Only two vehicles had gotten through, the rest of the attackers had come in with conventional transportation. But Lacroix had the somehow procured air traffic control logs, and the investigation was ongoing.

Each surviving intelligence community member had submitted their own report about which higher-ups had blocked their attempts to reach out to other agencies, as well as suspicious behavior within their own departments. Lacroix named names and displayed an organizational chart showing just how high up the obstruction went. In some places, it was pretty close to the top.

Lacroix also provided the transcript of Special Traitor Peters' interrogation, and you were just a little disappointed that he hadn't been allowed to hurt the guy. He didn't give up much that was new to you, and it seemed everyone agreed he was a fairly low-level pawn in the grand scheme of things. But he was a pawn who'd almost shot Jack. He wasn't walking away from this.
There were memos from DC politicians and presidential cabinet members, pursuing hostile angles and trying to push the blame onto everyone else, especially Overwatch. They were asking a lot of questions too. Why were there unsupervised armed Overwatch agents in the capital? Could they have done this? Which agencies were monitoring the Overwatch presence? It was unlikely anything would come from most of their inquiries, unless someone tried to fabricate evidence, but it was good to be aware of the danger.

Director Petras had claimed it was a shame the Strike Commander couldn't do more, while taking the US government to task for not giving Overwatch more resources to operate. It was a shitty trick: throw Jack under the bus, while strengthening his own position. But it hadn't worked out so well. Jack's approval ratings were still high, especially in light of little Du from Beechwood Elementary, telling every reporter who would listen how the Strike Commander, the Superhero, and the pretty FBI lady had saved her from the terrorists. Her teacher and classmates corroborated your involvement in the story. People were still looking for the "pretty FBI lady," but the FBI was keeping a tight lid on that story, neither confirming nor denying that this mysterious agent worked for them. But it was obvious that they were reluctant to give up the good press. You almost hoped they would produce a ringer; if they did you might have to show up and shred their story, one massive plot hole at a time.

Lacroix went on to cover the meteoric rise of Luminescent Holdings and the close family link between Amara Korpal and the Vishkar Korpals, whose clan allied with Talon. He speculated on the escape of Richard Prince, and his ties to Anh Nguyen.

The Shimada brothers had managed to trace the extremely convoluted flow of money through offshore accounts, Swiss banks, blockchain currency, and a myriad of other roundabout routes. Before the attack, the analysts had been tipped off by the large amounts of money being moved around. But that had been only a fraction of the money used to finance the catastrophe. Genji and Hanzo were digging up more sources as they investigated.

On a side note, you were really going to have to ask Genji to help you invest for retirement, provided you lived that long. Actually, Hanzo might be good at that too. Investing for retirement seemed exactly the kind of boring shit he'd be into.

Lacroix also gave a quick presentation on the Organic Life Defense League, and its troubled anti-government roots. While the members were religious extremists, homegrown terrorists, and batshit insane, they didn't have the skill to plan this level of attack, something that became readily apparent when you read their manifestos. They didn't even have the skill to use spell-check. No, the US government wouldn't be able to fool the public for very long, not without instituting some insidious gag orders. You wondered if Lacroix was grooming a particular press organization for the leak.

After Lacroix presented the less-classified sum of Overwatch's findings, the guests around the table each added to the pool of information.

Armstrong had names, ranks, and political affiliations for two dozen people involved in the cover-up. He also named a few more civilians - PAC donors, corporate sponsors, and other special interest lobbyists who might be involved.

The CIA Douche, who just went by "Hopper," had an updated route of Talon shipping routes and ports of call. He also had been tracking Nguyen, something Lacroix and Athena were doing as well. Though he was privy to details they'd missed: namely three days ago, Nguyen had slipped out of an IMF meeting in Nice, France to Monaco for a very quick visit to a familiar casino. There were pictures of her speaking to Maximilien, the dapper omnic.
You really needed to pay him a visit.

General Singh gave you an update on the prisoners that had been taken, not including Special Agent Peters. The cyborgs literally weren't talking, and had lapsed into a vegetative state. The attending physicians suspected some had suffered some kind of neural overload, intentionally-triggered by the architects of the attack.

Captain DeVevo had been part of a team that might have accidentally ended up in the Caribbean, tracking a surviving cyborg who had not yet been fried. He wasn't in great shape, but she had full confidence that a certain Lieutenant Salazar could charm some answers out of him, possibly with a knife, maybe some military-grade cake. She winked at you, and you didn't miss Gabriel's frown. You winked back anyway.

Poor Brant gave an embarrassed update about FBI politics and how he had been stonewalled. But no one here questioned his involvement in the investigation. Baby face or not, Brant had earned his right to sit at the table. Armstrong said he would see what he could do, his expression thunderous throughout the entire explanation on Brant's sidelining.

But it was the NSA Silent Sister who had the most interesting development. Apparently, she could talk, and she had a wonderfully melodic voice. Her name was Nikita, and she had found Richard Prince. She played a video of him strolling along on a boardwalk in some backwater village in southeast England. You recognized him immediately. He was a big man, with broad shoulders, a shaved head, and two massive metal arms.

According to her sources, he was still there, lying low, and wouldn't you like to go get him?

You and Jesse exchanged unpleasant smiles, while Genji raised his brow at you and Hanzo gave you a sideways look.

Oh, you would love to go get him. And you even had volunteers.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the late update, was watching stuff with people and lost track of time. Work is getting increasingly nightmarish, BUT my interview went well, I think, and I'll hear back this week about whether or not this company wants to hire me. It's a data entry position, and second shift, but the pay is way better than what I have now, and the manager seemed to like me? IDK. I'm very hopeful. Thanks for the good wishes guys.

We're coming up on the one year anniversary and I'm kind of shocked. I'm also really unsure of how this word count is going to go.
Chapter 98

Chapter Summary

All in a day's work.

Chapter Notes

So, I know the story was actually posted 10/22, but I began work on IAL October 11, 2017.

Drafts are now past 750k.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Did...that person just glare at us and shut their blinds?" Jesse asked, scratching his head. "We were just walking by. Looking normal." Jesse looked at you. "Am I missing something?"

"Beats me," you said, adjusting the comm unit in your hair. "Any thoughts, Tintin?"

Lacroix snorted, his disdain clear over the comm channel. "Small town Englishmen don't like new things. Or foreign things. And definitely not new foreign things. Also you don't smell like stale beer, drudgery, and that peculiar emotional malaise that they are all born with, so they know you don't belong."

You blinked, a little taken back by his vitriol.

"Well," Jesse said. "That makes this an odd place for Prince to hang out."

"I thought so too," Lacroix said, slowly. "Keep your eyes open, Madeline, Paddington."

You shook your head, really wondering about Lacroix's codenaming practices. Jesse just wrinkled his nose and adjusted his raincoat. The two of you were in drab rural clothes, lots of grays and navy blues, sensible shoes, nothing too flashy.

"How big of a trap do you think it is?" You asked, glancing at the rooftops. None of the buildings were over three stories here, some of them dating back easily over a few hundred years. You understood preserving nice things for centuries. But this town in East Anglia was not one of those things.

"Big enough," Jesse muttered, and the two of you ducked into a Tesco to pick up some snacks.

You would not accuse the clerk of being friendly, but you needed caffeine and sugar, so you put up with the resentful stares, starting to wonder if the whole town was somehow in on this. What if they were all cyborg killers? Boring rural-looking cyborgs? You eyed the clerk suspiciously, but she'd already turned her head and was pretending to read a magazine so she didn't have to talk to you.
Shaking your head, you took your coffee drinks and prepackaged cookies, and headed toward the beach. It wasn't an inviting beach with sunshine, sexy bathing suits, or people having fun. There wasn't sand, only discolored gravel and choppy gray waves. There were plaques commemorating the war dead, though you weren't entirely sure which war. Shaking your head, you opened your cookies and nibbled at them, noticing the sharp interest the sea gulls took in your food.

"It's like a horror movie," Jesse murmured in your ear. "You think they plan on sacrificing us to their dark gods?"

"I think there's a high probability of that," you said, staring at the unfriendly sea. "Save us each a bullet, just in case."

Jesse snorted. "We can take this whole town if we need to, sweetpea."

"Yeah, but why would we want it?" You muttered.

"I think it's perfectly respectable," Hanzo said over the comms. "It's very quaint, picturesque even."

"That's because you're not interacting with the locals, Babar," you said, rolling your eyes.

"You're as much a foreigner as me," Jesse said with a laugh. "And they don't look too kindly on foreigners here."

"My brother romanticizes small town life," Genji said. "He views it as idyllic and charming." Genji's dry tone further implied, "And isn't he boring and terribly wrong?"

You laughed, strolling around the boardwalk, where Prince had been sighted two days ago. It was pretty clear you couldn't really ask the townsfolk for any help. You were going in fairly blind, though there were discrete Athena bug-cams flying around, taking in the lay of the land.

"So, if you were going to settle down," Jesse began, turning off the mic on his comm unit. "Would it be somewhere like this?"

You shrugged. "I hope not."

"You like big city life more? Desert skies? Mountain air? Ocean breeze?"

You shrugged again. "Going to need trees. Big sturdy trees."

Jesse scratched his head, and then had to adjust his knit cap. "You like trees?"

"Guest treehouse," you said. "Figured you and Genji might like it. Ziv would bitch at first, but I think he'd really enjoy it too."

Jesse snorted. "You going to live in a treehouse too?"

"Nah, Jack and Gabriel want a real house, with big rooms," you said, feeling awkward mentioning this to someone else. You stared up at the gray sky. "Sewing room for Gabriel, garden for Jack, playroom for Isha." You bit your lip, wondering if you should be sharing this with anyone.

"And probably a big ole gym," Jesse said, shaking his head. "The boss has an insane workout routine."
You nodded. Jack did too. You'd tried, on several occasions, to keep up with them, but you couldn't match their core strength or endurance.

"So I'm invited over?"

"Of course," you said, rolling your eyes.

"Because sometimes I get the feeling the Strike Commander doesn't approve of me-"

You shrugged. "You do like needling him. But what's that got to do with anything? You'd be my guest, and you get to stay in the treehouse."

"Invite Ziv and you'll make both their heads explode."

"I don't mind inviting Ziv, but you'll be sharing the treehouse with him."

"Oh no, forget I said anything," Jesse groaned, though his smile took up half his face.

You were halfway back to the hotel when your comm crackled to life.

"Prince has an old girlfriend here. She was a Royal Marine turned mercenary," Lacroix said. "We have surveillance on her house. Lights are off. No one's picking up any calls, and there's no active net connection that we can find."

You glanced at Jesse. He was frowning, hands playing at his belt.

"Too easy," Jesse muttered. "Prince is no amateur. He wouldn't go somewhere that could be linked back to him. Why would he hole up at an ex-girlfriend's place?"

"Was their relationship common knowledge?" You asked.

"No," Lacroix said. "But Paddington is correct." There was a long pause. "Lieutenant Ranya Chokshi hasn't been to work in three days. This is her parents' residence. Her parents' grocery shop has been closed since last week."

"Hostage situation?" Jesse mused.

"No, they're dead," you said, recalling the thoroughness of Prince's DC attack. "Or close to it."

"There have been several assault and battery charges in Prince's past," Lacroix said. "Some of those were for domestic abuse and violating restraining orders."

"You think he's still in the house?"

"Did he come back here to settle a score? Or did something else go wrong?" Jesse mused. "What are we walking into?"

"Hold on," Lacroix said. "Brant might have some insight. He is a profiler after all."

You and Jesse returned to your hotel room, intent on changing out of your drab local wear. There was no point trying to blend in. The locals recognized that you weren't one of them. Just like they would recognize Prince wasn't one of them. You pulled up a map. There was a local pub three
blocks away. The beginnings of an idea formed. You changed into a tight red t-shirt and jeans.

You pulled up a summary on Ranya Chokshi. Her parents had lived here over a decade. She'd joined the military straight out of school. You had a passable RP accent when you tried, but that might sound too posh here. You could brush up on your Estuary accent, but you weren't sure if you could pull it off indefinitely, so you'd have to make this quick. England had a ridiculous number of regional dialects and people seemed to know immediately if you weren't from their particular patch of village.

Jesse raised a brow. "What are you thinking about?"

"Having a pint on my own," you said, testing the accent. It wasn't full on cockney, but it dropped some of the "t" sounds.

Jesse frowned.

"Too much?"

"You won't be mistaken for a local, but it might work," he said gracefully not commenting on the authenticity, not that he could. You'd heard his Italian accent before and it was atrocious.

"What's your plan?"

So you told him, practicing your working class accent, the entire time.

You sat down alone at the bar. It was an old building, all wood and dim lighting that had seen better days decades ago. There was some football paraphernalia on the wall, it seemed more like a half-hearted attempt at decorating than true sports fanaticism.

The chatter stopped when you walked in, and remained awkwardly silent even as you sat down.

It took the bartender almost ten minutes to reluctantly come over to you, though the pub was by no means busy.

He was an older man, liver-spotted and frowning, with only wisps of hair to warm the top of his head. He just stared blankly at you.

"A pint of lager and a packet of crisps," you said, sliding your money across the bar. "And have one on me." It wasn't an outrageous bribe, just enough of a tip to get the barman's interest, but he gave you a long slow blink, before taking your money and walking away.

You waited another ten minutes for him to return with a room temperature beer and an expired bag of potato chips. Apparently, he thought if he was slow enough, you'd walk out. They were "gammon" flavored chips, which you'd just take back for Jesse. Expiration dates were just suggestions after all. You took a drink of the beer and were not impressed.

The barman turned away, obviously not liking being seen with you.

"I came down to visit my old lieutenant. Ranya Chokshi. Her parents have a shop on the high street," you said, trying to sound casual.
The barman stopped, grunted, and looked at you for the first time.

"But it's been closed since I got here," you said.

He shrugged, still not keen on continuing this conversation.

"Have to admit, I'm concerned," you said, lowering your voice. "She has an old boyfriend, an American, that's been bothering her. They didn't part on good terms. He damn near kicked her dog to death," you said, unsure if domestic violence would be taken seriously here. But everyone loved dogs.

The barman's mouth flattened. "Bastard."

"She didn't want to see him again. But heard he suddenly showed up, and some of us came to check up on her. Now she's not answering her mobile." You weren't sure if your accent was convincing, but everyone was listening.

There was a pause.

"Big, unfriendly, metal arms?" One of the men at a table asked, cap pulled low over his eyes.

You nodded. "That's him."

"Wind your neck in," one of the other men hissed.

"Seen him yesterday," the man with the hat, shaking his head. "Been faffing about the wharf. He's holed up in one of the beach cottages." You'd seen the colorfully painted sheds by the ocean, though they hadn't looked big enough to fit Prince.

You nodded thoughtfully and finished your beer. "Next round's on me," you said, sliding another note across the bar. The men muttered something among themselves, their hostile looks going down a notch to just "suspicious."

You nodded politely and made your way out, unwilling to further test your luck or your accent.

"Either they're not home or they're dead," Lacroix told you over the comms. It was dark out, and you had changed into your armor. "Athena drones have spotted no signs of life. Brant says whoever goes in should check for explosives and traps."

That sounded right.

You and Jesse waited in the dark, Genji taking point, and Hanzo keeping his distance, since he was an idjit who insisted on fighting with a bow.

Athena had hacked the rental database, and found most of the shacks were empty, which was odd because it wasn't quite the off-season yet. But one cabin booked to a "Dick King." You were now absolutely certain that Richard Prince was fucking with you, or that the cybridization process killed off massive amounts of brain cells.

An Athena drone confirmed that yes, indeed, Prince was in his cabin. You switched on your night vision visor. You wanted Prince alive. So you had your EMP stun baton and your
pressure injectors primed.

"Moving out," Jesse said.

Athena cut the power to the beach huts. The area flickered into darkness, and for a moment all you could hear was the roar of the ocean. Genji moved swiftly across the gravel, smashing through the flimsy wooden door, and then pulling back, giving Jesse time to toss a flashbang through the entryway.

"Don't move!" Jesse shouted, and you shielded your eyes, your decibel blockers protecting your ears.

You counted to three, then you were up. Prince was on his feet, and you charged forward, smashing your stun rod into his left arm, releasing an EMP pulse. Sparks flew and he swore, upper body spasming as he dropped to his knees. You struck him across the head, and he wobbled. But in the darkness, you could see him smiling wide, a deranged grin. Snarling, you jammed your prosthetic finger into his the side of his neck, sedative pouring into his bloodstream.

He fell forward, and you didn't catch him. Instead you eyed the area behind him. There was a harsh chemical smell, and something rolled out of his hand, even as you began dragging him out. It clicked, and you swore, recognizing a deadman's switch.

But Jesse and Genji were with you, and their reflexes were well-honed. Grabbing you by the collar, Jesse threw you into the water, following close behind. Genji used Prince as a shield as the shack blew sky high, showering the beach in wood, metal, and vinyl siding. Worse, an entire chain reaction began: the half a dozen surrounding beach huts went up in a mess of fire, improvised explosives, and cheap building materials.

Then the lights flickered back on, an Orca dropship hovering over the beach, and it was a beautiful sight: streamlined metal, beacons lit up, thrusters alight and ready go. Genji hoisted the slightly charred and still unconscious Prince over his shoulder.

"Did you fools not see the explosives?" Hanzo shouted as he stomped across the beach, glaring at Genji.

And all the three of you could do was laugh, even as the smoke scraped your lungs.

Though no civilians were injured in the explosion, the four of you still got a dressing down from Lacroix. The English were very unhappy about this incursion into their sovereign territory. Fortunately, they had no real proof. Though after an "anonymous tip," they sent a bomb squad to the Chokshi residence and found it heavily booby-trapped, the entire family several days dead.

The Americans suspected that you had someone important and were demanding updates. The FBI had the nerve to actually call in and ask questions about the progress of the investigation. So Lacroix very smugly requested the presence of a certain Special Agent Lugh Brant, and asked them to handle the English, before signing off.

"He knew we were coming," you said, sitting down after Jesse and the Shimada brothers had been dismissed.

"That much is apparent," Lacroix said, sharply, frowning as you leaned back in the chair. Your hair was still dirty with brackish seawater and you were getting it on his nice clean furniture.
"But I don't think it was a last stand. It was not...dramatic enough for a man of his skills. Killing the Chokshis was unfinished business, and I'm sure we'll find something there, but..."

"But he wanted us to find him," Lacroix said, his eyes studying the reports on his desk. "I know, Chanceux. I don't like it either."

"Should we have taken him alive?" You wondered.

"Maybe not," Lacroix admitted. "Because we cannot kill him, now that the Americans know that we have him in custody."

You tapped your fingers against the chair. "We need to make sure his guards are specially cleared."

"I suppose it may come as a surprise to you, but I have not rooted out every single traitor in the organization," Lacroix said, coolly. "But yes, he is under very tight restriction, with Athena keeping extra eyes on him, his guards, and his cell. He will have no communication with the outside world."

You sat there, still uneasy. "Do you think someone will try to jailbreak him?"

"I think he will try to get himself out," Lacroix said. "An operative of his caliber is skilled enough that it is a real risk."

You sat there. "Are you going to share that list of known traitors and collaborators?"

Lacroix pursed his lips. "What makes you think I have not?"

"I don't think Gabriel and Captain Amari know how extensive your list is," you said. "Because you're secretive to a fault."

Lacroix folded his hands. "You are partially correct. I have shown Ana. It is not that I do not trust Gabriel, but I am running a long operation; it is easier to do without interference."

"Or oversight," you smirked.

Lacroix gave that Gallic shrug. "As you say. Athena, access file Revenant Gun, under clearance Ultramarine, Priority Degas."

Lacroix handed you his tablet. "This does not leave this room, and it is by no means comprehensive."

You nodded, skimming the list of names. Most of the people you didn't know very well; you recognized their names and could possibly place their department, but they weren't in your circle.

But one name stood out to you.

"Bruce Riggs?" You blinked. The earnest hacker who'd sent you flowers when you were incapacitated? Who wrote you saccharine pep talks in cards? The one whose mother sent him cookies on a weekly basis? That Riggs?

"He has special chats with the Director," Lacroix said. "He probably isn't aware of the harm he's done. But if you want to know who Petras' ears are in Blackwatch, it's Riggs. Ziv keeps him on
nonessential servers, citing protocol, and for the most part the boy follows it."

You blinked, a little shocked. Honestly, there wasn't much you could do with the list right now. You knew better than to treat any of the people differently or track them yourself. But there were two dozen people on it, and you knew most of them.

"My biggest concerns are Sakai in InSec, Vander Meer in HR, Schneider in the European analyst group, and Bakker in dispatch." Lacroix shook his head. "Is your curiosity satisfied? Or are you secretly friends with one of them?"

You shook your head. "No. But you already knew that."

Lacroix inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Sakai has been trying to talk to Hanzo. I am going to ask you to discourage that without giving up the game."

And there it was, the real reason Lacroix shared the list with you. "I can do that," you said. "Do you know her angle?"

"She is just being friendly," he said dryly.

"To Hanzo? Now that is suspicious," you laughed.

You headed back to your room for a shower. When you opened the door, Isha had broken out of her kennel, and was playing with her tablet. She chirped at you, then went back to drawing. You still weren't entirely sure what she making, and if it really was art, but it kept her out of trouble.

You patted her head, not quite buying the casual act. At first glance, nothing seemed out of place, which was a good sign. She hadn't had any accidents, and it looked like your belongings were intact. Noticing some claw marks on the vent, you popped it open, and she squeaked, before dropping her tablet and running under the bed.

Inside were several empty chip bags, a large gold chain, half a dozen of your socks, and a headless mouse. You just stared, not entirely sure what you had discovered.

"Isha, did you steal this?" You asked, holding up the chain, because it wasn't yours, and it was real gold. You wondered if she'd lifted it from Amélie's quarters, then realized Amélie would never own such a tacky piece.

She didn't respond.

Shaking your head, you pulled the stuff out of the vent, and replaced the cover. You threw the wrappers and dead mouse away, and tossed your socks in your laundry hamper. Then you got on your hands and knees and stuck your head under the bed. Isha was huddled against the wall, eyeing you suspiciously.

"Come on, you can't go stealing other people's stuff. Where'd you get this?" You asked. "Was it Tataryn...?" You trailed off, narrowing your eyes as Isha tried to look nonchalant. "Come out. I can't talk to you like this," you scowled.

She tuck her head under her wing, pretending to be sleepy.
"Come on. I have mutton jerky and those dried dates you like." Ziv had gotten her hooked on dates and figs, but figs had a very unfortunate digestive effect.

She peeked out from behind her wing, making a faint thrumming sound.

"I'm honestly more upset about the mouse," you said. "Come on."

She crawled out from under the bed, giving you a wary look. You got down the metal box you now stored treats in, wondering if it would be empty when you opened it.

It was still half full, but you could have sworn it was three quarters full when you left for England. Shaking your head, you pulled out a piece of jerky and a few dates. You sat down on the bed, and lifted your bad raptor up and set her beside you. She cooed, rubbing her head on your hand, while reaching for a date.

You petted her head, unsure of what you should be doing.

"Do you need a secret stash?" You asked, trying to figure out what was going on in your murderbird's head. "Like a safe spot to put your things? Do you want a box, like this one?" You pointed at snack one.

She made a noncommittal noise.

"Or do you like using the vent because it's hidden?"

She just took another date from you.

"Because the vent is a terrible hiding spot. That's where every professional looks," you continued. "The vent, under the mattress, the undersides of drawers. Everyone knows to look there."

Isha cocked her head to the side, looking worried.

"If you're stealing things, you don't hide them in our room," you said dryly. "And don't hide them in other people's rooms where they might get accidentally discovered or blamed. So it's very important that you don't use Jack or Gabriel's bedrooms to stash your ill-gotten goods."

Isha stared at her date and you knew you'd have to discretely check your lovers' quarters too.

"You could use ceiling tiles in lesser-traveled hallways," you said, not really sure if she understood that. "You can use hard to reach vents, outside my room. You can dig a hole in the woods and bury things." You gave her a look. "But you don't need to." You handed her the gold chain. It was heavy, but she gripped it in her mouth. "Did you get that from Tataryn?"

She just carried the chain to your bathroom and you blinked as she pulled loose a ceramic wall tile and dropped the necklace in the hole.

You peeked inside, slightly alarmed to see candy, a single sapphire earring, and oddly enough, a whistle.

"OK, that's a better hiding spot at least," you said, massaging your forehead.

She bobbed her head, chirping happily at you.

"I don't recognize that earring. You're not stealing from anyone here, are you?" You asked.
Isha stared up at you blankly.

"If you're stealing from those people Tataryn took you to visit and poop in their houses, fair enough. But no stealing from my coworkers, OK?"

Isha thrummed happily, rubbing her head against your ankle, and you shook your head, knowing then that you would be a terrible parent.

After your shower, you curled up in bed, your raptor nesting down by your feet. She normally didn't sleep in your bed, but now that she could jailbreak herself, you wondered if it would be worth the fight. Since she was housebroken, maybe it wasn't a big deal? You were going to have to ask Tataryn about where that damn jewelry came from, and Durga help him if he was using your murderbird in jewel heists.

You awoke to a knock on your door, having fallen asleep on top of the covers. Yawning, you got up, noting that Isha was nestled on your blankets, looking far too comfortable. A glance through the peephole let you know it was Gabriel, and you opened the door.

Dressed down in sweats and a hoodie, Gabriel gave you a tired smile. You stepped aside so he could come in and shut the door, before giving him a quick kiss.

"Thought you were still in Geneva," you said, lingering against his chest.

"Got done early. Didn't want to stay the night," he said with a yawn. He took a look at your hoodie, jerked his chin up, and grinned. "A little big on you, isn't it?"

It was one of his, and you shrugged, not admitting to stealing anything. Unlike Isha, you were just borrowing it. "It's comfy."

Gabriel just kissed your nose. "I don't mind, corazon." He gave you a big grin. "There's plenty more where that came from."

You tucked your hands in the oversized pockets. "What's up?"

"Jack's on his way back from Athens. Finished formalizing the new strategy for the omnic issues over there. He should be home soon." Gabriel yawned, his gaze falling on Isha. "So the little sneak is sleeping your bed now?"

You sighed. "The kennel won't hold her any more."

"Well, at least she's housebroken now," Gabriel said. You half expected a lecture about "no dinosaurs or murderbirds on the bed," but Gabriel sat down and stroked her snout. She cooed and opened one eye, on little hand reaching out to grip his fingers. A soft smile tugged at the corner of his lips and he shook his head fondly at her. Gabriel stretched out on your bed, and Isha shifted to the pillows, bedding down right by his head. He didn't protest, just reached up to pet her, while murmuring Spanish endearments. You slid in beside him, laughing as he squeezed you against his chest. The bed wasn't quite big enough for the three of you, but you made it work.

You awoke again to the door opening, and this time it was Jack, wearing sweats as well, his hood up. You glanced over at Gabriel who just laughed and helped you pile the blankets and pillows on the floor.
Jack gave you each a kiss, Isha included. Gabriel ended up in the middle, with you trying to be the big spoon, and Jack hugging him and Isha.

It was cramped, silly, and far less comfortable than their beds. But no one complained. And you were out cold a few minutes later.

You caught Hanzo as he was heading to the gym. You just fell in line beside him, acting real casual. He gave you a sharp look, not buying your performance at all.

"So I wanted to give you a heads up." You looked around and lowered your voice. "There's this chick that has a robot fetish, and she's been into Genji for awhile. It's kind of creepy, but she hasn't actually violated any policies, though we've had words with her."

Hanzo stiffened. "What?" He hissed.

"We usually just ignore her, you know." You shrugged. "It's just something to be aware of."

Hanzo looked around, eyes wide, mouth open. He was utterly scandalized, and you had to smother a laugh. "Who?"

You pretended to struggle for a name. "She's in InSec. Uh...ex-IDF," you said. "Sakai, I think?"

Hanzo narrowed his eyes. "...I see. I know of this...person. I will tell her to keep her perverse ways far from my little brother!" Righteous fury burned in Hanzo's voice, and to be honest, you were a little scared.

"No, no, no, no," you said, shaking your head. "That's a terrible idea. Genji will totally resent your interference, and the two of you will get into it, and then you'll start shouting and it will be bad."

"I do not shout!" Hanzo said loudly, then winced and lowered his voice.

"Anyway, we run interference for him when he needs it. Just figured you'd like to know. You know, in case you see us acting weird around her. We try not to encourage her to...linger."

"I see," Hanzo said, stroking his chin. "And Genji has...no interest in her?"

"I don't think Genji likes being a fetishized," you said with a shrug. "You know, if she liked him for him, fair enough. But she's just into his metal parts, you know?"

"No, no you are correct," Hanzo said. "I understand. I will be vigilant. Genji deserves better." He stared off into the distance, a severe frown taking his expression from disapproving straight to absolutely constipated. He was thinking bad thoughts.

You paused then, wondering if you'd made a terrible error in judgment. "OK, good chat. I'll see you later," you squeaked, and headed off to warn Genji.

"You did what?" Genji asked flatly, staring at you. He was still in his Pachimari pajamas, the onion octopus beaming at you, and it was kind of adorable.
"I might have told Hanzo that Agent Sakai is a cyborg fetishist, and has been creeping on you, so that he'll avoid her."

Genji groaned. "Why would you do that? She was going to take him out for noodles. I thought he finally made a friend..." He paused, and then looked at you, the light flickering on his head. "Shit Spiders?"

"Yeah," you said regretfully, wondering if you needed to explain this to Lacroix. "Your brother isn't cleared for that information and...well, I was asked to take care of it...discretely."

Genji gave you sardonic look. "Discretely?"

"Yeah, so I botched that. I was going for maximum efficiency," you said, unrepentant of your error in judgment. "Anyway, this story is kind of funny."

Genji just gave you the hairy eyeball. "I will play along," he said. "But you owe me lunch."

"I was just getting ready to make yakisoba. Want to tag along?"

"Yes," Genji said, yawning. "I want prawns, and cabbage, and extra fried egg..."

"Done," you said, relieved that his cooperation had come at a reasonable rate.

Chapter End Notes

...Some of the smalltown English stuff is based on my own experience. I do not have a convincing English accent though.

Second job interview for the same job tomorrow. I am between "Oh I passed the first, I should do fine on the second, maybe?" And "OMFG I'M NOT EVEN HALFWAY THROUGH?" Ahem. I appreciate all the good wishes. Thank you very much. I am going to buy Assassin's Creed Odyssey after the interview, and possibly go to dinner with a friend, as celebration/consolation. Because I was hoping to buy the game earlier (when I got news that I did/didn't get the job), but the waiting obviously has been extended.

Ranger is going back to the vet because he has a weird skin condition and I'm all "...I better get this job so I can take care of my stupid dogs with their expensive problems."

Hope everyone is holding up all right.
Chapter 99

Chapter Summary

All you know is that nothing is quite what it seems.

Chapter Notes

Annie_Drew did a comic from Chapter 61. Smug Jack is very smug!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even manacled to the chair in the interrogation chamber, prosthetic arms removed, Richard Prince was a large man, and his presence filled the room. He smiled widely at the two way mirror, the bruises and broken teeth only highlighting the mockery in his expression. Up close, he had a boxer's face, the impression aided by his black eye, crooked nose, and the fact you just really wanted to punch him.

Winston and Angela had managed to disable parts of his augments, while leaving his neural functions intact. You had considered asking Athena to immobilize him, but Winston told you that wouldn't be necessary, and had added that the experience with Lao had been unpleasant for her. He didn't go into detail, and he wasn't angry at you, but you understood the reprimand. You wouldn't mention anything of the sort to Athena.

Jack, Lacroix, Captain Amari, and Kwento were all sitting in on this one. Gabriel would be handling the questioning. You had some guests too. Captain DeVevo, Nikita from the NSA, and Hopper the CIA Douche had all stuck around after that first information-sharing meeting. Genji and Hanzo weren't coming, but Jesse and Ziv showed up.

Brant had gone back to DC with Senator Armstrong's entourage the same day, but today two representatives from the FBI showed up, and one of them was a ridiculously youthful redhead in a suit that actually fit him. The second man was one of his higher-ups, because they had to send someone to rein Brant in. The man was large in height and width. He could be described as blonde, though there was really a lot more exposed skin than hair. Most noticeably, he had lips so thin that you first thought he was trying to work his dentures back in place, but he was a little young for dentures and that was just how his face was made. He kept glaring at Brant, but to your surprise, Brant just responded with wintry smiles and what looked like cutting, even-tempered comments. At least that's what you got from trying to lip read the security cam footage. Agent Casano, Brant's personal burden, just seemed to get more and more agitated.

Having over a dozen people in the observation room was going to be very crowded. And it was going to feel worse with all the prickly people sprinkled throughout.

Jesse and Ziv stuck to your side, and Jack gave you a wry sidelong glance, his place between Lacroix and Captain Amari. Kwento made a few comments to Lacroix and he reassured her that while the events might not be entirely legal, there would be no torture. DeVevo, Hopper, and Nikita stood off to the side. Nikita looked unapproachable and cool, and Hopper just looked
unapproachable.

The FBI agents entered last, escorted in by a very unamused Lieutenant Jemison. Jemison nodded at you, before hastily leaving the room, either because she didn't like the company, or because she was concerned that your bad luck would rub off on her. It was probably that particular FBI agent. Probably.

"Agent Brant," Lacroix stepped forward and offered his hand. "We're glad you and your...guest could make it."

"I am Special Agent-in-Charge Christopher Casano," his companion said sharply. "And I'm the authority here, not Agent Brant."

"Yes," Lacroix said, "Good for you. Brant, do you have any additions to make?" He held up a tablet. "Commander Reyes and I reviewed the questions, but perhaps you can address the Chokshi angle?"

"The profile is...abnormal, even for the circumstances," Brant said, thoughtfully.

"What's abnormal about it?" Casano snapped. "He's a violent terrorist who went on to kill his ex-girlfriend and her family. It's not some kind of mystery to unravel. Is this how you waste your time in Overwatch?"

"This is good," Brant said, pointing at a line. "Try pulling more on that thread. Maybe have..." He looked around the room. "Maybe have Captain Amari step in beforehand. He has a type. She fits it. It might get pretty crude though." He gave the captain an apologetic look.

Lacroix nodded thoughtfully and glanced at the Captain. She nodded once.

"I have a few theories, given what you and Dr. Ziegler have told me, but I'd like to see how he reacts first," Brant said, brow furrowed.

Casano made a loud scoffing sound.

"We've seen similar...issues in a certain type of case," Lacroix said, purposefully not going into detail. "You have a good eye for-"

"Can you stop sucking each other dicks and just get to work?" Casano snapped.

Jack's shoulders tensed, and Captain Amari flexed her fingers. Ziv stiffened beside you, while Jesse rested one hand on his hip. The disrespect was directed at Lacroix, sure, but it was obvious that Casano was targeting Overwatch as a whole.

Your other guests watched with undisguised interest.

"Chanceux, if he interrupts once more, please remove him," Lacroix said, not deigning to look at Special-Agent-in-Charge Casano.

"With pleasure, sir," you said, giving Casano a nasty smile.

"My government will have something to say about this." Casano just turned and glared, clearly not recognizing you.

Probably an apology for sending a nitwit to such a sensitive event, but you weren't holding your breath.
"Commander Reyes is in the hall prepping," Lacroix said, touching his earpiece. "He approves of your suggestions."

Brant nodded.

Casano just glared at Brant.

You looked over your shoulder, a little surprised by how intently Vashtai, Nikita, and Hopper were watching Casano. Maybe they were embarrassed by his bad behavior. No, that wasn't it. Nikita and Hopper exchanged looks, DeVevo murmured something to Nikita, and all three of them smiled unpleasantly. Maybe they liked Brant more than they let on?

"Did you know his acronym is SAC?" Ziv murmured in your ear. "It's actually the official abbreviation for "Special Agent-in-Charge."

You smothered a snort.

Casano was ignoring you, his glare going between Lacroix and Brant. You caught Jack signaling you, one eyebrow arched questioningly, like he was worried about you and the FBI.

You just shook your head and he nodded once, trusting your call. Then he turned back around, to focus on the show.

Gabriel strode into the interrogation room, notes committed to memory. He wasn't dressed in any kind of uniform. He wore simple black fatigues with no rank markers, and that was intentional. Prince wasn't the kind of man who cared much for medals and patches. He found it too self-aggrandizing and respected efficiency to an extreme, arguably psychopathic degree, or so the little redhead FBI agent said. Gabriel wasn't exactly sure where that line of demarcation was, but with you and Jack at his side, he was a lot more careful about trying not to cross it.

Pulling up a chair, Gabriel sat down perpendicular to Prince, still staying at a higher position. He rested one boot on his knee in a figure four and waited.

Prince smiled sardonically at him. "Reyes."

"Prince," Gabriel said the name without anger or inflection. He knew what Prince had done. He'd seen the aftermath of the Metro attacks, the fresh dead in the museums, the crime scene photos from Ranya Chokshi's family home. The sheer waste of human life infuriated him. But feelings served little purpose here.

"We both know how this works. You're going to lay siege from whatever angle gives you the best vantage, and press me for all the information you can get. Names, dates, future attacks, my favorite whiskey. It's old hat, Reyes. I've taken apart so many people, I could walk you through this step by step, and you'd still fail."

Gabriel laughed. "Perhaps, but the challenge doesn't bother me. You know everyone has a breaking point. And maybe I'll push you past yours. It'd be a shame, but then I could console myself with some good old-fashioned revenge."

"Don't know what you think you're going to torture," Prince said, sounding almost gleeful.
"I'm already missing a good third of my body. Pain receptors don't work right any more either. Go ahead, cut me. There's a fifty-fifty chance that I won't feel it."

Prince had a smoker's voice, though Gabriel knew that Prince didn't indulge. He kept himself in prime condition. Smoking would be detrimental. Funny, Prince got that, but you and Jack still liked to sneak cigarettes and then thought he wouldn't notice. His frown deepened. It was time to focus on the task at hand. Because even if you and Jack were sitting in on the session, he didn't need to bring you here, into the muck of the interrogation room with him.

"You don't think I can find ways to hurt you?" Gabriel laughed without humor.

"Not as easily as I can hurt you," Prince laughed, sounding genuinely pleased. "You're tough, Reyes. Honestly didn't expect you to survive that attack on Black Base Delta. You sure do know how to inspire loyalty. How many of your agents died protecting you?" He leaned in, eyes gleaming, like he couldn't wait for Gabriel to react.

Gabriel gritted his teeth, but bottled up the feelings that started to surface, and just inclined his head back, waiting for the kicker.

"Ah, I remember one: your old mentor Captain Patel." Prince beamed, his jagged toothed smile hideous under the fluorescent lights. "Heard she was one-of-kind. A goddamn legend." Prince laughed, the sound harsh and terrible. "But then she retired, just a washed up old bitch. I respect how you played her. Brought her back, gave her something to fight for, and suddenly you had your old CO eating out of your hand. Bet that was useful."

Gabriel heard the familiar roar of blood in his ears, his vision narrowing down to the small crushable oval that was Prince's head, before he realized his fury. But he remained seated, teeth clenched. It had been nothing like that. Gabriel stayed very still, forcing himself to analyze Prince's words.

Prince's triumphant smile let him know he hadn't masked his emotions as well as he'd hoped. "So you're the one who planned that attack? How sloppy," Gabriel said coldly, voice flat, almost bored.

"Sloppy? You were the sole survivor, Reyes. What was it? Thirty four agents dead? You had to sweep it under the rug and write it off as an accident." Prince's shoulders shook from laughter, and Gabriel had to quash the urge to feed Prince his own teeth. Too many witnesses. Too much at risk. Too little to gain.

"But I wasn't," Gabriel said with a thin smile.

Prince cocked his head to the side. "Are you talking about that worm Gleeson?"

Gabriel's smile widened and he sat with his legs apart, elbows on his knees. "Commander Gleeson is listed as KIA," he said without batting an eye. "His remains were never recovered. So I can't really say what happened to Gleeson."

"You did," Prince breathed, teeth bared. "Well, color me impressed. And here we thought the coward had gotten smart and gone to ground. Nicely done."

"I was actually talking about Bái Shé," Gabriel said, though he'd meant for Prince to get the message. It just didn't need to be confirmed for all the other people in the observation room. He wasn't sure how much the American government knew about that attack. "Quite the piece of work there."
Prince shrugged. "If you like'em young. Do you Reyes?"

Gabriel just rolled his eyes in disgust. "Work is work, Prince. I expect you of all people to know that."

Prince smirked. "Doesn't mean you can't enjoy it. Are you noticing a theme yet, Reyes? Bái Shé survived. Gleeson survived. And you survived. What do you three have in common? Oh, let me see, Gleeson was a traitor. Bái Shé is one of ours. Maybe the Strike Commander should be concerned about you, Reyes. I mean, we did have order to take you alive if possible." Prince's voice took on a teasing tone. He sat there, secured, a prisoner with a vicious smile, and so awfully amused by his own cleverness that Gabriel wanted to slug him. But that wouldn't do much besides make him feel a little better. Might make you feel better too. Hell, after this, he'd give you a set of brass knuckles and let you go to town of Prince. The thought cheered him immensely, but Gabriel leaned back in his seat feigning indifference.

"I heard you thought I'd be sympathetic to your cause. Or weak-minded enough to sell out."

Prince shrugged. "Wasn't my idea. I thought we should put a bullet in your brain and leave you in the snow. My boss said her friends requested you alive if possible. She didn't care."

"Your boss. Ambassador Nguyen Anh?"

Prince gave him a sly look. "Yeah. Sure. And when you try to release this confession as evidence, it won't mean a thing. My boss could be Morrison. Or hell, the new undersecretary, Adaeze Kwento. I might even answer to Bái Shé."

Gabriel rolled his eyes, because while this kind of confession would not hold up in any court of law, that wasn't the point here. "So you planned the attack on Black Base Delta and DC?"

Prince smiled, lips pressed together, and he shook his head. "Now see, I'm not supposed to talk about DC. Heard it was homegrown terrorists. America does have a problem with disaffected young men going on rampages."

Gabriel shook his head. "Yeah, I've noticed. Speaking of such things, what exactly did Ranya do to upset you so?"

Prince's eyes bulged, cheeks puffing out, and his face grew more grotesque. "Bitch got what she had coming."

"For having bad taste in men?" Gabriel asked.

"It was her own fault. Should've stuck with me. I would have treated her right," Prince spat. "Some bitches don't know how good they have it."

Gabriel cocked his head to the side. "Really? Was being with you all rose petals and diamonds?"

Prince snorted. "Ranya wasn't that kind of girl. Yeah, she cleaned up right and had an ass you could bounce quarters off." He gave an almost wistful sigh. "But she was fun. She liked cars, rugby, and explosives. We were a good team for awhile."

"Till you joined up with Nguyen."

Prince's nostrils flared. "No, bitch just got pushy. It her way or the highway. This wasn't
some beauty and beast story, Reyes. We fucked. She got too comfortable. I kicked her to the curb."

Gabriel made a noncommittal noise.

The door opened and Ana walked in. She had always been a good looking woman, especially in uniform. But that mix of power, beauty, and intelligence made her deadly, in the boardroom as much as the battlefield. She leaned over him, her back to Prince, the faint scent of amber tickling his nose.

"Well damn, the Captain Amari herself," Prince leered. "An ass that just won't quit and legs that go on for miles. You an ass man, Reyes?"

"Brant's recommendation," she said ignoring Prince and offering him a clipboard with some illegible notes scrawled on it.

Gabriel took a moment to pretend to read them, then handed it back. Her hair brushed his cheek, and Gabriel chuckled. "Thank you, Ana." He gave her a cheeky grin. "You're an angel."

"And still too good for the likes of you," she said with a wink, leaving with a little extra swagger.

Prince blew out a breath. "Seriously, Reyes. You're banging her?" He stared at the door for an extra second, pupils dark.

Gabriel gave a noncommittal shrug. Prince was impressed, and he didn't hide it very well. "Don't see how it's your business. Your Ranya looked pretty good too, before you beat her to death. Hard to look pretty with a smashed skull and well, I don't need to list the damages, you and I both know how she looked at the end."

Prince stiffened. "I told you-"

"Thing is, by all accounts, the dumb bitch was crazy about you," Gabriel said coolly. "She just didn't want you getting tangled up with Talon. Hell, she stuck around for awhile, tried to save you from yourself, but I guess that was too pushy for your delicate ego. You damn near beat her to death a few years ago, according the police report anyway, and so she left. Guess she wasn't that dumb."

Prince snarled then. "That's not how it happened."

"Oh?"

"I kicked her out," Prince said sullenly. "I see what you're doing. Playing that old sob story about an abusive boyfriend. Trying to make her the victim. She thought she could tell me what to do. Got too full of herself. She was undermining me."

"So you had to teach her lesson? Reassert the chain of command?" Gabriel fed him the lines, though skepticism permeated every word.

"Yeah," Prince nodded, eyes unfocused. "That's it. That's precisely it." He gritted his teeth. "It was just a lovetap, anyway. Enough to show her I meant business. That was all. She'd had worse in the field."

Gabriel just raised a brow, though he was sorely tempted to poke holes in all of Prince's flimsy rationalizations. That would be counterproductive, even if it did feel good. Prince would shut down. Gabriel didn't need to feel righteous, he just needed to keep Prince talking.
"Don't give me that look," Prince snarled. "You've seen what I can do when I actually want to hurt someone."

Gabriel just stared at Prince's face. Sweat beaded on his upper lip, and his shoulders twitched, like he willing his phantom arms to lash out.

"You're a black ops commander. You can't tell me you've never had to put someone in their place."

"Several times," Gabriel said. "Rarely got to the part where I had to break their bones to do it. And then, never with someone who couldn't give as good as they got." Gabriel allowed himself that barb. "But I suppose what's done is done. Not like Ranya can really us otherwise, can she?"

Prince clenched his teeth, veins in his neck bulging.

"You know, you were never what society would consider "a good person." But you always had self control. You were very talented at planning ops and black bag jobs. Up till you joined Nguyen. Then your behavior grew increasingly erratic. Beating POWs to death. Beating your girlfriend. Hell, heard you executed some of your men, just for questioning the nature of your orders. That's a lot of rage, Prince. I get that you're a psychopath, but you've gotten more and more out of control as time goes on. That makes you quite the liability now."

Prince snorted. "You trying to say that I'm the victim here?"

Gabriel laughed. "You know, Bái Shé had a self-destruct command. There were two priorities that trumped it. Kill Gérard Lacroix, which is something you never quite managed to do. And kill her old squadmate, her admitted best friend in the whole wide world. We actually have videos of Dr. Chumak implanting the order. It was pretty insidious. Get the subject to isolate themselves, and well, who was left for them but Nguyen? Kind of funny how that worked out. You go from having a fairly stable...whatever it was with Ranya to breaking her collarbone? Seems strange, don't you think?"

"I told you, she was pushing me," Prince snarled, eyes wild. "She didn't give me a choice."

"Women," Gabriel said with a wry smile. "Even the best ones are difficult." He laughed then, because that statement applied equally to his boyfriend and his girlfriend. "But I have to say, after DC, it was pretty strange that you went straight to her. Rather like you wanted us to find you."

Prince's head snapped back, his eyes narrowed.

"Come on, it's textbook that'd we'd be watching anyone who'd been close to you. That was very careless work."

Prince's eyes were wide, his breathing labored.

Gabriel took a look at the biometrics: Prince's heartbeat was skyrocketing and his adrenaline was up. "Even the explosives you used in that town, not the usual Talon tech at all. All homemade stuff." Like Prince didn't have Talon support right now.

"Maybe I am here for a reason," Prince said tightly. "Maybe this is all a cover so I can reach my real target." He glared at Gabriel, his teeth clenched. "Shouldn't you be more worried about that?"

"Maybe," Gabriel said, thoughtfully. "But I've seen your work. You're an in and out kind of guy. No loitering, usually no bystanders, unless the mission required soft targets, and even then,
you did them quick. Nothing time-wasting like torture or rape. Makes me wonder why you went after Ranya's sweet old parents too. Because it would be much easier to corner her in a dark alley and finish her there, make it look like a mugging gone wrong. Hell, you hadn't seen her in years. Were you holding a grudge that long? Did you want to hurt her that badly? Forensics said you killed her parents first. Did you show off their dead bodies for her? Was this some kind of last-ditch murder-revenge pact? Or was it something else?"

Prince fell silent, staring past Gabriel, his eyes unfocused. He began to speak a few times, and then stopped himself, shaking his head. Gabriel remained stonefaced, but he honestly hadn't expected that reaction. Maybe a joke or a comment about "that's what happens to people that cross him." But Prince actually seemed at a loss for words. Or at least like he'd been disassociating from his actions. It wasn't that he was ashamed at all; more like someone awakening from a weekend bender surprised that he'd gone that far.

"I don't buy it, Reyes," Prince said with ragged laugh. "Nice try. Never figured you for the headshrinker type. Kind of disappointed really. I mean, you're trying to tell me that I'm a better man than how I've behaved?"

"No, you're still a piece of shit, but before you were your own piece of shit. Now you're just Nguyen's rabid dog, rapidly losing his usefulness and his mind. There's no point in really questioning you or torturing you, Dick. You don't know anything of value, because you're on a timer and Nguyen wouldn't have trusted you."

"You're wrong," Prince snapped. "You think you can make me reveal things, but you're wrong. I ran the show. I was in control of my actions. Ranya was unfinished business. You're reading too much into it. The planning, the attacks, that was all me. That was my work!"

"Keep telling yourself that," Gabriel said with a smirk, and he stood to leave. "But we both know your usefulness, like your lifespan, is nearing its limit."

It wasn't harsh, not as far as Gabriel's interrogations had gone. Prince deserved far worse. But your attention wasn't just on Gabriel. Some of it was on Prince. There he was, a smug piece of shit talking trash about your captain and admitting what you had long suspected. But then you also had to keep an eye on your visiting Trojan horse.

"Oh come on," Casano muttered loud enough for the whole room to hear. "What is this? A fireside chat? I thought Reyes was supposed to be tough." He was a bundle of exaggerated gesticulation, all heaving shoulders, rolled eyes, and exasperated sighs. It was like watching a caricature of a teenager throwing a tantrum.

Ziv elbowed you too hard, understandably raw from Prince's Black Base Delta confession. "Do something about him, or I will."

You shook your head. Not yet. Lacroix wanted you to give him enough rope to hang himself, and you would.

Jesse's attention went between Casano and interrogation. His fingers twitching when Captain Amari entered the interrogation room. You rested a hand on his shoulder. He took a deep breath and nodded at you. Despite what did not happen between Jesse and the captain, it was obvious he still worried about her.
"Is this how you run the place, Commander Morrison?" Casano snapped as Captain Amari and Gabriel exchanged some flirty banter. You bit your lip, a little weirded out, but not upset by it. "Do you fucking hear this shit?"

You moved then. Smiling, you rested your hand on his shoulder. "You're interrupting, Agent Casano. I'm going to have to politely escort you out."

"Fuck you. Who the hell do you think you are?" He shouted at you, spraying spittle in your face.

You squeezed his shoulder, your jaw tense. You could hear the bones creaking under your metal fingers. It would be very easy to clamp down just a little more...

Casano froze, back bowing as he gritted his teeth.

"Agent Casano, you're being a disruption. Now, please, I am requesting your cooperation," you said. "Aren't you supposed to comply with authority?" You asked, venom seeping into your voice. "Or do I have to get unprofessional?" You smiled broadly, the strain on your cheeks letting you know that it was not a nice expression.

Casano cringed and deflated as you guided him out of the room, everyone watching out of the corner of their eyes, no one, not even Brant, protesting.

You stepped into the hall, a little surprised to see Shoal and Jemison there.

"We'll take it from here, agent," Jemison said sternly.

"Make sure he reaches his destination safely," you said, trying to sound sincere and failing.

Casano began to sweat, and Shoal laughed.

"Come on, Special Agent Casano. You can go wait in the transport," Shoal said, giving you a jaunty wave.

You returned to the observation room, in time for Gabriel's little mindfuck reveal about the mental conditioning. You let yourself enjoy the show, because you'd suspected it was Prince who planned the Black Base Delta attack. It was...cathartic to get a admission. Hell, your heart was beating too hard, too quickly now and you were filled with anticipation that could easily turn into obsessive anxiety. You still remembered Gleeson bleeding out in this very wing, your tanto in his throat. You knew, from a logical standpoint, that you couldn't kill Prince. There was too much political weight right now. But you could indulge in the fantasy: your blade in his throat, the light in his eyes going out...

"I am both grateful to you and terribly jealous of you," Brant told you as Gabriel left the interrogation room.

"Please tell me his presence was all part of some clever ruse," you said. "And not just a concession to your agency."

"Of course." Brant nodded rapidly. "It was Armstrong's idea. Angle to send the most belligerent, obviously unprofessional opposing agent we could, but one who wouldn't actually be able to cause direct damage - didn't want a repeat of your shooting. Then I can present the recordings of his behavior to prove my point about internal sabotage. They played right into our hands," Brant said.
"And it doesn't hurt at all, that representatives from the DOD, CIA, and NSA are going to corroborate your story, and mention what an embarrassment Agent Casano turned out to be," Lacroix said.

Everyone in the room, even Hopper, shared wicked little conspiratorial smiles.

This was only the first session, of course. Lacroix and Gabriel were handling the Prince interrogation with great care. You wondered how likely it was that Prince had a self-destruct command, or whether or not he was only partially culpable for his actions. It was a troubling thought. Lao had fought the programming, and she'd still stabbed you.

Prince, by most accounts, was a high-functioning psychopath. He had even less incentive to behave humanely or restrain his baser impulses. Gabriel's implication seemed to bother him, sure, but that could have just been part of the power play. "Oh Dick, no one takes you seriously, you're brain damaged." That would rankle anyone, let alone a control freak like Prince.

You unrolled the mats, then began to stretch, warming up your muscles. Gabriel would probably go a round with Hanzo and Genji before he came up to Jack's room. Lacroix was handling your guests accommodations, and you'd caught sight of Jesse and Captain DeVevo sitting with Brant in the cafeteria. You wanted to ask questions, but weren't up for socializing. Jesse could tell you all about it later.

Isha sat the coffee table, eating the chips Jack had left out. You hadn't forgotten about her mysterious treasures. Once Tataryn got back from Kosovo, you were going to have a long talk with him. You'd made some discrete inquiries, but none of Isha's sitters were missing any jewelry, and no one had made any complaints to InSec, or made any matching inquiries at the lost and found. There were no reports of local jewelry stores being burglarized while you were in DC either. You'd done your due diligence.

You glanced up as the door opened, and Jack stepped in carrying pizza. Isha cheeped and hopped onto the back of the couch to greet him.

Jack patted her head and set the pizza boxes down on the coffee table. He eyed the mats for a moment, took a look at your face, and then began to strip down to just his fatigue pants.

"You don't need to-" You trailed off, trying not ogle his bare chest, and failing.

"Looks like you do," he said, smile cocky, though there were worry lines around his eyes. "Wouldn't mind a little workout either. Spent most of the day sitting." Jack ambled over to you, a little extra swagger in his shoulders. "Didn't you get to rough that asshole up a little?"

"Nah, I was professional. I know, what's wrong with me?" You shook your head. "Guess the mention of Black Base Delta shook me a little." You rubbed your tense shoulders. "Know it bothered Gabriel. Figured we could work some of that off. I can wait for him if you're tired."

"Sweetheart, are you waiting for Gabe because he goes easy on you?" Jack raised his chin, his smug smirk making your heart rate spike.

Your head snapped back and you glared at Jack, climbing to your feet. "Fuck you, Jackie."

"After," he grinned, running his fingers through his hair. He rolled his shoulders, raising his hands.
You were already moving, dropping low as you closed the distance. You kicked your leg out, aiming for Jack's ankles.

He jumped backward, but you slid into him, knocking him off balance and onto the ground. He landed flat on his back with a surprised "oof!"

You didn't give him time to recover. You were on top of him immediately, knees digging into his ribs, metal fingers against his throat.

Jack blinked up at you, eyes wide and delighted. Instead of trying to buck you off, he reached up and tapped the mat, and you released him, though you remained seated on his chest.

"Fuck, that was sexy," Jack kissed your knee. "Do you want to be on top?"

"I'm not done, Jack," you said, lightly. "And even if you win next round, I'm still in the mood to hit things."

Jack laughed softly and sat up. He leaned over and nipped your bottom lip. "All right, boss. I think I can handle that."

You ended up sweaty, out of breath, and exhausted. Flat on your back, your limbs burning, you glanced over at Jack who had only worked up a light sweat. His skin had turned a light shade of pink, bruises and red marks still visible, though they would fade soon.

He sat beside you, hair mussed, a pleased grin on his face. You realized you didn't provide enough of a challenge, but did he have to look so damn amused? You groaned, pushing yourself off the ground.

"Feeling better?" Jack asked, ruffling your hair.

"Feeling too tired to be mad," you admitted. "But now I'm hungry." You glanced over at the pizza, and then shook your head, wondering if there would be any pizza for you.

Isha sat on the coffee table. She'd very carefully opened the top box, and helped herself to a slice, probably more, while you and Jack were sparring. She had cheese and tomato sauce smeared on her face. Noticing both you and Jack watching her, she shoved the rest of the slice into her mouth and hurriedly chewed it up so you couldn't take it back.

"Who does that remind you of?" Jack asked, laughing into his hand.

You gave him a dirty look and wobbled to your feet. Isha had been fairly neat, not messing up the rest of the pizza or spreading food all over the table. And she'd only stolen two slices "Come here, you little thief. We need to get you cleaned up." You scooped her up and she shortled, rubbing her sauce-stained snout on your chest. "Really?"

She bobbed her head, licking some of the sauce off.

You carried her into the bathroom and put her on the counter. You turned on the sink, taking a moment to make sure the water was warm enough, before you grabbed a washcloth and began wiping her down.
She cooed, splashing her little hands in the water while you tried to work. You briefly considered letting her play in one of the fountains next summer. Or you could get her a kiddie pool. Maybe a large birdbath?

You toweled her off, noticing how much fluffier she was now. Her feathers were still coming in mostly in iridescent black. But on her tail, there were streaks of green, blue, indigo, and violet feathers sprouting. She was also starting to get what looked like a crest on the top of her head. Those feathers were coming in black and violet. You checked her arms, noting her pinions were still growing too, also in indigo and violet, subtle stripes starting to form on the underside.

"You're getting so pretty," you said, kissing her damp snout.

She patted your cheek, thrumming happily.

Fluffing your murderbird, you headed out to the living room. Jack had cleaned up the mats and Gabriel sat on the couch, a piece of pizza in his hand. He flashed you a tired smile.

"Hey," you said, setting Isha down on the couch.

"Feeling better?" He asked, leaning over to kiss you.

"A little. Still need a shower."

He offered you a bite of his pizza and you took it, sighing.

"How are you holding up?" You asked.

"Not bad, all things considered," Gabriel said, reaching over to pet Isha. "I underestimated how angry Prince was going to make me. Nothing he said came as a surprise, but it still got to me."

"Yeah. Same. This is going to suck," you said.

"Yes," Gabriel agreed, taking another slice. "But we only have one shot to do this right. At least today went according to plan."

"Yeah," you said, grabbing your own slice of pizza. Isha curled up between Gabriel and Jack, opening her mouth to beg for more food. And you didn't miss how they both snuck your murderbird scraps.

After dinner, you and Jack got a quick shower and then joined Gabriel in the bedroom. There was new fluffy fleece-lined dog bed on the floor, complete with stuffed dog, pillows, and a dinosaur-patterned blanket. Isha was not in it though. Gabriel had her on his lap while he skimmed a novel. No dinosaurs in bed, huh? You stifled a laugh.

"Maggie and Michael should be here in a few days; they're coming in early with Ray," Jack said. "Feng will be here too. They're all camping out in my living room. Do you think that will be a problem?"

Feng, Maggie, and Michael together? It sounded like a bad idea, like mixing gasoline, alcohol, and raccoons. You weren't exactly sure what would go wrong, but inevitably something would. There were so many possibilities.

"It's your room, but are you sure it's a good idea to have Feng here?"
"Her cover is as my sister's classmate. Maggie won't mind," Jack said in a way that let you know that he had not discussed that plan with his sister yet. Honestly, you didn't think Maggie would mind either, but you weren't sure how he was going to explain Feng without sharing some classified intel. Well, that was Jack's business. You didn't have any expertise there.

You glanced at Gabriel who shrugged. "It's your funeral, Jackie."

"Is anyone in your family coming?" You asked.

Gabriel shrugged again. "Maybe. My mother doesn't travel so well any more, and that goes for my grandmother too. My sisters might, but they have so many children. If they come, they'll have a hotel room or three."

"OK," you said. "Kseniya wants to come."

"Catriona won't mind," Gabriel said with a yawn.

You crawled into bed beside him, and he gently put Isha on your pillow. Jack was on his other side. Gabriel gave a sigh of contentment, and Jack turned out the lights.

Interestingly, Isha had been in her new bed when you woke up in the morning. She was cuddly, yes, but maybe having all four of you in the bed was too busy for her. That, or she missed her stuffed dog.

You smelled coffee, and sighed happily. Both men had let you sleep a few extra minutes, and you weren't going to complain. Stretching, you winced slightly at the soreness in your limbs. You had bruised knuckles and shins, and you were tender all over. Jack had thrown you several times last night, and not all your landings were graceful. You should have put an emitter. Groaning, you dragged yourself out of bed and headed out to the living room for some coffee.

Gabriel sat on the couch, dressed in cargo pants and a Blackwatch hoodie, eating reheated pizza and reading his tablet. Still in one of Jack's oversized t-shirts, you gave him a kiss, and he let you steal a bite of his pizza.

"Was going to get you up in another ten minutes," he said.

"Thanks," you yawned.

The bathroom door opened and Jack slunk out, full dressed. He trudged over to the coffee pot and poured himself a mug and grabbed two slices of pizza out of the box, not bothering to heat them up. He plunked down on the couch beside Gabriel and began eating. You got your own food, and more importantly coffee, and sat down beside Jack.

"Morning sunshine," you said, grinning at his bleary eyes.

Jack grumbled under his breath, but leaned over and gave you a saucy kiss on the cheek. Shaking your head, you blotted at your face with a napkin.

"Really Jack?"

"Sorry," he muttered, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Not entirely awake yet."
You laughed and kissed him back, notably not smearing any food on him. Gabriel leaned over and kissed his other cheek, laughing softly as Jack began to turn pink. "Good morning, amor. You look adorable as always."

"But also manly and muscular," you added. "Very leaderly."

Jack chuckled, shaking his head. "You two are too much." He rested his head on Gabriel's shoulder. "I have budget meetings most of the day. Come save me?"

"We can stage an escape," you said. "I think Vo and Genji have smoke bombs somewhere..."

"I think he wants one of us to sit in on them with him," Gabriel said. "You know, and not fall asleep."

"Oh, well, I uh...have work to do," you said, trying to come off as serious and failing.

"Same," Gabriel said, not even trying.

Jack groaned. "I thought you loved me."

"I do, Jack. Oh, I do, but not that much," Gabriel said, smiling through the brutality of his response.

It was early evening, but now you were finally caught up on the paperwork that accrued while you were in DC. And, you and Gabriel had taken turns sending Jack dirty messages to help keep him awake during the meeting. You'd sent cute pictures of Isha too, because you weren't a total sadist.

Tataryn's team was back from Kosovo had finished their debrief. Isha sat heavy on your shoulder as you headed toward the Blackwatch dorms. Her talons dug into your shirt, and you realized you were going to have to get some kind of protection, maybe falconer's gear. You'd look into it later.

Knocking on Tataryn's door, you didn't miss how Isha's eyes narrowed and she shrewdly looked up at the ceiling tiles.

You raised a brow, seeing some marks around the edge of one. Well, someone had a hiding place here, though the tile wasn't scratched up enough for it to be Isha. You'd since found a few caches in Gabriel and Jack's rooms. More pieces of jewelry that you did not recognize, snacks, and oddities like marbles, an antique perfume bottle, and coins from all over the world.

Tataryn opened the door, still in his armor, his hair pulled back in a tight braid.

"Lucky, Isha, why are you standing in front of my door looking so serious? Come in, come in. Sorry about the mess, I just returned, but I suspect you knew that already," he said slyly, gesturing to his armor. "I hope you don't mind while I slip into something more comfortable."

"As long as you're wearing pants," you said, and immediately regretted not being more specific.
"You're going to have to at least buy me dinner if you want to see me without pants." Tataryn gave you a cheeky wink. "And how are you, Ishana? Good hunting?"

Isha yawned, pretending not to see him.

"She loves me," Tataryn said, already stripping off his chestpiece. He pulled off the rashguard, taking his time so you could see his lean muscled back, tattoos and all.

You sighed impatiently.

"OK, the pants are next. So impatient-"

You leaned against the door, arms crossed. "So I've been finding lots of jewelry stashed all around the place. No one here is missing anything, so that begs the question, where did my murderbird find all these things?"

"I told you she was smart," Tataryn beamed. "Who wouldn't want to give you jewelry?" Tataryn perched on the arm of his sofa, shirtless. He flexed a few times for good measure.

"Tataryn, you're very pretty, but you're not going to distract me with your little muscles." He frowned at your dismissal and you had to work hard not to smirk. "Where did Isha get all this jewelry?"

Tataryn sighed, and began to unbraid his long hair. "I suppose I should start at the very beginning. Isha discovered some of Min's caches."

Oh.

"Min was very upset that Isha ate several of her...emergency rations. When we were on our prank run, Isha, with her new...treasure-hunting tendencies, found several more hidden spots. She showed Min, possibly as a way of making amends. We took small things, things that wouldn't be as easily missed."

"Like a large gold chain?" You scowled.

Tataryn shrugged. "Trust me, it was the least gaudy piece of the bunch." He chuckled. "Even better was the one earring she took. That would drive me crazy. So very clever and infuriating."

Isha gazed at him expectantly and he went to his shelf and grabbed a package of digestive biscuits. He was still missing a shirt, and now his hair was loose, falling in golden waves down his back. Tataryn was very good at being distracting.

"Anyway, I wasn't going to cheat her out of her fair share. We each picked out four or five trinkets," Tataryn said. "But we agreed you might...be concerned, so Min showed her how to make her own hiding places. Which I guess you discovered."

"Yes," you said, giving him a hard look.

Tataryn shrugged. "Well, it's never too early to start saving for your education, is it Isha?"

Isha just reached out, waiting for him to give her a biscuit.

Tataryn laughed and handed it to her. She crammed it in her mouth, giving him a dirty look. "Anyway, I hear you picked out some nice pieces at the Smithsonian. Planning something special
"I returned them."

"Of course, you did," Tataryn said, with a knowing look. "Most of them."

You glared at him, not taking the bait. "Did you consider the repercussions of teaching her these behaviors?"

Tataryn shrugged. "Not at the time, no. I was just excited to have such an apt pupil. I suppose it could be troublesome if she gets caught, but she can charm her way out of these things. Most people will assume she is a dumb animal that doesn't know any better. It is quite the advantage." He winked at Isha, like he'd already discussed this outcome with her.

"Not the point Tataryn. You're a bad influence."

Tataryn smiled wryly at that. "I know. Why do you think I want you to spend time with Kseniya? You are a gentler scoundrel than I. She is comfortable with you. You do not judge her and you do not talk down to her. I trust you to keep my daughter safe, maybe even teach her some of those troublesome morals that I have not mastered. These are important things, Lucky, if she is to live a better life than me."

You blinked, sucker punched by his honesty. Goddamn his manipulative hide. He knew exactly what he was doing.

"And, Isha is a natural. I hate to see that talent go to waste. We work well together, don't we?"

Isha just looked at the package of biscuits.

"She drives a hard bargain. Very respectable." He gazed at her admiringly. "You should have seen her and Min staring each other down for a chocolate bar. It nearly came to violence. I had to distract them with a pearl ring and a very shiny ruby bracelet. I am afraid your raptor may have very expensive tastes. It is good that she is willing to work for her keep."

Rubbing your forehead, you told yourself that some animals were just kleptomaniacs. Birds and scavengers especially. Maybe she would have learned these behaviors on her own. Maybe Tataryn was just giving her a better education. You weren't so sure how to go about teaching her ethics though.

"I tried to make it clear to her that stealing from Min was very unwise. I believe she understands, but you should work on that, just to be safe," Tataryn continued cheerfully. "They've reached a truce now, but early on I was quite worried."

"You didn't think to tell me any of this earlier?" You scowled.

"Well," Tataryn rested his chin on his hand. "I was actually hoping you would never find out. We're going to have to work extra hard on not getting caught, all right Ishana-bird?"

To your horror, your murderbird trilled in agreement.

Chapter End Notes
So I'm supposed to hear back from the job tomorrow or the day after. I'm a bundle of nerves, because damnit, I want to make a living wage and they offer that.

Also, useless!manager is apparently talking smack about me and I'm not sure if angry!manager is just trying to stir the pot, but he reports that useless!manager considers me the laziest person in the store and "doesn't know what I do." Well, yeah, he doesn't know what I do, because he never has to do my job. Because I get my work done. Work that is actually for two people, but my partner had to step up as a temporary manager, so I've been doing most of it alone. I'm pretty pissed. Everyone else was like "it's projection, we know it isn't true." But still, it makes me want to leave even more.

Ahem. Going to play some AC: Odyssey. I've only done a little bit, but so far it's interesting. The voice acting in the beginning is kind of stilted, like I'm laughing for the wrong reasons, but we'll see how it goes.

Ranger is just having bad skin allergies. They gave him some steroids and he's fine. I'm also coating him in aloe; that's the vet's recommendation.
Chapter 100

Chapter Summary

Family Day is about to begin, but some family members are more welcome than others.

Chapter Notes

...So I'm an idiot, and we've reached 100 chapters.

Trigger warning for sexual harassment and the gaslighting that goes with it.

You waited in the docking bay, more than a little concerned by Jack's lack of planning. Isha sat on your lap, and you'd shown her pictures of each person, explaining they were safe, and that she needed to be patient with them. Not that you thought she would misbehave, but it was better to lay boundaries.

An Athena drone hovered beside you, and Isha seemed more interested in it than your lecture. Great, you were being preachy and boring.

The first transport arrived, and when the bay doors opened, Feng bounced out, carrying a large tote bag, two rolling suitcases, and wearing a large floppy straw hat with an enormous fake daisy secured around the crown. Big red flower-shaped sunglasses covered her face, and she wore overall shorts patterned with numerous pachimari icons and a green raptor t-shirt. Her socks were knee high with rainbow stripes and she had on neon green sneakers with bright orange laces.

You stared at her for what felt like a very long, very psychadelic time. Isha squawked.

"What?" Feng asked, lifting her sunglasses. "I'm supposed to be a school kid, yeah?"

You blinked a few times. A red metal ball floated behind Feng.

"I told you that you looked like a manic colorblind beggar," Zheng's cultured voice came from the orb. "It's absolutely ridiculous. You should not have left the house that way."

Privately, you agreed Zheng's assessment. Feng could probably refine the look and make it some kind of iconic rainbow urchin queen street wear, but it wasn't an ideal disguise. "I uh...Umm. Jack's sister is in high school."

"And?" Feng asked, narrowing her eyes at you.

"...In rural Indiana."

"Oh. Yeah." Feng crossed her arms, lips pursed in the beginnings of a pout. "Damn. I was looking forward to trying to pass for a grade schooler. The younger, the better. You can get away
with a lot more if they think you're younger," she said, tapping her fingertips together. "Throwing water balloons, asking for candy, piggyback rides: these are all more acceptable when people think you're under twelve."

"You're a little tall," you said, patting Isha, who was studying Feng's hat with predatory interest. "But, if you didn't want anyone to recognize you, the plan worked."

Feng snorted. "OK, I get it. It's too much." She sighed. "Aunt Zheng made me pack normal clothes too. Don't worry." She shot the floating orb a sulky look

"Why don't you say "hi" to Auntie Feng?" You said, nudging Isha.

Casting a baleful look at you, Isha hopped down and strutted over to Feng.

Feng crouched down. "How is my favorite raptor-niece? Well, my only raptor niece. Bayan decided I was his raptor-godmother, and that set of responsibilities is completely different."

Standing at Feng's feet, Isha begrudgingly stuck out one hand.

Feng gasped and crouched down, delicately taking the little clawed fingers in hers for a handshake. "That's adorable. You've gotten so big and pretty, and I hear you're a smart little monster too." She sniffed. "Jack sends me pictures, and I love how much you love your dogs, and-
"

Isha yanked her hand back and turned around, civilities observed and done with.

"Wait! I have gifts!" Feng said, dropping her bags, and frantically digging through the tote. "I brought you spicy squid jerky, and rice crackers, and a limited edition Pachimari Pocky!"

"I think Genji might fight you for that," you said, shaking your head.

Isha hesitated, cocking her head to the side.

"She is so damn clever. My god-babies don't make me work this hard," Feng hissed, yanking out a giant bag of shredded squid jerky. She tore it open and handed the entire package to Isha. Isha didn't hesitate. She snatched the bag, and ran back to your chair, diving underneath. The plastic rustled and you could already hear her chewing mouthfuls of the stuff.

"She's a thief," you said.

"Species trait," Feng shrugged. "Peony, Altan, and Odval are all thieves," Feng said, referring to Bayan's trio. "They work in teams. I have a video of them stealing eggs out of the fridge. It was a group heist: together they opened the door, one held the door, the other grabbed the eggs one by one, and one caught them and set the aside as they were tossed down. Then they put Peony on her back and she held the eggs against her stomach while the other two dragged her along like a wagon." Feng shook her head. "I have the whole thing recorded if you want to watch."

You sighed, grateful that you only had one murderbird. "Later for sure. Do they just steal food? Or are there other things?"


"Hey, are you really going to try to eat that all?" You asked Isha, glancing down at your
feet. You got down on your knees and tapped her. "Stop that. Don't gorge yourself. It'll make you sick. Give it here."

Isha growled in protest.

"If you don't hand it over, Aunt Feng won't give you any more snacks, and she brought lots of things for her favorite raptor niece."

Reluctantly, Isha released the bag. It was a third empty already. She emerged from under the chair, giving you a dirty look.

"Come on Isha, I have coconut-flavored rice crackers," Feng said, opening a package and holding one out.

Isha trudged over and reached up. Feng put the cracker in her hand, giggling the entire time. Isha continued holding up her empty hand, and Feng placed a cracker in that one too. Isha shoved both of them into her mouth simultaneously and you sighed.

"That's not good manners," you said, unsure of why you bothered.

Isha chewed loudly, spraying the floor with crumbs. You were pretty sure she was doing that on purpose.

"So Jack really thought she was some kind of bizarre chicken?" Feng laughed.

"For like five minutes," you said. "But she adores him. Acts extra babyish around him. And gets him to carry her around."

"They're social animals," Feng said. "Like us."

"Though she gets all tough and serious for Gabriel and the other Blackwatch agent who has been training her. She seems happy, but she's started to exhibit some weird hoarding behaviors..."

"Mmm," Feng rubbed her chin. "But she is housebroken, and that's pretty awesome. We're using the woodchip litter boxes too and the god-babies are picking it up. Some of the others are kind of stubborn."

Feng took off her hat and set it on Zheng's orb. Her hair was in twin braids, polka-dot ribbons tying off the ends.

"Really?" Was all Zheng said.

"It looks quite nice," Athena piped up. "Do you think I could get some accessories, Lucky?"

"Yes," you said, immediately. "I always thought you needed a giant bow, but...I wasn't going to pressure you."

"I would be willing to try it," Athena said.

"Does anyone market accessories directly at AIs, instead of their human companions?" Feng rubbed her chin.

"Yes, but they tend to be more functional," Zheng said. "This hat is blocking my light sensor, and now I'm in night mode." Her orb glowed with a soft red light.
"Hmm," Feng wore a cartoonish wrist watch and began typing something on the screen. She did not remove the hat. "OK, so I'm Maggie's schoolmate. Michael's too maybe, since I can pass for between their ages." She tapped her cheek. She was a little older than Michael, though she still looked like a teenager.

"What's your cover back home?"

"Some well-deserved R&R after a new project. It's done. Already launched. I really hauled ass," Feng said with a cheerful nod. "Didn't sleep for three days leading up to the press release, and I'm never doing that again. Li and Bayan had to trick me into leaving the office, and then after I passed out - still think one of them drugged me - they had the nerve to yell at me about it."

"That is unhealthy," you said. "The not-sleeping part. I'd have drugged you too."

Feng snorted. "Well, you're a jerk." She jammed her hands in her pockets. "Don't worry. When I woke up, Auntie gave me a long lecture on the neurological importance of sleep, and also threatened to forcibly sedate me if I did that again. You guys really need to learn about boundaries."

"Desperate times, desperate measures." You nodded at the floating red ball, and it pulsed agreeably back at you.

"Anyway, I have to admit, the tech is an innovation, not a completely new invention. But, I'm the one who thought of it, got the engineers to fine tune the specs, and then streamlined those for a functional prototype. If all the test runs go well, we can begin mass production in-"

"LU-CKEEEE!"

You and Feng looked up as the bay doors opened a blonde blur hurled herself across the waiting room. You barely had time to brace yourself as Maggie threw her arms around you, cackling with glee.

Isha squawked in alarm, and you quickly held up one hand. "It's Maggie," you said. "Jack's sister. Stand down."

Maggie grinned at you, cheeks flushed, blonde hair in a long braid. She was wearing an Overwatch t-shirt and basketball shorts. She also looked leaner and more muscular than she had at Christmas. "Oh my God, that's your mutant bird? She's adorable!" Maggie squealed, hugging you tighter. "You guys have a pet together!" She stage-whispered. "Can I be Aunt Maggie? Please?"

"Sure?" You hugged her back, wondering if you were going to have to pull a Chang and wiggle away, but Maggie released you, beaming. "Thank you so much for persuading Jack to let us come."

"He would have done it anyway," you said, rubbing the back of your neck. "And uh, this is..."

"Claire," Feng said, grinning at Maggie. "Call me "Claire." Pleased to finally meet you." Feng extended her hand and Maggie shook it rapidly with both hands.

"I love your outfit, Claire. And your tattoo. I want some too. My parents would flip, but I've got a few years to persuade them."

"Claire is your classmate," you said, giving Maggie a wry look. "It's her cover."
"Really?" Maggie said, eyes wide. "I never knew. We have so much to talk about. Like Ms. Boomershine's terrible geometry exams."

"I was OK at geometry," Feng said, almost sounding genuinely modest.

"Good, maybe you can help me with my homework," Maggie said. She glanced over at you. "Let me guess, this was Jack's idea?"

"Yes," you said. "I told him to run it by you. Maybe it slipped his mind?"

"Of course it did." She rolled her eyes. "That's my brother. The inconsiderate ass." Maggie squinted at Feng. "How classified is this?"


"Hey, sorry. I tried to slow her down, but she dumped my bag out and ran."

You looked up to see Michael, his hair no longer black, but the same Morrison blonde as his siblings. He still had it spiked, and he was wearing a band t-shirt with ripped jeans. You'd never heard of "Billie the Squid and Gnarlywhals," but that didn't mean anything. And Michael too, had filled out since Christmas. You were a little surprised by the amount of muscle he had put on; he was still leaner than Jack, however, he looked more like a grown man and less like a gangly teen. But then Chang did have it out for him. He gave you a shy smile, stopping short of hugging you.

"Hey Michael. You look healthy." You shook his hand. "I was a little worried that Chang was going to accidentally destroy you."

"It would have been completely intentional," Chang said, as she emerged behind him, expression flat. She wore a leather jacket and jeans; the jacket looked like it had been in more fights than you.

Michael laughed nervously.

She walked past him and up to Feng. "I don't care if we have business, Zhai. If anything happens to these two, because of you-"

"Relax Sergeant, I swore a blood oath to Jack. You know, the gross kind." She mimed drinking. "His enemies are my enemies. His family is my family." Feng said placing one hand over her heart.

"You killed several members of your extended family," Chang snarled, obviously not convinced by that argument.

"Yeah, but they started it," Feng grumbled. "And Jack is part of the family that I like. It's a very important distinction. Not to mention we're friends. I wasn't friends with any of the southern assholes. And they tried to kill my mom. Which, by the way, only makes her angrier." Feng shuddered, one hand still over her heart.

Maggie stared at Feng with big eyes.

Chang gave you a sharp look, more raptor than human. "You trust her?"

"Yes," you said, though you didn't go into detail. You trusted her to have your back. You trusted her to do her best. You didn't trust her to stay focused around shiny things or to have the
sense to avoid teaching Maggie and Michael dangerous truths.

Chang frowned, giving Feng a hard look. "Jack does too. But you're a better judge of character. Not that that's saying much."

If your understanding was correct, that was practically an endorsement from her. "I try."

Chang crossed her arms. "What is that?" She jerked her chin at Isha.

You snorted. "That is Isha. Isha, that is Chang. She's safe and she's one of Jack's best friends, but don't bother her."

Isha watched from the chair, not making any move to approach Chang.

Chang stared at your murderbird for ten seconds then shook her head. "Of course, he'd want a mutant chicken," she muttered, before stalking out of the waiting room. You watched as the rest of her squad filed out in civilian clothes, Fitzpatrick and Almasi waving at you as they left.

"...So she's hot and terrifying," Feng said, shaking her head. She turned to face Michael. "Hi, I'm--"

"Zhai Feng, the Triad tech mogul of Shanghai," Michael said solemnly.

"-Claire," Feng said, sheepishly.

Maggie narrowed her eyes. "Oh, she is. He showed me your TED talk this week. Very cool. Shiny morphing laser arms."

"Integrated hard light prostheses," Michael corrected. He glanced at you with a frown. Like he'd just now realized how many secrets Jack had been keeping, and how big some of them were.

You had not been paying attention to tech news; you had been too focused on the aftermath of Black Abacus.

"That was the beginning of the big project I told you about." Feng grinned at you. "There's more coming," she said cheerfully. "But anyway, I'm incognito this trip. So, I'm Claire." She offered her hand and Michael shook it carefully, motions taut and wary.

"Oh come on, I'm not going to bite. You're like, my adopted brother and we've just met. You haven't earned the same level of ire as my biological brother."

Michael glanced at you.

"Feng's cool. Just let her know if she does anything that makes you uncomfortable. It's usually unintentional."

Feng nodded. "True. I have an amazingly bad attention span and extremely questionable impulse control."

"She plays it up," you said, patting Feng's shoulder. "She's a lot more competent than she acts."

Feng favored you with a toothy look. "Don't share all my secrets."

Maggie's gaze darted between her brother and Feng. "So, blood oaths? Family-killings? How are we related?" She leaned forward, staring at Feng's face, like maybe she could find a
distant cousinship in the bone structure.

"By blood oath?" Feng said with a shrug. "I mean, Jack and I cut ourselves, bled into a tea
cup, and drank from it, all to secure an alliance because-

"And there goes a bunch of classified information," you said, resting your face in your palm. "Please stop. Now."

"Oh, you know we won't repeat anything," Maggie said, linking arms with Feng. "So, you're a mafia princess Ironman. And your cover is that we're classmates. I want to hear the juicy details. Like, did you fight alongside my brother and Lucky?"

"Yeah, and they flirt so hard: it's adorable-

"Oh my god! Tell me everything! Was Gabe there?" Maggie's eyes gleamed.

"Uh...not that time, but I got to seem him right before Lucky and some friends came to visit me in Shanghai..."

Feng changed into an oversized t-shirt from Purdue University and denim shorts, but she left on the colorful socks and the flower sunglasses.

Athena was monitoring Zheng, but that was outside your expertise.

Michael kept sneaking long looks at Isha as you walked your charges through the base.

"That's not a bird," he said while Feng and Maggie chatted at twice the speed of a normal human, and laughed loud enough to turn heads. You heard something about "cosplay" and wondered if this was all a terrible mistake. "She's not a hoatzin either." He waited for you to confirm his suspicions.

"Feng pulled a Jurassic Park. Isha's a velociraptor, heavily genetically modified, of course." You carried your murderbird in one arm, not missing how she kept studying Michael and Maggie, like she recognized the Morrison look. You weren't sure she really understood terms like "sister" or "aunt," but she understood body language and social groups.

Michael stared at the back of Feng's head. "Is she safe?"

"No," you said, not just talking about Isha. "But she's on our side. We had this massively classified epic bonding adventure, plus I sometimes go visit her on the weekends."

Michael nodded slowly, like he wasn't really sure what to make of that. He shot Isha another concerned look. "How big will she get?"

"Good question. She should stay turkey-sized, but we'll see."

The trip to the officers' quarters went smoothly. Your party got some curious looks, but you reached Jack's room without any issue.

"Wow, this is smaller than I expected," Maggie blurted out as you let them into the room.

Feng covered her mouth, not really muffling her laughs.
Michael sighed.

"These are military quarters. The Strike Commander's suite is one of the larger rooms," you said.

"Is Gabe's room bigger?" Maggie asked, wagging her eyebrows at you.

"About the same size, but he's got his own place by the Blackwatch dormitories."

"How big is your room?" Maggie asked, setting her bags down beside the coffee table. Feng neatly placed hers against the wall. Michael set his farthest away from Feng's. He was staring at the painting of Jack and Atticus that you'd commissioned.

"My room is much smaller. I have a private bathroom, but the whole thing is maybe a third the size of this room."

Maggie pursed her lips. "You should get a bigger room. Jack should be able to do that for you, right? I swear, my brother is so dense."

You shrugged. "It's within his purview."

Maggie paused, crossing her arms. "You don't seem to mind... Because you don't sleep there," she trailed off, grin widening.

"I do, sometimes," you said with a sigh, not missing Feng's smarmy look.

"You need to redecorate in here. Or let Gabe do it," Maggie said, looking around. "Oh, that's your work." She grinned at you and Michael. "That can stay."

"Oh, not bad," Feng said, tilting her head sideways. "You're really good."

"Lucky commissioned it for him," Michael said, turning a little pink around the edges.

"Still think his room needs more personality," Maggie muttered. "Maybe we can fix that while we're here..."

"So, what are we doing for dinner?" Feng asked, grinning as she diverted the subject. "Because I still haven't gotten to eat in the cafeteria, and I'm so curious-"

"It's not as good as yours," you said.

"And are you going to cook for us? Because Ray says you're a good cook," Maggie said.

You blinked trying to digest the fact that Chang was saying nice things about you behind your back. "Umm...maybe?"

"Where's Gabe?" Maggie asked.

"Are Hanzo and Genji going to be around?" Feng asked.

"Can I meet Commander Wilhelm?" Maggie grinned. "And I want to say "hi" to Ana too!"

"Oh, and I want to see Bandit!" Feng chirped. "I brought him something!"

You rubbed the back of your neck, a panicked smile spreading across your face.
"I'm sure Lucky has something planned, if you two would let her get a word in edgewise," Michael scolded.

Maggie covered her mouth with both hands. "Oh, sorry," she said, her giggles muffled.

Feng gave you a sly look, one that conveyed that she'd been egging Maggie on intentionally.

"You guys better behave, or I'm leaving you with Torby. And he'll probably take you to IKEA, and tell you all the reasons why their designs are subpar, and how Sweden only exports it as a joke on the rest of the world."

"But they have tasty food," Feng said. "I mean, the smoked salmon is great. Princess cakes are adorable. And lingonberries? I love lingonberries. They're not secretly cranberries, are they? Because I'm going to embarrassed if they are."

"I...don't think so," you said.

"The lingonberry, also known as vaccinium vitis-idaea is related to the cranberry, but they are not identical," Athena piped up.

"Thank you, Athena!" Feng said. "Why can't you be helpful like that, Auntie?"

The red orb floated there silently.

"Why do you call your drone "Auntie?" Were you raised by omnics or something?" Maggie asked, brows furrowing. And actually, that wasn't a bad back story, though you had met Feng's parents, and maybe being raised by omnics would have been better.

"Because she nags me like one," Feng said smoothly. "Anyway-"

The door opened, and you blinked as Gabriel and Jack entered, still in full uniform, carrying bags of snack food.

"Gabe!" Maggie leapt forward, and Gabriel tossed the food onto the couch, catching her mid-jump. She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed.

Jack rolled his eyes, setting his bags down and grinning at you before he turned to Michael and gave him a big hug.

"You look good. Ray's fitness regiment is something else. You might not even need SEP," Jack said.

Michael gave an embarrassed laugh. "Thanks. I uh...I couldn't feel anything except pain for the first three months."

"But now all my friends want to come over to see my other hot brother," Maggie said. "Bleagh."

"Ooh, getting popular with the ladies-" Jack teased.

"Her friends are way too young," Michael said, turning red.

"Some of them are legal," Maggie said. "But Michael likes older women." She winked.

You half expected Gabriel to say something snarky, but he just patted Maggie on the head.
Feng stepped forward and gave Jack a quick hug. "Way to warn your siblings about me."

Jack laughed sheepishly. "I figured it would all work out in the end. Lucky introduced you, didn't she?"

"Not the point," Maggie said, walking up and punching him in the arm. "You should have given me a heads up. I would have brought props, gotten Michael to edit some photos, we could have had a good back story going."

Jack frowned and rubbed his arm.

"I don't know why you're surprised," Michael said. "He's always been a flake. Remember Christmas? When he didn't tell anyone anything about Lucky? Like we were supposed to guess they were dating and have presents for her, without any warning? Good job, Strike Commander. You're great at details. I see why you're in charge on an international military organization."

You covered your mouth, stifling a laugh.

"Fuck you!" Jack scowled, looking less like the Strike Commander and more like a very annoyed older sibling.

"Oh, is this the part where we tell embarrassing Jack stories? Because I have one," Feng said, raising her hand.

Gabriel laughed and came to stand beside you, watching everyone pick on Jack. "How are you doing, chica?"

"Ready to give Jack some quality family time," you said, leaning in for a quick peck on his cheek.

"I want a real kiss." Chuckling, Gabriel cupped the back of your head, nibbled on your bottom lip.

Your fingers dug into his shirt and he parted your lips with his tongue, his mouth teasing against yours. You sighed softly, placing a series of soft quick kisses against his lips.

He smirked at you and let go, eyes promising more later. And when you looked up, Feng and Maggie were watching you with big delighted eyes. Jack gave you and Gabriel a fond look, his smile downright silly. And Michael was staring at his shoes, his face and the tips of his ears burning pink.

"Well, I have snacks, but that's not dinner," Jack said. "Umm, did you want to go down to the cafeteria, or-?"

"Yes!" Feng and Maggie shouted, already racing for the door.

Family Day didn't start till tomorrow, but it lasted the entire weekend. You'd already escorted Isha, Maggie, Michael, and Feng to Reinhardt's office. He was showing them around today, probably taking them out on some of the training courses. He recognized Feng immediately, and though you knew he had reservations about On Sing, he remained cheerful and friendly with her. For her part, Feng turned on the charm, though it seemed she was genuinely delighted by him. Maggie had latched onto Feng as a co-conspirator, and while Michael was on good behavior,
you could tell that she made him nervous. Isha stayed polite with your guests, but she loved Reinhardt, and he let her perch on his shoulder like a giant parrot.

On your way back to the office, you passed In-Sec Officer Sakai. She was a serious woman who rarely smiled. Today, she seemed to be in a hurry. Athena knew to monitor her; she wasn't your responsibility. You still watched her disappear down the hall, not quite able to relax while she was behind you.

You spent the morning compiling Shit Spiders intel and receiving photo messages from Maggie and Feng. An unmanned Athena drone sat on the ground by the office door.

Gabriel had been in and out of the office all morning. Jack was still wading through his bureaucratic nightmare. And Ainsley kept cc'ing you on all the Family Day planning messages, because she thought you'd wanted to be kept updated on things like the catering, the facilities tours, and the three-legged race. It was a nice thought, but you didn't actually care. You weren't a damn event planner. Well, not the kind of family-friendly event that Overwatch was trying to organize.

You drained your tea, and read Lacroix’s reports on the American situation. Brant was making some headway within the FBI. Athena verified that. Kwento was in Geneva right now, smoothing out the potential fallout from Black Abacus. Prince had sat through another session with Gabriel, and seemed eager to talk, not about what you wanted to hear, but just to chat. It was odd, but you got the feeling that on some level, he liked Gabriel. No, that wasn't quite right. Prince at least respected Gabriel and wanted to have another "tough guy" to talk shop with. It was, theoretically, a good thing, though one you would not have predicted.

You had piles of other mission reports to sort through, orders to delegate, and operation outlines to send back to the planner for improvements, or kick up to Gabriel for authorization. Some time after noon, you received an invite to lunch, the Jack-siblings were now famished after running Reinhardt's obstacle course. You got up and turned on the drone, requesting connection.

"Lucky, you should know, the Director is on site, and moving toward this part of the building," Athena said.

You raised a brow, wondering if this was going to be your chance to enact your clever cockblocking plan. "All right, cameras on then." You straightened up, adjusted your gloves, and walked out of the office, hoping to run into him in an isolated hallway. Athena kept her distance, already recording.

You made a few long circuits of the area, when you caught a whiff of that familiar heavy cologne. Grimacing, you headed toward it, and sure enough, there was the Director himself, in a navy blue suit and red tie. He had dyed his not-quite bouffant hair, an unconvincing shade of silver-blonde. He smiled sharply when he saw you, eyes flat and hungry. He reminded you then of a shark in that moment, and you forced your hands to relax at your side.

"Director," you said, with a salute.

"Agent Strike, just the woman I was looking for." He stared at your chest, gaze slowly traveling down your form and then back up, finally gazing at your face with a dismissive sneer.

"Is there something I can help you with?" You asked, keeping your tone even, almost bored.

"You are the helpful sort, aren't you?" He asked, in a way that didn't sound complimentary.
You didn't react to the snide tone. You just stood there impassively.

"Were you going to tell me about Morrison's constant meddling in Undersecretary Kwento's affairs? It's a funny coincidence that both Morrison and Reyes were in DC with you. Didn't think to put that in your report?"

"Commander Reyes and I were in Virginia for most of our America visit, dealing with DOD contacts. I was not privy to the politicking that the Strike Commander undertook. If I remember correctly, he was in Maryland for most of it."

Petras was slowly turning a blotchy shade of red. "So you claim that you had no idea-"

"I was on leave, sightseeing when the attack on DC happened. I was immediately recalled, as were the other members of Commander Reyes' retinue." You shrugged. "The Strike Commander informed me that we were rescuing civilian VIPs and that was that. As for the Undersecretary, I was under the impression that she did not approve of Blackwatch."

Petras glowered at you. "She doesn't. She made sure to take me to task over the existence of a secret black ops division. Fortunately, she remains unaware of the actual work Blackwatch undertakes."

You smothered a grin. Yeah, Kwento still didn't approve of Blackwatch, but she wasn't actually going to move against you, not unless you guys really fucked up. But apparently, that detail wouldn't stop her from giving Petras a hard time over it. You could appreciate that level of petty.

"That uppity bitch used the attack to build her platform in the UN," Petras growled, mostly to himself. "She's been spin-doctoring the entire event." He glared past you at the wall. It looked like he was especially furious that the DC attacks completely backfired: instead of killing Kwento, they lionized her. You were particularly pleased with that outcome, and wondered just how much Petras had collaborated with Nguyen on this venture.

"Was there anything else, Director?" You asked, stepping to the side.

He stomped in front of you, blocking your exit. "We're not done, Strike." He stepped closer, his cologne turning your stomach. "I don't think you're really serious about wanting this job. I don't think you really understand your position, or the proper amount of deference you should be showing me. I think it's time you prove your loyalty." He rested his hand on his belt. "Do a good job and we can make this quick. You might even like it, you uptight bitch."

"That was never part of our deal," you said coldly, flexing your fingers involuntarily.

"Those terms are changing. Unless you want Morrison to find out that you've been reporting to me. He'll throw you out on the streets like the trash you are." Petras gave you an ugly smile.

You only shook your head, knowing full well that you could fight him, and easily win. If he'd been a tad less chauvinistic, he would have realized that dangling the job promotion was a better lever. But the scumbag was trying to dominate the situation and you, and he didn't realize that he was woefully outclassed. Still you had a cover to maintain. Sighing, you crossed your arms.

"I can handle the Strike Commander, but this is rash behavior, sir. I have no interest in such things and honestly it's really not a good idea. In light of full disclosure, I should probably tell you
"I don't give a shit," Petras snarled, shoving you against the wall. "Just get on your knees, you cheap slut. I was patient with you. I tried to help you out. But now your stupid face is pissing me off-"

You were originally going to tell him that you had Hepatitis G, a newer chronic version of the infection that didn't actually get better, resisted the antivirals, and happened to be sexually transmitted. Lacroix had rolled his eyes at the story, but said it was more acceptable than your "oozing rash" excuse. However, when you looked up and past Petras, you stopped short.

Ainsley stood there, blue eyes comically wide, clutching her tablet. Her mouth hung open and she worked her jaw a few times, eyes darting between your face and Petras' back.

Just how much had she heard? You caught sight of the Athena drone hovering up high, still recording.

Petras grabbed your collar. "Don't even think about fighting me on this, Strike. I will end you and your career. Because I'm the goddamn director and you're nobody. No one is going to believe you. So just make it easy for yourself and-"

"UNCLE!" Ainsley screamed, and that unmistakable grating high-pitched shriek had never sounded so good.

Petras immediately released you, fumbling with his belt as he whirled. "Ainsley! What are you doing here?" He glared at her. "Can't you see I'm dealing with a disciplinary issue?"

"You were assaulting Agent Strike!" Ainsley shouted back.

"The bitch asked for it! Don't you try and lie now, Strike!" Petras whirled and jabbed his finger in your face. "You scheming bitch! Trying to turn my own flesh and blood against me!"

"Lucky hasn't said a thing! I heard you myself!" Ainsley wailed. "Don't you dare start gas-lighting me!"

You raised a brow, a little surprised that Ainsley was actually arguing with the director.

Petras glanced between the two of you. "Ainsley, it's just a misunderstanding. Tell her, Strike. Tell her that it's just a misunderstanding," he demanded. "Tell her right now, you lying whore!"

You crossed your arms, wondering if Petras actually heard the mixed messages he was sending so very badly.

Now sobbing, Ainsley lunged forward, furiously pounding on Petras' back. "Leave her alone!"

You blinked, shocked as Petras stumbled, Ainsley tearing at his jacket.

"Get off me, you crazy little bitch!" Petras shoved her backward and she fell onto her ass. Swearing, he raised his hand. "Your dumb cunt of a mother never did teach you how to respect-"

Your left hand shot out and your fingers closed around his wrist. Suddenly Petras' words cut off, a pained whine scraping out of the back of his throat.
"That's enough, Director," you said coolly. "We all know that you're under a great deal of stress. Perhaps you should go sit down somewhere quiet. You're clearly overexerting yourself."

Petras stared at you with wild eyes. "You'll be sorry, Strike."

You just smiled widely, your fingers squeezing just a little tighter. "Please, let's not do anything we'll regret."

He shuddered and tried to pull away. "Release me this instant!"

You glanced at Ainsley, who was sitting on the floor, just gaping at you both.

"Of course, sir," you said politely and let go.

Off-balance, Petras wobbled as you released him. Rubbing his wrist, he glowered at you and Ainsley, before hastily retreating down the hallway, possibly toward the infirmary.

Ainsley wiped her eyes, her makeup staying firmly in place despite the tears. She took a shaky breath and began to cry harder. You rubbed the back of your neck, completely at a loss on how to respond to this reaction.

"Come on," you said, after half a minute of muffled sobs. "I'll make you a cup of tea."

Chapter End Notes

I GOT THE JOB!! Put in my two weeks notice Thursday, did my drug test today, and start in November. Thank you for all the good wishes. Seriously. I appreciate it. Your comments are the serotonin boost my brain hasn't been getting naturally.

Toying with a Halloween oneshot Slasher76 piece. It'd be set in IAL, and a roleplay scary chase through the woos, kind of thing, so basically consensual dubcon. But that would set the fic back a little.
Chapter 101

Chapter Summary

Your response to Petras' unwanted advances.

Chapter Notes

Today is the one year anniversary of posting IAL, so you get an extra long chapter, somewhat sooner than the regular update schedule. Thanks for bearing with me guys. I appreciate it. We've had quite the journey.

You sat Ainsley on your couch, brewed a pot of chamomile tea, and set some chocolates in front of her. She sniffled, dabbing at her eyes.

The chamomile was for Gabriel. Sometimes he had trouble sleeping, and while it didn't actually knock him out, it did seem to help him relax. Athena had sent you and Lacroix a copy of the video as well as an inquiry about your status.

"I'm fine," you'd typed back. "Keep Lacroix apprised." You reached into your desk and pulled out your flask of whiskey. You poured her small glass of that too and handed her the cups.

"Whiskey and herbal tea. Take the whiskey first," you said.

Ainsley nodded, and obediently downed the whiskey and set the glass on the ground. "Lucky, I'm sorry. You shouldn't be doing this. I'm not even the one that-" She broke down, crying harder.

You weren't exactly sure what you were supposed to say. Yes, it was probably disturbing to realize that one's close family member was a scummy piece of shit. But there really wasn't much you could say to make that better. Instead, you sat down beside her, the implications sinking in. Director Petras had tried to assault you. Ainsley Petras had tried to rescue you. Overwatch Barbie had tried to be a hero because she thought you couldn't handle yourself. You were going to get laughed out of Blackwatch.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," she said, rocking back and forth.

"Know what? That the director is a sleazebag?" You shrugged. "It doesn't get spread around, but we don't leave female agents unattended around him," you said. "It's not a big deal."

She just started crying harder.

You blinked, trying to figure out what you'd said. Oh, you'd just told her that a lot of people knew that her uncle was a piece of shit who wasn't above using his position to harass women. That probably wasn't going to make her feel any better. And that wasn't even the worst of what he'd
"He-he-he's done this before?" She blew her nose on the tissue you offered.

You shrugged. "Tried. But he's an old bureaucrat and I'm a combat-trained agent. His real power is over my career."

Ainsley sniffled. "I had no idea. I'm so sorry. No wonder you didn't want me to mention you to him-" She began to sip the tea, taking deep breaths. "The Strike Commander and Commander Reyes won't let him fire you, will they?"

You managed a wry smile. "I don't think so. Not without good cause."

"Because I was a witness," she said, speaking rapidly now. "I know he's my uncle, but I won't help him cover this up. I promise, Lucky. I would never. There has to be something you can do. You can get a lawyer or make a report to Internal Security-"

You shrugged. "It's my word against his," you said. "He's right. He's the director and I'm nobody."

Ainsley stared at you in horror. "That's not true! You're a hero! You can't just let him bully you into silence!"

"He's just going to retreat and lick his wounds, and if I ever mess up anything on the job, he'll do his best to crucify me for it." It was terrible, but you did kind of enjoy stringing Ainsley along. She didn't know that Athena had recorded the whole damn encounter. It was awfully petty of you, especially considering she'd tried to come to your rescue. Maybe you shouldn't be quite so mean. "Relax, Ainsley. He probably won't do anything, since you saw it. Later he'll just come to you and try to pretend like nothing happened."

"I'll call my mom. She might have some advice. She never liked him anyway," Ainsley said, a little bit of confidence returning to her voice.

You wondered what that would actually accomplish. Nothing probably, but it would be interesting to hear about.

"If you think that's wise," you said. "Honestly, don't worry about it, Ainsley. I appreciate you stepping in. It was very brave."

Ainsley gave you a weak smile. "Was it? I just... I was terrible."

She really was. But even you knew better than to say that.

"Doesn't make it any less brave," you said, because it was the truth.

"I...thank you," Ainsley hung her head. "I...do you want me to file an incident report?"

You sat there for a moment, wondering how Lacroix would want this handled. You didn't need Ainsley's report, but it wouldn't hurt either. And maybe she needed to do it, for herself. "Write one up while the memory is still fresh. Then give yourself some time to think about it. If you want to submit it, take it straight to Captain Amari. If you don't..." You shrugged. "I understand."

Ainsley bit her lip, looking like she wanted to argue. "I...OK. That makes sense." She took a deep breath. "I know he's my uncle. I know this could get messy. But I don't want you to hate..."
You raised a brow, wondering if that was the deciding factor. Ainsley Petras was trying to turn over a new leaf, maybe. But was she trying to do the right thing, because it was the right thing, or was she just worried what you thought of her? And really, did her reasons matter?

She stood up, wiping her eyes, finding no comfort in your silence. "Is my makeup OK?"

"Flawless," you said.

"Thanks." She nodded, swallowing roughly. "I'm OK now." She squared her shoulders and flipped her hair back. "I'm going to go write that report and then I'll be in touch," she said.

"All right." You watched her go. When the door had closed securely behind her, you stood up. "Athena."

"Yes Lucky?"

"Keep a very close eye on her."

"Of course... Do you really think the director will retaliate against her?"

You crossed your arms. "I don't know." Just like you didn't know if that entire encounter had been staged. Petras' ire seemed real enough. "But it's best to be safe, don't you think?"

"Yes," Athena agreed.

"You haven't said anything to Jack and Gabriel, have you?"

"No. But I would not recommend-

"I'll handle it myself," you said, glancing down at the empty glasses and chocolate wrappers that Ainsley had left behind. It looked like you were cleaning up after her emotional breakdown yet again. Rolling your eyes, you shook your head and began to straighten up, not minding it nearly as much as you had the time before.

In a treacherous, face-paced world, it was kind of nice to see that some things hadn't changed.

There was a knock on the office door as you finished sanitizing the cups. "Athena?"

"It's safe," she said, and the door popped open.

You blinked as Ziv came in, dragging Távio behind him.

"McCree's out with our favorite spoiled rich kids and I couldn't locate that weasel Tataryn," Ziv said brusquely. "Gérard specifically forbade me from approaching your stupid boyfriends, and Amélie is finishing her advanced sniper certification exam, but she'll be ready shortly so-

"Slow down," you said, noting Távio's slightly confused expression.

"He's sticking to your side for the whole weekend," Ziv said sharply. "I'd do it, but you're too annoying."
You laughed softly, because Ziv was not a good bodyguard by any stretch of the imagination. And you were nowhere near as annoying as he was. "Ziv, he has his own duties to-"

"Wilhelm's busy with the tours and Gérard already OK'd it. So don't argue," Ziv snapped, shaking his finger in your face. "Kid, you just follow her around unless she's in her boyfriends' quarters. Then you wait outside."

"Ziv, it's fine."

"No, it's not fine!" Ziv scowled, pushing his hair back. It was getting unruly again. "Fucking Ainsley Petras had to charge to your rescue!"

You exhaled slowly, really wishing he hadn't phrased it like that. "I had it under control, Ziv."

Távio's eyebrows climbed higher, and it was obvious he hadn't been briefed about what had just occurred. "Umm...what do I need to do?"

"Keep Director Petras away from Lucky. Spill coffee on him. Pull the fire alarm. Pretend you're having a seizure so she can rescue you."

"Please be more discrete than that," you said, elbowing Ziv.

Távio frowned. "What did he do?"

Ziv pursed his lips, and glowered at the door. Apparently, you had to answer this question.

"He has trouble taking "no" for an answer," you said with a shrug. "That's really all that needs to be said."

Távio's expression darkened. He glanced at Ziv, biting his lower lip. "Understood, Agent Mihret. I'll watch her six. You can count on me."

Ziv inhaled deeply. "Good. I'm trusting you, kid. Don't let us down."

You rolled your eyes, because Ziv wasn't _that_ much older than Távio, and if the two of them got into a fight, well, your hacker wasn't going to win that brawl.

"Understood," Távio gave a grim nod.

"Really, this is unnecessary, I have Athena and Tataryn will show up and be far more discrete."

"Yeah, well, Tataryn will get his turn later," Ziv said. "Now if you excuse me, I have to help Gérard filter through the surveillance footage. We have a fucking needle-dicked director to fry."

Ziv stormed out of the office, slamming the door shut.

Távio stared after him, a small smile tugging at his lips.

"He's such a drama queen," you said, shaking your head.

"He's kind of impressive," Távio said.

First you, then Reinhardt, and now Ziv? Távio was taking his cues from the worst people
imaginable. You really weren't sure how to handle that.

"What would you like me to do, while we're waiting?"

He wasn't cleared for most Blackwatch intel, so you couldn't put him on the paperwork. He was supposed to stay with you, so you couldn't send him out for food. There wasn't much you could give him to do right now.

"I'm afraid this might be a boring weekend," you told him. "You can grab a book maybe?"

Távio wrinkled his nose. "Is that an order?"

"No." Shaking your head, you went to your terminal to write up your incident report.

"How do you keep making these messes, Chanceux?" Lacroix groaned, sitting in the chair across from your desk, one hand on his forehead. "And you were progressing so well..."

"Don't you dare blame me," you said, crossing your arms. "It wasn't my fault. I de-escalated. I was the very voice of restraint. Was I supposed to let him slap Ainsley around?"

"You cannot call it de-escalating if you just make him angrier, Chanceux," Lacroix said, giving you a sullen frown. "And I thought you didn't like the Petras girl?"

You shrugged. "Doesn't mean I want to see her get hurt." You re-watched the video, impressed by the picture quality and sound clarity. From his not-at-all subtle opening leer to the attempted slap, Athena had captured the entire encounter flawlessly. You had Petras dead to rights.

Lacroix took a deep breath, adjusting his emerald green tie. He'd dressed up today, sharp black suit, platinum tie pin, calla lily boutonnière. You wondered if that was because of the upcoming festivities, or if it was for more personal reasons. And then you abruptly stopped wondering because you didn't need to know what Ziv and Amélie were getting up to tonight.

"If it had just been you and Petras, you could have gotten in a scuffle. I understand. But having his niece bear witness complicates things immensely. Especially if she is dead set on opposing him. He will retaliate."

You sighed, massaging your forehead. "I didn't want Ainsley there, Lacroix. I just thought Athena could get a better recording in an isolated hallway-"

"He was far too reckless," Lacroix said, rubbing his chin. "I don't disagree. He is very upset about Adaeze's promotion and sudden interest in Overwatch affairs. He is aware of Prince's capture, and has been demanding the interrogation transcripts. We have, of course, provided some heavily edited ones, but I dislike his increased scrutiny." Lacroix made a disgusted noise in the
back of his throat. "And I dislike his face. His face offends me."

"Yeah, seconded," you said, thinking about his bulbous nose and beady little eyes. "His cologne's pretty awful too." You sipped your coffee. Távio had been sent out to pick up snacks while you and Lacroix discussed your options. Jack and Gabriel had just come to terms with what happened in DC. You hated the idea of giving them something else to worry about. Being the center of so much...trouble irritated you immensely. Back in the day, you could fend it off, maybe leave town after dark. That wasn't an option here.

You could lie, but then they were going to ask why Távio was following you around. Plus, you weren't so sure you could trust Ainsley to keep her damn mouth shut. And Athena wasn't exactly keeping your secrets either.

"I don't think we can hide this from Gabriel and Jack," you said. "And I'm saying that as someone who really wants to."

"No, there are too many variables," Lacroix said, shaking his head. "You are correct. And Petras is slated to participate in many of the Family Day ceremonies. Jack and Gabriel have excellent self control, but in light of recent events, I cannot help but be...concerned." Shaking his head, the spymaster's pained expression said the rest. You were a complication.

"Sorry," you muttered. "I'm not trying to make things more difficult. I can't help being a shit magnet."

"I know," Lacroix said, waving you off. "And I do not actually blame you. Despite your reputation, you are not the cause of troublesome events. Your ill "luck" has a perfectly rational explanation."

You blinked. "Wait, what?"

"You are an agent with highly specialized talents. If you've been assigned to an operation, it is because that operation requires said talents. And if things go wrong, it is rarely because you were personally careless, but because the situation was already precarious. That doesn't mean you always make the correct call, just that the ensuing chaos isn't entirely your doing." Lacroix gave you a wry smile. "That doesn't mean that I don't expect you to be constantly improving, Chanceux. I can think of at least three ways you could have prevented this outcome."

You rested your head on the desk, already knowing one answer. "I should have stayed in the office. Less bystanders and while Athena's camera angles wouldn't be as great, we wouldn't have attracted witnesses and maybe he wouldn't have been so bold in Gabriel's territory."

"That's one," Lacroix said. "A lack of witnesses would have reduced the tension."

"I shouldn't have waited for Ainsley to react. I should have just pushed past him and walked her away before she could make a scene," you muttered. "I was, I have to admit, in shock."

"Yes," Lacroix agreed. "That would have been the optimal action. Even if Ainsley is truly neutral, she still may decline to bear witness against her uncle. If Ainsley is against us, her involvement would be harmful, but for the fact Athena was recording."

"Should I have let him slap her?" You wondered.

"No," Lacroix said with a laugh, because he knew you'd thought about slapped her multiple times. "The other option, and the one you were least likely to consider or succeed at, would be to charm him. Of course, you're very flattered by his attention. Oh, you know somewhere
private you can talk... Oh, and would you look at that, Agent Decoy is looking for you and can you get a raincheck? You can barely hide your disappointment, you were so looking forward to demonstrating your loyalty." Lacroix gave you a pointed look. "That would have worked best."

"But been so much less satisfying," you said under your breath.

"You derive plenty of satisfaction from duping your opponents, Chanceux. This is no different. Deception takes skill."

He was right, of course, not that you were going to admit it. Lacroix certainly had a jeweler's eye for situational nuance. You could deconstruct interactions after the fact, but in the moment, you just weren't as smooth as Lacroix or Amélie.

"I am working on it," you said. "But I'm not you."

"I know," Lacroix said, steepling his fingers. "But you need to learn faster. I do believe I have a solution though, one that does not require excess strain on your relationships and one that will keep the director out of our hair. I was saving it for a rainy day, one I had hoped would come later than this."

"Sorry," you muttered again.

"Adaeze has all sorts of budgetary and operations queries. Small things that will amount to nothing, but she is well within her rights to demand that Petras brief her on the subjects. If she calls him soon, she can keep him occupied for a few days. Just so he misses Family Day and the PR opportunities. More importantly, he will be out of Zurich while you update Jack and Gabriel on the situation."

"We are going to nail him with this footage, right?"

"If we have to, yes. But I would rather bring him down for treason and war crimes, if I have the choice," Lacroix said. "We both know that we need to time it right. As much as I would love to oust him this very weekend, it would affect other operations..."

"I understand that for now, it's better to let him remain close enough to keep an eye on," you said.

Lacroix nodded. "Exactly." He gave you pleased smile. "Let me review our options before I contact Adaeze. Once I give you the all-clear, you may inform Gabriel and Jack of the situation."

You didn't miss how he left that task to you. Just like you didn't miss how this time he made no attempt to try to convince you to keep them in the dark.

"Keep your guard up, Chanceux. This weekend may be more dangerous than I originally anticipated."

You sent Reinhardt and the gang an apology for missing lunch, and headed to the gym with Távio in tow, knowing you wouldn't be good company just yet. Because all that calm calculating strategizing aside, you were furious.

It crept up on you, like a yawning hunger. Ainsley's selfless actions had thrown you for a loop, but after some delay your own feelings were now rising to the surface. Rage bubbled up in
Fury tightened your motions and you had to remind yourself not to grind your teeth.

On top of that, you knew he wasn't done. Petras would retaliate, and now you had an even larger target on your back.

The footage would be excellent leverage, except Lacroix was right. Petras was a big fish and you needed every bit of evidence to bring him down. You didn't just want him ousted as the director, you wanted him punished for his collaboration with Talon, and if you were to get that, you needed to keep him close.

The risk to yourself was worth that. You didn't like knowing that you'd have to continuously keep your guard up. But everyone had made sacrifices for the mission, and you'd just have to deal.

"Chanceux, you look like you got some mustard in your nose," Amélie said, already waiting for you in the gym. She wore a violet unitard, her hair pulled back in a tight bun.

You touched your nose, before you realized it was another of her idioms.

"It means you look very angry," she said lightly. But there was sharpness in her smile. "And rightly so. Oh, hello there," she nodded at Távio. "You must be Távio. Ziv and Chanceux have said so much about you. All of it very interesting."

You could feel the curiosity emanating from your former student.

"Umm, pleased to finally meet you, ma'am." Távio already knew who Amélie was, most of the base did.

"Chanceux specifically mentioned your fondness for the title "ma'am." I don't see why you're so fussy," she said to you. "It can be stifling, certainly. But he's adorable when he uses it."

You glanced over at Távio who watched Amélie with big, wary eyes. Yes, he was charmed, but he was also scared. Smart boy.

"Maybe so," you agreed. "But my job isn't to teach him to be cute. My job is to make him more dangerous."

"Dangerously cute," Amélie giggled and Távio's cheeks darkened. "Oh I've made him blush!"

"I'm going to stand over there now," Távio mumbled, hands jammed in his pockets. He took a few steps away from you both.

"Was that necessary?" You sighed.

"No, but it was fun," Amélie said, booping you on the nose with her finger. "And now you
look less upset." She handed you a wooden practice saber. "But I guarantee that this will cheer you up even more."

You raised a brow. You knew Amélie and Lacroix fenced, but they both seemed to prefer epee.

"Now you must be gentle with me, Chanceux," Amélie said with a wink. "This is not my strongest suit."

"Nor mine," you said, testing the weight. Most practitioners used electrical equipment for scoring, but right now you didn't care about the mental chess of fencing. You just wanted to hit something.

"We can be play at being musketeers," she said cheerfully raising her own blade. "Or pirates. Or both. I want to be the pirate. You can be the musketeer." She saluted you then.

"Rules?"

"The only rule of the high seas: no mercy," she said with a bubbly laugh.

"That's it?" You asked, and she lunged, nearly whacking you across the face with her weapon. "I thought this was one of those civilized sports. With too many stupid rules."

"It is," she agreed, as you parried another strike. "Which is why we are just going to hit each other till you feel better...you uptight musketeer."

You slid backward, barely avoiding another hit. "Now look here, you dirty pirate wench-"

"Dirty? Me?" Amélie narrowed her eyes, and suddenly she was moving twice as fast, and still amazingly graceful, the practice blade an extension of her body.

You blocked what you could, stinging slaps echoing against your arms. Snarling, you spun, jabbing your blade into her unguarded ribs.

Wincing, Amélie shot you a dirty look and kicked you in the stomach. It hurt. It actually did. And she had excellent form, but she wasn't as strong as Genji nor as casually violent as Hanzo. You staggered backward a step, and then raised your blade, your smile as savage as hers.

You lunged forward, knocking aside her saber and slamming the pommel of your weapon into her shoulder. That would leave a mark. You spun, dropping the blade and taking her to the ground. Amélie tried to knee you in the face, but you blocked it. Then she punched you in the nose, fuck decorum, and you headbutted her back.

No mercy indeed.

Both of you ended up panting and bleeding on the mats. You sat with your head tilted back, while Amélie lay face up, an odd little smile on her lips. Távio cautiously approached, bringing you each ice packs.

"Congratulations on acquiring your advanced sniper qualification," you said, breathing hard.

Amélie gave a raspy laugh. "Who told you?"
"No one. But it's you. There was never any question about you passing it with flying colors," you said, accepting the ice pack Távio handed you. "Thanks."

Amélie gave a delighted laugh. "So smooth, Chanceux. Take a girl out with your practice saber, then finish her off with compliments."

"I think I did more with my fists," you said, sitting up slowly.

"You were supposed to use your saber," Amélie complained as she applied the ice to her right eye.

"I think that would have hurt more than my fist," you said, sounding terribly nasal. "You're the one who started kicking me with your stupidly pretty ballet moves. I would have stuck to practice blades otherwise."

"I'm the pirate queen," Amélie laughed. "Of course, I'm not going to play fair."

You snorted and then regretted it, because it stung. "Sorry, I got kind of carried away."

Amélie waved her hand, but didn't get off the ground. "It is nothing, Chanceux. I volunteered."

"Yeah, but-" You paused, wondering if there was anything good to say. You normally sparred with people who were much stronger than you. Amélie certainly wasn't weak, but she wasn't a ninja assassin or a super soldier. Still you probably shouldn't compare her to someone else. Not out loud. "But I don't normally hit you in the face."

"Despite your best efforts, I am still beautiful," she said with a haughty laugh. "So please, stop this frivolous apologizing. We should be drinking wine and plotting revenge. Not the professional diplomatic revenge that Gérard is so fond of, but something truly vicious. Something vastly more personal."

"How do we arrange for a debilitating penis injury?" You asked, actually thinking about it. That was the wrong question. Which method should you use to cause a debilitating penis injury?

"Mmm," Amélie sat up slowly. "Let me think."

"The balls would be more painful," Távio volunteered, and then winced.

"But what to use? Broken glass, barbed wire, shrapnel, tasers, vise grips to cause testicular torsion..." You rubbed your chin. "Drill bits?"

"Nails, live piranhas, acid, scorpions, fire ants," Amélie continued the list. "Flesh-eating bacteria..."

Távio took a step backward, looking very queasy.

"Your friend...Claire might have some ideas," Amélie said. "I understand her organization has its own distinct trade secrets. Expanding bamboo splinters was one of them, if I remember correctly."

"Amélie, how is that even though you just busted my nose, slapped me with a wooden sword, and kicked me around the mats... How is it that you always know how to make me feel better?"
She laughed, patting you on the back. "Because I am your friend, Chanceux." She leaned closer, her voice a conspiratorial whisper. "But mostly because I am amazing."

You couldn't think of a truer answer than that.

"Can I just say that I am a big fan. I will fully admit that I am a mediocre dancer at best, and know next to nothing about the ballet scene, but you are pretty fucking awesome," Feng said. "She floats, she flows, she owns the stage." She looked at you, waiting for you to comment.

"Sure," you agreed.

Feng rolled her eyes at your lack of enthusiastic swooning. "Sometimes I forget that Lucky's a savage."

"A noble savage," Amélie said, and they both giggled.

"But seriously, watching you totally rekindled my interest in ballet, gymnastics, and acrobatics. Which is very cool because the only reason I even looked was because I had to research your tricky husband for political strategizing... And I'm doing that thing where I say too much again, aren't I?" She sighed, tilting her head back and staring up at the ceiling. "Uh...your decorating is really nice."

"Thank you," Amélie said, sounding pleased, and not the least bit perturbed.

You and Amélie had tracked down Reinhardt on the range, and "borrowed" Feng. Távio trailed behind you, carrying Isha. Zheng-bot hovered by Feng. But you didn't miss how Michael and Maggie narrowed their eyes, watching you speculatively, because they knew something was up. The biggest hint was probably all the bandages and swelling on your faces.

Amélie set little bowls of gelato in front of everyone, Isha and Távio included. She poured you a glass of red wine while you set up the emitter.

"We have two orders of business," Amélie said, passing Feng a glass of wine. "First, Lucky would like to discretely cause grave harm to Director Petras' genitals. We were wondering if you had any...shortcuts, or if we needed to do things the traditional way."

Feng raised a brow. "I..." She glanced at you. "Did he hit you? Because I thought that was Amélie and a bunch of potentially sexual tension."

You rolled your eyes. "I'm no super soldier, but I can handle one fat old bureaucrat."

"He attempted to coerce her into sex," Amélie said coolly. "And while we have enough evidence to start a trial, it would be tactically unwise to do that just yet. But that doesn't mean he should be allowed to run around unpunished and a danger to others."

Feng's eyes narrowed and she lost her easy smile, her jaw clenched. Her normally vivacious expression flattened into something desolate and merciless. You'd only seen that look on her face once, right before she'd lifted Fa Hai by the throat and let him have it at the blood oath ceremony. You thought perhaps, this was the Feng that ran On Sing. This was the Feng that killed to save her family.

"I really fucking hate rapists," she said, each word carefully pronounced and vibrating with
fury. "And the rich ones are always the worst."

"Is there someone you'd like us to kill for you?" You asked, meaning every word of your offer.

Feng just laughed harshly. "Oh no, he didn't hurt me." There was no humor on her face, only bitterness. "And I killed him myself, long before I became the super cool Triad tech innovator that I am now, so don't worry about it. Just old blood under the bridge."

You were pretty sure the phrase was "water under the bridge," but you understood the meaning. Feng was young, fresh out of college. Yet you hadn't seen that controversy in her background. Maybe you should have dug deeper. Or maybe Feng had always been a bit dangerous. It shouldn't surprise you, not after you met her parents.

"I suppose a small bomb would do the trick. Though I do have realistic robot spiders with injector fangs. We could always use a specialized toxin on the area. Maybe induce necrosis..." Feng said thoughtfully. "Obviously, we have to be discrete."

"Chemical castration is also an option if you are trying to avoid permanent damage," Zheng said. "I have a few formulas on hand. They have varying efficacy based on dosage and are harder to trace than a lot of other external elements: usually they're passed off as a hormonal imbalance. But we could render him impotent for a year easily."

"But can we make that more painful?" Amélie asked.

"Oh yes, he needs to suffer," Feng said rubbing her chin. "And there are so many ways to cause discomfort to soft tissue..."

"Teeny tiny bear trap in his chair," you said, clapping your hand shut.

Feng laughed. "I thought you wanted to make it look like an accident."

"Yeah, that's probably wise."

"Umm, bullet ant bites are really painful," Távio said. "But they don't cause any permanent damage. The pain goes deep and it kind of feels like you've been shot..." He winced, like he knew all this from personal experience.

"The bullet ant actually stings," Zheng said. "Though it is terribly agonizing, and it is an understandable mistake to assume it was a bite, especially if you experienced it personally."

Távio shrugged. "Worst pain in my life, and I've run through Agent Strike's penal exercises."

"Pfft, they're nothing compared to Sergeant Chang's," you said.

Távio flinched. "Probably still not as bad as the ant sting."

"Don't tell her that," you said.

"Timed release of the bullet ant venom directly to the genitals to prevent usage..." Feng said thoughtfully. "I think this might be one of those unethical things I haven't thought the whole way through. Yeah, when has that ever stopped me before?" She laughed.

"Or we could just get bullet ants and put them in his laundry," you said. "I'm not picky."
"Robotic ants DNA-keyed to the target so there is no collateral damage," Feng said. "They could return home to be refilled and continue the cycle..." She glanced at Zheng. "Can you have Bayan send some of the venom over? Don't tell him what it's for. He gets upset when I do questionable things."

"Maybe just one bullet ant sting, and then a dose of your castration chemical?" You said after a moment, because you didn't want Petras getting suspicious. "That way it seems causal of the impotence effect and he doesn't suspect some kind of conspiracy. I at least want him out of the way for the weekend."

"That's terribly sensible. We can adjust the plan to match his biology and reactions," Feng said. "I approve. Give me a few hours. And hey, I think I'm going to offer this as a service. I'll have to run it by Bayan first. He'll probably complain about the ethics of going around chemically castrating people I don't like, but as long as they're rapists..."

Your gelato was melting and you took a bite, savoring the smooth richness of the chocolate and coffee flavors.

Isha sat there eating her gelato with a tiny spoon. When it was mostly gone she put the spoon down and began to lick the bowl. She had chocolate smeared on her face and feathers. You were going to have to bathe her later.

"I have been meaning to ask you," Amélie said, turning her expectant smile on Feng. "Will you be bringing more raptors out?"

Feng looked up from her gelato and blinked a few times at Amélie. "Oh yeah. We're going to start marketing them soon. We've done some in-house ad campaigns but everything either looks too scary, like they belong in a gladiatorial arena, or too docile, like I'm marketing a bunch of mutant turkeys. I get that the dinosaurs will sell themselves, but nothing sends quite the right message."

"Wait...dinosaurs?" Távio muttered to himself, glancing at Isha.

Oh, right. You hadn't told him. He thought she was a mutant bird. Oops.

"Isha's a velociraptor, but a friendly one," you said.

"Pfft, she's kind of snobby if you ask me," Feng scowled and then quickly smiled when Isha looked up at her. "Which is perfectly fine, because you're my adorable raptor-niece."

Isha snorted and went back to licking her gelato bowl.

"So, I had an idea. Amélie and a fancy-feathered, color-coordinated raptor posing together eating chocolate, or drinking wine, and being sophisticated," you said. "I thought a diamond collar, but I realize that I might just be really gauche."

Feng blinked. "No. No, that's good. That's really good. Don't show them as pit fighters or overgrown chickens. They are beautiful rare treasures that require respect."

"And money, lots of money," Távio coughed.

Feng laughed. "Yeah, that too. Hey...so I know you don't model any more," she said batting her eyes at Amélie. "But would you and a raptor friend like to pose for our ad campaign? The models would be loaners, but I can arrange for your own hatchling at a time of your choice."
Amélie gave you both a sly look. "It is possible. Though I would require some creative control on the project should you wish my involvement. For example, I think you would do better if you photographed several models with their raptor companions. In fact, I think Chanceux and Isha should definitely occupy a place in the shoot."

"Hey, leave me out of this..." You muttered.

"Yeah, multiple subjects. Same theme. Pick a palette and color-coordinate it..." Feng murmured, looking around Amélie's room. "Black for Lucky and Isha. Something purple or red for Amélie..." Feng began typing on her watch. "OK. This is great. Do you want my people to talk to your people or do you just want to contact me directly? Lucky has all the details. Athena and your husband probably do too."

"I think we can work together very well, Feng," Amélie said, looking terribly pleased. "Thank you so much, Chanceux for introducing us."

Both Feng and Amélie beamed at you, catching you mid-bite, with a spoonful of gelato.

"Yeah, thanks Lucky. You always give me the best ideas. I swear, you really are going to have to come work for me some day..."

Slipping into the hotel room that evening wasn't difficult at all. Petras rarely stayed in the Overwatch dorms, favoring luxury hotels, which were actually pretty easy to infiltrate. No one ever paid attention to the cleaning staff, and you placed the little bot on the loofah hanging up in the shower. It was the size of a grain of rice and actually resembled a tick. But it had been loaded with bullet ant venom and a dose of antiandrogens. The bot itself would be washed down the shower drain and biodegrade within a week. Petras tested negative for allergies to the venom, so you weren't worried about killing him, though that might have been a bonus. The venom would only cause pain for a day or two, but the specially-formulated hormone agonists would stay in his system for over a month.

Zheng would be piloting the bot, to ensure the right target was reached and no bystanders were harmed. You walked out casually. Távio was in hallway, keeping watch in a bellhop uniform that was slightly too big, and Feng had driven the getaway car. Amélie stayed behind to update Lacroix on your...informal operation after you'd left headquarters, because it was easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.

It was after midnight when you finally got out of the hotel. You got a late start, having had to wait for Feng's special delivery to arrive and for her to calibrate the bot. According to Athena, Petras was still out carousing at a private gentleman's club. You weren't sure if she was directly tracking him or his Overwatch security team, but you were grateful for the help.

"Also, Amélie has already informed her husband of our little "prank." And Athena has been asked to pass on his...disapproval over methodology. Do not worry; she doubts that he is going to stay angry. He was laughing too hard," Zheng said as you climbed into the car. "You have the go ahead to inform your lovers about the situation."

"How many places can you split your consciousness between?" You asked Zheng as you buckled your seatbelt.

"That is a very personal question." Zheng's floating orb managed to sound terribly
"...Sorry," you said. "I didn't know."

"She can be at least three places at once, but it's a strain," Feng said.

Zheng's orb pulsed a displeased shade of red.

"Most higher level omnics can do between two and five, so she's a little sensitive about it. The human brain isn't really calibrated for that kind of thing, so she's really quite talented," Feng added quickly.

"...But our..." You trailed off, realizing that maybe you shouldn't be so open about this topic, especially not in a rental car with a rookie agent. Athena was aware of the entire Overwatch campus, and several individual drones. You'd counted a dozen at once, but it could be more than that.

"She's special," Feng said grimly, and it sort of bothered you that she understood exactly what you were not saying. "We don't even know how she is that special, if you catch my drift. It shouldn't be possible, not with the hardware I've seen. But it isn't all hardware. There are other factors. I mean you've heard of god-programs."

Távio swallowed audibly.

Everyone had heard of god-programs. They were the supervillain masterminds of the Omnic Crisis. The smart, body-seizing virus hives that could take control of robot bodies and infiltrate almost any open computer networks.

"Usually they come about on accident and thankfully are difficult to replicate due to unusual circumstances. Like Auntie doesn't qualify, but her weirdness is on par with that sort of thing. Maybe some of her abilities. But you know this already," Feng said, giving Távio a pointed look.

"This is one of those "Blackwatch knows discretion" moments that I have been educated on," he said. "I know better than to ask questions, repeat what I have heard, or make smarmy remarks." He gave an agreeable nod. "Ma'am."

You rolled your eyes.

"Good," Feng said, sounding satisfied. "Anyway, I know one about came from the aftereffects of a solar flare. One of the first ones came from a dying omnium in the South China Sea: that one didn't work out so well, probably kicked off the Omnic Crisis, in case you didn't know. Something came out of Tunguska, we're still not sure what and the Russians are simultaneously murderously secretive and insanely terrified of any mention of it. Lucheng had one go bad. Vishkar had one go really bad and the other self-destructed. I know several militaries have been trying to develop their own. Usually, they do have massive hardware though. Like entire facilities built to house them..."

You paused, digesting that for a moment. Because you'd always known Athena was amazing. You just hadn't realize the technical degrees of it. You weren't even sure there was a central control unit that housed her consciousness. "I see."

"Good," Feng said cheerfully. "Because I still don't."
Jack was waiting for you at the entrance to the motor pool, dressed down in black fatigues. "Just where have you been?" he asked, frowning at you and Feng. "I thought you were going to spend some time with Maggie and Michael. They've been with Reinhardt all day." The accusation was clear in his voice.

"...I...sorry about that," you said sheepishly, though spending a day with Reinhardt honestly didn't seem that bad. Two days? Maybe you'd be exhausted. "Umm, I...had things to do that I will tell you and Gabriel all about in a minute."

"Things you could take Feng on, but not my..." Jack rubbed his forehead. "On second thought, I'll wait for Gabe." He narrowed his eyes as he caught sight of Távio. "Huh. Wait a minute, Feng-"

"Lucky will tell you all about it, Jack," she said, cheerfully. "Come on Távio, you can walk me back to the Strike Commander's quarters. Otherwise I might get lost, and that would be horrible."

"...Sure thing," Távio said, smiling nervously as he made his escape.

You sighed as you watched them go, walking away briskly. They couldn't have helped you, not really, but it still felt like you were being abandoned to the wolves.

Shaking his head, Jack headed down the hall toward Gabriel's quarters. He took a glance at you over his shoulder and his frown deepened. He stopped, head cocked to the side as he examined your face. "Who hit you?"

"Amélie," you said. "We were using wooden sabers...and whatever else was handy. Like our hands."

Jack blinked, obviously not expecting that answer. "...Is everything all right between you two?"

"Great. Amélie's great. She's an amazing friend," you said, nodding nervously. Because now that you had gotten some of the anger out of your system, you realized that you hadn't spent much time thinking about how you were going to tell Gabriel and Jack what had happened today. And there was a lot to tell.

The two of you reached Gabriel's quarters too quickly; you still didn't have a good answer, except the unvarnished truth, and honestly, you didn't like that option at all. Maybe a cyanide capsule instead? Jack got the door and you hung your head as you entered.

Gabriel sat on the couch reading an actual book, with an open bottle of beer. He shot Jack a wry look. "Uh oh. Did you have to bail her out of lockup? Was she out scrapping again?"

"With Amélie," Jack said, not sounding amused. "Because she was upset. That's all she'd
"We were in public," you said, uneasily as you kicked off your shoes and sat down beside Gabriel. "I'll tell you the whole story here in a minute."

Jack took the spot on your other side. "First, I want to say that nobody complained about your absence. Reinhardt isn't upset at all. My siblings are disappointed, but I know that because I'm their brother, not because they said anything to me. And I'm really wracking my brain to try and piece together what was so important that you blew them off and then took Feng and Maeda Vargas offsite." He stared at the table unhappily. Gabriel passed him his beer and he drained it.

You winced, because when he said it like that, it did look really irresponsible.

"But you're a grown ass woman, and we trust your judgment. So maybe you can tell us what's going on," Gabriel said, setting his book down. "Because no one's told us anything. And obviously something is going on."

You rubbed the back of your neck. "It's a long story."

"We have time," Jack tilted his head sideways, his expression flat.

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to get out of it. I'm just...embarrassed." You stared at the ceiling, wondering if you should just show the video and be done with it. But you needed to use words too. You just weren't sure how to start. Rubbing your forehead, you blew out a breath. "First off, I want to say, I'm uninjured, except for the friendly smacking around I got from Amélie. No one hurt me, and I'm OK."

Gabriel gave you a sharp look, one arm resting on the cushion behind you. Jack turned to face you, knees brushing against yours.

"Secondly, I am really embarrassed," you said, each word stilted and awkward. "This story has two parts. Let me cover the first half, field your questions, and then I can explain the offsite thing afterward." You stared at Gabriel's coffee table, the dark wood scuffed from Jack's allergy to coasters and someone's penchant for putting their feet up. "There's a video too."

"Why don't you tell us what happened first? In your own words." Gabriel's arm rested on your shoulders.

"Petras cornered me in a hallway today. Tried to...make demands." You bit your lip, not looking at either of them. "I swear I would have had the situation under control, but...Ainsley walked in on it. Flipped her shit and uh...tried to save me. Petras freaked out and stormed off. "You shook your head. "Athena recorded the whole thing. Had to calm Ainsley down and made a report to Lacroix. He assigned Távio as my...shadow, and then I sparred with Amélie.""

"Back up," Jack held up his hand. "What kind of demands was Petras making?"

"Improper ones of a sexual nature," you said, trying not to fumble the technical words. You stared at your hands, knowing that making the explanation as unemotional as possible wasn't actually going to keep them from getting upset.

"Gabe and I were on site all day. Why are we just now hearing about this?" Jack's voice dropped an octave, his words clipped.

"Because we wanted a plan of action in place before I came to you," you said.
Jack narrowed his eyes. "We? As in Gérard and you?"

You nodded.

"And I'm sure Gérard wanted to put some space between the director and us. He isn't looking to cover-up a high profile murder tonight," Gabriel said as he got up and retrieved his tablet from the kitchen table. Wordlessly, he brought up the video and played it, from Petras walking toward you, ill-intent clear on his face, to the part where you helped Ainsley off the floor, offering her a cup of tea. Petras' language had been as harsh and offensive as you remembered it.

Jack tensed beside you, cold fury etched on his face, his eyes hard, his lips drawn back in a snarl. Gabriel stared at the screen, outwardly calm, but his jaw twitched, eyes dark. You knew him too well. Something dangerous churned beneath the surface.

"What actions did you take?" Gabriel turned to look at you, brows heavy, words clinically precise.

"Precautions first," you said. "Lacroix and I decided that he would probably seek retaliation. We have extra eyes on Ainsley, just to monitor the situation. And I'm not going anywhere alone. Umm, and Amélie, Feng, and Zheng might have helped me put together a plan to keep him...away from the Family Day festivities, and out of our hair. Which is what we were coming back from," you said, and hurriedly explained the bullet ant venom as well as the temporary chemical castration.

"Let me get this straight," Jack said, his voice low. "You ran an unsanctioned mission with Overwatch personnel against the organization director, utilized On Sing assets for said mission, and neglected to inform any of your commanding officers of this venture. Not to mention you utilized questionable chemical weaponry against a civilian?" His voice grew louder and more ragged with every question. "Please tell me why you thought that was a good idea!"

"When you put it like that, it sounds kind of bad," you admitted. "Operationally, I have no justification." You flinched, because maybe you shouldn't have been that blunt. "But I thought, and Lacroix backed me on this, that it would be best to have a handle on Petras before we informed you of what transpired today. Because you love me, and you're protective, and I didn't want to come you like a victim."

You stared at your feet, and there was a hole in your sock. You kept your eyes on it, not quite willing to look at Gabriel or Jack just yet. Because maybe sneaking into Petras' hotel room and planting a small attack robot wasn't the wisest course of action. But it was poetic justice, no one could deny that.

"I was also worried about how you would react," you said. "Not because I don't trust you, but because you are protective. Because I've had enough close calls lately and I know it's been hard on you. I...wanted to take care of it myself."

The couch creaked as Jack rose. He paced in front of you, shoulders drawn up, fists clenched behind his back. He wasn't looking at you or Gabriel.

You sat there, hands in your lap, unsure of what to say.

"How would you react if the roles were reversed? If some politician tried to coerce Jack or me?" Gabriel asked softly, resting one hand on the back of your neck. He didn't have to ask, not really, when your reaction to Ainsley's flirtations with Jack hadn't been entirely reasonable. They could also bring up the time Kwento's light banter with Gabriel put you in a fighting mood.
"I would be furious," you said hesitantly, tasting more trouble in your words.

Gabriel nodded. "Jack is. I am. Not that Petras' actions are in any way your fault. But you didn't have to tiptoe around like you can't trust me or Jack to behave."

"I...Kwento," you said, recalling the flight back from DC.

"I thought that was masterfully done. No voices were raised. No harsh words exchanged. No feelings hurt," Gabriel continued, warm hands squeezing your shoulders. "Neither of us has behaved unreasonably. You should have more faith in us."

"I...you're right." You winced. "I got caught up in trying to handle everything myself. And I didn't want to worry you, either," you said glumly. You glanced at Jack who had lapsed into a dangerously quiet state.

"That's fucking ridiculous," Jack scowled at you. "We're in a relationship. It's my privilege to worry about your reckless, insubordinate, impulsive ass." He leaned forward, gripping your arms. "You should already know that if you're hurt, upset, scared... whatever, you can come to us and we won't think any less of you for it. You're supposed to come to us," he shouted.

"I'm sorry," you said.

Jack blew out a breath, brow furrowed as he studied your face.

"I do trust you. I just...tunnel-visioned," you muttered. "And I didn't want him to go after someone else. Figured this was the neatest way to keep things under control."

"Damn right, you tunnel-visioned," Jack glared down at you. He released your arms and you blinked as he walked out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind himself.

You hunched over, not entirely sure what you were supposed to do next. You took a shaky breath and looked over at Gabriel, wondering if he was going to tell you off next.

He sat there, a wry smile on his face. "So, bullet ant venom?" He patted your cheek. "Whose suggestion was that?"

"Uh..." You weren't sure if you should give Távio credit, or if it would be wisest to leave him out.

"Not yours obviously," Gabriel said gruffly. "Is it going to be like that then?"

"No," you sighed. "I just...it's my fault. Shouldn't have thrown together a revenge mission and dragged the others into it with me."

"I know that," Gabriel said, firmly. "But I thought you were going to be up front about this."

"It was Távio's idea: it hurts like hell but doesn't cause permanent damage, unless you're allergic and his medical files indicated that he isn't. The antiandrogens probably won't either: that was Zheng. He just won't be able to get it up for a month, not without intervention anyway."

Gabriel stroked his beard, expression thoughtful. "Come here," Gabriel said, patting his lap. You scooted over and he wrapped his arms around your waist, his chest warm against your back. "That was a stupid move, idiota. You pull something like that again and your ass is suspended."
"Sorry," you muttered, grateful for the comfort of his touch.

"Jack hates that kind of thing, and you know it. He's a lot more law and order than Blackwatch. There are rules in place for a reason, if you're going to break them, he wants to make sure that there's oversight."

"I know." You were seeing shades of Spinshot and Cologne, and worse: Mongolia, I Need Coffee, and how you'd left Gabriel out of the loop that time. You were supposed to learn from your mistakes. "I was really stupid."

"You were," Gabriel said, tone mild. "It's part of your charm."

"Do I need to go sleep on the couch or babysit the visitors while you guys cool off? Because I know I fucked up."

Gabriel chuckled in your ear. "You don't get out of this conversation that easily, chica." He tightened his hold on you. "And I don't think I should let you out of my sight any time soon."

You laughed weakly at that. "OK." You turned around to face him. "You're being awfully reasonable."

"One of us has to be," he said, shaking his head and giving you a pointed look. "In fact, I usually am. Despite what you may think."

You winced. "Yeah, you are. I...I'm sorry."

"I am furious about Petras, corazón. I'm not happy that you didn't think you could just come to us. That you didn't trust us to behave rationally-"

"That wasn't my intent-"

"But I also know that you were reeling from his assault and you needed a chance to reassert yourself. It doesn't excuse your behavior, but I understand." He cupped your cheek. "Sometimes I worry that we're giving you a complex. You work so hard not to be seen as weak, and we don't view you that way. But you're overcompensating."

"...You're probably right," you said, closing your eyes. "It's not you. It's one of those dysfunctional survivor's traits I picked up." Because you lived in a world where weakness was a death sentence. Even if you were on your last legs, you couldn't fucking show it. You had to power through and hope that would be enough.

"I know. But I wonder if we're making it worse..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Not just Jack and me. Blackwatch. Shit Spiders. Everything."

You shrugged, unprepared for that conversation.

"While Jack's still sorting himself, I do have to admit, that was an impressive little op you put together," Gabriel said, with a crooked smile. "You, Amélie, crazy Feng, and a fucking rookie Overwatch agent came up with a fairly sophisticated plan, executed it without getting caught, and all in half a day." He practically glowed with pride, and you felt yourself grinning.

"I mean, we had Athena and Zheng too."

"It's an advantage, sure, but you knew how to properly utilize it." Gabriel stroked your cheek. "And this impotence formula actually sounds like an interesting trick. I hadn't really thought
along those lines. Not something we can use regularly, but in certain circumstances? Well, I think you're onto something. And the bullet ant venom? That has some interesting applications..."

"We are shady as fuck," you said, a little taken back by how interested in the logistics Gabriel was. And he didn't look nearly as angry as Jack. More like he approved of your methods, though you were smart enough not to bring that up right now.

"Yeah," Gabriel was unapologetic. "Try not to look smug about it in front of Jack. He's not as understanding as I am about your rogue operation."

You hugged Gabriel. "Thank you."

"I'm still angry," he said. "You should have come to me about Petras. It irks me that you go to Lacroix first." He meant not just this time, but the incident before, when you'd gotten to slap Lacroix around on the mats.

"I...try to focus on the counterstrike first," you said. "I need that measure in place. That solution. And then I get angry and want to hit things." You paused. "And then, I guess I finally realize I need comfort, and I am vulnerable; that's when I'm ready to come to you."

Gabriel was silent for a moment. "That makes sense." He rubbed your back, his touch almost too firm. "Still want to be kept in the loop."

"I'll work on it," you said, resting your head on Gabriel's shoulder.

The door opened, and you looked up. Jack came back inside, this time closing the door carefully behind him. His cheeks were pink and he was breathing hard, like he'd taken a quick run around the building.

You looked up at him, and whatever he saw in your expression made his face soften. He crouched in front of you, resting his arms on the back of the couch. "I'm mad that you didn't come to us immediately after it happened."

"I know," you said. "I'm sorry. I just told Gabriel that I have to digest it in steps. It's almost...compulsive. As bad as being overly emotional, but without the hysterics."

"I understand," Jack said, with a heavy sigh. "I get that you "handled" it. That you want to protect us, even though we weren't the ones in danger."

"Maybe for a murder charge," Gabriel volunteered.

Jack shot him a dirty look. "Not helping, Gabe." He pressed his forehead to yours. "But neither of us would think any less if you came to us right afterward. If you asked us for help. Hell, I would have paid Zheng for the ammo ant venom personally."

You gripped his fingers, knowing that admission cost him something. "I'm sorry. I'm bad at this. I just wanted you to worry less and maybe I wanted to regain some of my pride. It's dumb, I know, but I was rescued by Ainsley Fucking Petras, OK? That is some demoralizing shit." You hung your head. "Like dishonorable discharge level failure."

Jack exhaled, one corner of his mouth turning up slightly. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Sorry, I'm dumb."

"No, you have too much cleverness, too little good sense, and a one-track mind," Jack
rested his forehead against yours. "It's a terrible combination."

Gabriel laughed, his body shaking against yours. "You are one to talk, Jackie."

"Now's not the time," Jack grumbled. "Unsanctioned op, sneaky girlfriend, man we need to kill. Focus, Gabe. You cut her more slack than she deserves."

You hung your head, knowing it was true. Gabriel did let you get away with things, like sleeping in, going rogue, and murder.

"It's nothing I haven't done for you too, amor," Gabriel said, not sounding bothered by the accusation. "Oh look, Gérard has sent us a message." You could hear the amusement in his voice. "It seems Director Petras is in extreme pain after an intimate shower encounter with a...lady he brought home from an evening on the town. She is being investigated, though it's speculated that the old man most likely overexerted himself today... Still, there is a good chance he's going to be missing out on the festivities."

You snorted, laughing into Gabriel's shoulder.

"Mission accomplished," Gabriel said, with a smirk.

Jack huffed. "Don't encourage her Gabe. I want to rip Petras' dick off and feed it to him, but that doesn't excuse you going rogue, sweetheart."

"...I know," you said, trying very hard not to giggle.

"There need to be consequences," Jack said. "Personally, I'd put you back on training duty for a month." he said, sounding severe. "But Gabe needs all the help he can get right now. So I'm letting you off with a deferment: Ana might choose to pursue other disciplinary actions. But for now you're on family tour duty for the entire weekend. If I can't keep you out of trouble, then maybe a bunch of children can. Fareeha is due in tomorrow. Torby's daughter Brigitte will be joining us. And I think Gabe said you're picking up Tataryn's daughter. You're going to be responsible for them for most of the weekend."

You winced. "Can I request help? Like steal Jesse or something?"

"Sure," Gabriel said. "Take the Shimadas too. You're going to need help with all the kids anyway."

"Are you sure it's wise to put Hanzo with...children?" You asked.

"No, but I'll leave it up to your discretion," Gabriel said.

Jack climbed over the back of the couch, and wrapped his arms around both you and Gabriel. He kissed the top of your head, exhaling slowly. "I love you. I'm glad you're all right."

"Love you too," you said, tilting your head up to kiss his cheek. "Sorry I'm giving you gray hairs."

"I don't have any gray hairs," Jack scowled, fingers combing through his hair. "We need to get back to my quarters soon. Who knows what Maggie and Feng are getting up to unattended?"

You hugged him back. "So...no makeup sex then?"

Jack's eyes darkened. "Now, I didn't say that..."
Jack rolled onto his side, unable to relax, even though you had all made it back to the comfort his bedroom. Gabriel shifted slightly. He was on his back, and just turned his head to face Jack. You lay between them, though you had tunneled under the covers, your face buried against Gabriel's chest, a little bit of your hair visible from under the blankets.

"Can't sleep?" Gabriel murmured, his voice low.

"Guess not," Jack shook his head ruefully and scooted closer, his arms tightening around your waist. You made an grumbling sound, but didn't move. "We need to do something about him. It's only going to get worse."

"I know," Gabriel said, grimly.

"Ainsley "helping" her will only enrage him." Jack said. He'd already made the calculations. "He won't let this go. He's going to escalate."

"I know," Gabriel said, shutting his eyes. "He's come after both you and her. And he's won't stop. I don't even have a clue what his obsession with you is all about. Believe me, Jack. I want nothing more than to press his skull between my palms and squeeze."

"Maybe poke your thumbs in his eyes while you're at it," Jack said, not at all bothered by how dark the pillow talk had gotten. "Honestly, I think it should last longer. I know it's been awhile since I've done a formal enhanced interrogation, but it's like riding a bike. You never really forget how."

Gabriel chuckled. "That's fucked up, amor."

"We all are," Jack murmured, kissing the top of your head and then Gabriel's cheek. "I hate this, Gabe. I hate that he came near her. I hate that she didn't come to us immediately. I hate that she felt like she had to do it on her own."

"I know," Gabriel sighed. "She's kind of dumb though, like you."

Jack snorted. "You better hope she's really asleep."

Gabriel just smiled. "After all that makeup sex? Jack, you had her begging for mercy after the first round."

Jack felt a smug smirk tug the corners of his mouth upward. You'd been breathless and shaking underneath him, the headboard rattling as he fucked you into Gabriel's mattress. No one had been in the mood for "gentle," least of all you. "You didn't cut her any slack either, papi."

Gabriel grinned. "It's how she wanted it. Papi knows best." His smile faded. "But I understand, Jack. He's been trying to professionally sabotage you too. If anyone should be doing something, it's me. The fucker came after my lovers."

"Gabe, if you go after him and don't bring me along, you're sleeping on the couch for a month."

Gabriel chuckled. "Then we had better invite her along too. She called "dibs" after all."

"She got to make her own fun. It's our turn," Jack said, not too keen on having you in the same room as Petras. Sure, you could take him, he knew that rationally, but his gut instinct balked
at the idea of having you in the same room as that bastard. Petras threatened you. Jack would take
care of the threat. Gabriel could help. You just needed to stay safe.

"Isn't that what we were upset with her for? Taking a big risk? Leaving us out of the loop?
After all this, if anyone deserves to finish him off, it's her."

Jack blinked, a little taken aback by how much thought Gabriel had put into this. He'd just
wanted to drop in through the skylight and bludgeon Petras to death in his penthouse suite. Maybe
steal something to make it look like a robbery gone wrong. Grab some of the tech for Mihret to
analyze, and boom, everything was all done!

Of course it would never be that easy. Jack sighed, shaking his head. "You're right, damnit.
We can't just run off to assassinate Petras and not invite her along. She'll be furious."

"I know, you goddamn hothead." Gabriel reached out, resting one hand of Jack's cheek. "I'll
run some scenarios by Gérard."

"Really?" Jack raised a brow. "I thought we'd keep this quiet-" He wrinkled his nose.
Gérard was focused on the big picture and he could admit to himself that this was less about grand
strategy and all about protecting the ones he loved.

"For all their sniping and bluster, Gérard is very fond of her," Gabriel said softly. "He isn't
joking when he calls her his "favorite pupil." I think it's because the two of them are so damn
sneaky. Maybe because she and Amélie are friends too." Gabriel chuckled. "If we're going to
assassinate the director, then it would be best to have his input on our plans. It's not like he's going
to object on moral grounds."

Jack nodded, kissing Gabriel's palm. "If you're planning the op, I trust your judgment. Just
let me know when. I'm in."

Gabriel leaned over to kiss his forehead. "I love you, Jack. There isn't anything I wouldn't
do to keep you safe. And the same goes for her."

"I know," Jack said, a heavy lump in his throat. "I feel the same way." He squeezed
Gabriel's hand. "Promise me that you won't do this solo-"

"I just said I would bring you both along! I'm not the one who went rogue this year,"
Gabriel snorted. "You and her, you're both ridiculous idiots. I'm the responsible one."

Warmth coiled in Jack's stomach and he snuggled closer. "You're absolutely right, Gabe.
What we do without you?"

Gabriel muttered something uncomplimentary in Spanish, and hugged you both. Jack threw
his leg over yours, ankles tangling with Gabriel's calves. Gabriel sighed, fingers interlaced with
Jack's. And through it all, you slept, safe and warm between them.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to try to start the Halloween oneshot tonight, probably. It will impact the
regular update, but I think you guys might forgive me? Maybe?

I called this my therapy fic, partially because I only thought I'd be addressing grieving
issues, partially because it was self-indulgent as fuck, and then it kind of ballooned into other things. Yes, I complained a lot about my job and personal neurosis in the end notes. And it helped, I appreciate the support, or at least no one saying "you're so whiny," even if I was. It's easier to complain about work than say "I'm really fucking depressed and I'm not seeing much hope right now." It's easier to say "yeah, that's my whole generation" rather than "I have a problem." It's easier to write a story about people your character loves dying, than talk about the people that you loved who died.

Because I've had a hard time coping with all the shit that's happened in the past couple of years, but I'm also really well-versed at appearing perfectly fine to the people around me, because I'm used to being the responsible one, the one who handles all the crises, and that takes it toll. I kind of forgot how to ask for help, and writing about making Lucky do it, reminded me that sometimes I need to do it as well. There were other things, being "ethically petty," respecting healthy boundaries, and that elusive difference between "fault" and "responsibility."

So, honestly, thank you guys for all the comments, reviews, ko-fi, fanart, playlists, just being around. Because it's kept me writing this, and I know this fic has been good for me. (Maybe not my social life, but I've always been an introvert.) Addressing these issues has been good for me. And I hoped it's helped some of you out too.

And getting a new job hasn't fixed everything, but honestly, I just feel 100% better about life. I'm not going to be rich, but I can afford to put money in savings. I can afford my cat's stupidly expensive prescription food. I can put some money aside for teen!cousin for his college. I bought some Overwatch figurines on clearance without any guilt, because I can treat myself a little more now.

Also, it's totally leveled up my writing skills and I want to write original novels again. So, hooray for that! Sorry about ramble, our fic!anniversary has made me maudlin.
Chapter 102

Chapter Summary

Family Day socializing and secret-spilling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The alarm went off, and you groaned, knowing it was your turn. Slowly, you rolled out of bed, giving Gabriel an envious look as you scrounged your clothes off the dresser. Gabriel sighed and rolled over, the sheets bunching around his hips, giving you a nice view of his well-muscled back.

Isha lay in her bed, burrowed under her stuffed dog. You knew better than to wake her. She'd be grumpy and cuddly, which was a bad combination when she had long talons.

Jack was already gone, preparing for the opening ceremonies and checking in with Ainsley and Reinhardt for event preparation. As Blackwatch Commander, Gabriel didn't have any such duties.

You pulled on the violet and black tennis dress with black compression shorts. Amélie had picked this out, proclaiming it sporty, comfortable, and flirty. You glanced in the mirror, your hair still mussed, your eyes half open. The outfit looked fine. You looked like you needed to go back to bed.

Maggie was asleep on the couch, Michael and Feng were sprawled out on the floor in sleeping bags. Feng was on her back snoring. Zheng's orb hovered nearby, glowing a faint pink color.

You splashed water on your face, brushed your teeth, and put on some makeup. Because today you were dealing with a crowd of people, and you might as well look civilized. Putting your hair back, you decided that this was as respectable as you were going to look before coffee, and left the bathroom.

You stopped by the bedroom to give Gabriel a quick kiss, and he chuckled sleepily.

"You look cute, corazon."

You just grabbed his ass in response and he gave a low growl. "See you later?"

"Later," he murmured. "I have some things to do this morning. I'll meet up with you and the kids when I get chance."

You kissed him again, and headed out the door, Tataryn and an Athena drone already waiting for you in the hall.
Tataryn drove, stopping to pick up breakfast and coffee. You were only half awake, the coffee cup so wonderfully warm against your gloves.

"Morrison's siblings are here?"

"The two younger ones."

"You are also taking care of Fareeha?"

"Apparently. Torby's oldest daughter too. And Feng." You leaned back in the seat. "Maybe I should leave the country. Change my name. Take up blacksmithing."

Tataryn snorted. "The boss would find you."

"Yeah, he's invited. It's all these kids I'm worried about." You yawned as you pulled up through the gates of the Institut Montana. You trudged alongside Tataryn through the checkpoints, still waking up.

"Tato, Ms. Lucky," Kseniya stood in front of her bedroom door, wearing strawberry printed shorts and a pink Pachimari t-shirt. Her hair was up in two puffs, and she wore a very full backpack. She rocked back on her heels, grinning up at you both. "I get to spend the whole weekend with you, right?"

Tataryn nodded cheerfully. "Though you'll be in Lucky's company during the day. She has a big tour group with other young people."

Kseniya's face fell. "I'm stuck with the little kids?" To her credit, she wasn't whining, but her disappointment was very evident.

She was eight. She wasn't exactly an adult. You rubbed the back of your neck. "Fareeha is a tween. Brigitte is...tiny. And Maggie and Michael are teenagers. Claire is an adult, but she's...excitable. So there's only one little kid, and I hope you'll help me look out for her. Because her parents are terrifying."

"Also Jesse and Távio will be accompanying you places. Because Lucky needs all the help she can get." Tataryn chuckled.

"Will Bandit and Isha be there?" Kseniya asked, hopping down the stairs, no longer dejected.

"For sure," you said, stifling a yawn. "There's breakfast in the car, though we can have a second breakfast at the cafeteria."

"You just want more coffee," Kseniya said, giving you a wry look. You didn't argue. She was, after all, absolutely correct.

You were a little surprised by the crowd at your table. Gabriel sat with Isha in his lap, talking with Captain Amari and Fareeha. Maggie and Michael were on his other side. Michael was chatting cautiously with Feng, though she sat slumped over her coffee, inhaling the fumes and giggling sleepily every few minutes, her Zheng orb floating behind her. You didn't see Torby anywhere yet, but you got a coffee refill and a plate of doughnuts, and settled down, watching Kseniya chat happily with Gabriel.
Maggie looked between you and Kseniya, then Kseniya and Gabriel, her blue eyes shrewd. You shook your head and she sighed wistfully. Her gaze traveled to Tataryn and she raised a brow, reaching over to nudge Feng.

Feng's eyes got real big and she wiggled her brows at you, her smile very wide.

You shook your head, rolling your eyes.

Feng pursed her lips.

Maggie raised her hands, palms upward.

"Because he works for me, and he's old enough to be your father," Gabriel said sharply.

Tataryn chuckled. "And Lucky is so obviously in love with me, I cannot break her delicate heart like that."

You slowly turned your head to glower at him, wondering if Feng had any of that bullet ant venom left.

"Tataryn, don't you have some place to be?" Gabriel scowled, his glare harsh.

Kseniya gave a quiet gasp and quickly covered her mouth, her eyes darting between you and Gabriel. You rested your face in your hand and sipped your coffee, not making eye contact with anyone. Because apparently most people present were fluent in nonverbal conversation and even worse, the eight year old had now figured out your secret. Granted, she was a little genius, but that wasn't the point.

"Oh, I can take a hint. I am distracting Lucky. Goodbye ladies, don't worry, I'll be back."

Tataryn leaned over and gave you a loud kiss on the cheek, more sound than contact.

Maggie giggled. Feng sighed. And when you looked up, Gabriel was staring past you, at Tataryn's retreating back, his expression promising violence.

"So, Tataryn, huh?" Feng asked, giving you a sly grin. "Mrow." She rolled the "R" extra long. "Tell me more."

"He's nothing, but trouble," Kseniya said earnestly. "Very popular with men and women and notorious for never calling them back."

You blinked, a little surprised by her aggressive response.

Feng's grin didn't waver at all. "Good to know. And who might you be?"

"I'm Zinnia, and that's my Uncle Gabriel." Kseniya calmly took a doughnut off his plate. He raised a brow at her, but didn't comment. In fact, he looked downright amused by her chutzpah.

Feng and Maggie exchanged speculative looks. "You certainly know a lot about Goldilocks."

"I've heard people talk," she said, biting into her doughnut. "Hi, Isha."

Isha trilled back at her, eating her own doughnut carefully on Gabriel's lap.

"I'm Feng," Feng said, extending her hand. "But can you call me "Claire" please? That's my
Kseniya paused mid-bite, and her eyes widened at Feng's honesty. "Oh. Oh! Oh! I just saw your TED talk! That was amazing!" She looked at you, practically bouncing out of her seat. "Do you know who that is?" She hissed.

"...Yes," you said. "That's "Claire." She's Maggie's schoolmate. She's very excitable."

Kseniya gaped at you, believed that you actually believed that story for thirty seconds, and then gave you a dirty look, not amused at all.

Feng just laughed.

"Sorry, I'm late, ma'am. Agent McCree wanted me to let you know that he's on his way in and he's bringing some friends."

You sighed, looking up to see Távio saluting you.

"At ease, Távio. You remember Zinnia."

"Miss," he said.

"Mr. Maeda-Vargas," she said solemnly.

"Claire," you said, reminding him of Feng's cover. "Maggie, Michael, and Fareeha." You made the introductions, since he was your bodyguard. And then went back to your coffee.

Távio pulled up a chair and sat there rigidly. You grabbed a doughnut and put it on a napkin in front of him.

When you looked up, you noticed Maggie eyeing him thoughtfully.

Feng elbowed her and whispered something, then they both giggled.

Távio was grinning back.

Suddenly, you felt a massive headache coming on. You were going to need a lot more coffee.

Gabriel was going to finish up some paperwork, while Tataryn was running Blackwatch's part of the security.

There was an exhibit Ainsley put together with pictures, artifacts, and videos of the founding of Overwatch. It was very nicely organized, informative, and devoid of anything controversial. The kids skipped right over it.

Kseniya declined to run the obstacle course. She was more interested in holding Isha. Maggie, Michael, and Feng had already done it yesterday. Fareeha mentioned that they'd made it "easier" and "safer" for civilians. Then proceeded to give the details of what Reinhardt's extreme training version of the course looked like. Her mother used it for live fire exercises and you were very glad you did not have to run it when there were actual proximity mines on the field.

You still took them down to the range and let them shoot for a little bit, if only to gauge
their skill levels. Feng was, unsurprisingly, extremely good. Fareeha was a close second. Kseniya did quite well when you gave her a smaller caliber weapon. You really were going to have to talk to Tataryn about his parenting tactics. Michael and Maggie performed respectfully too.

Jesse appeared then, Bandit in tow, to give shooting lessons, and you didn't miss how Maggie sized him up too. Genji and Hanzo lingered on the periphery, apparently tasked as bodyguards. They didn't come over for introductions, and you didn't make them.

It wasn't till you reached the inflatable bounce house, that Torby and Reinhardt finally showed up.

On Reinhardt's shoulder's sat an adorable little freckle-faced girl with brown hair and big eyes.

Torby gave you a suspicious look. "You and McCree are the babysitters?" He scowled. "The two of you can't even-"

"Oh no," you said, not missing how disappointed Kseniya looked. "We're just the body-guarding tour guides. She's the sitter." You pointed at Kseniya.

Torby was taller than her, and he gave her a long, look.

"Miss Zinnia," Reinhardt boomed. "So good to see you again! Guten tag, Isha!"

Isha trilled back at him and Kseniya gave a shy wave.

"Are you going to be looking after my goddaughter?" Reinhardt continued, sounding delighted. "She's so very responsible, Torby. She showed me how to reprogram my cooker settings. Now my currywurst sauerkraut casserole doesn't get too mushy!"

Torby gave you an odd look, but turned his attention to Kseniya. She extended one hand, still holding Isha to her chest.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Zinnia. I'm Torbjörn Lindholm, and this is my daughter, Brigitte. She's young and impressionable, and Lucky and McCree are terrible influences."

Jesse snorted, but tipped his hat.

You just shook your head and waved.

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Lindholm. Lucky arranged my last visit: she made lots of time for educational stops, gave me good advice on resolving conflicts with other people, and ensured I ate several well-balanced meals." The little girl's face was so very serious and Feng and Maggie were giggling behind their hands.

"...I suppose Lucky can sometimes be responsible. But you seem like a more trustworthy individual." Torby crossed his arms. "If you take extra good care of my daughter, I'll make it worth your while."

"He can teach you to build things," Reinhardt said in a booming whisper. "He's good at that."

"Very good at that," you said.

"Stop sucking up," Torby scowled at you.
"Not so good with people though," Reinhardt continued. And Kseniya had to cover her mouth. "Why don't you take her into the bouncy house? I would go, but I am not allowed. Not after last time..."

Reinhardt sounded so dejected, that you had to do a doubletake. Was he hamming it up for the kids? No, he actually looked sad as he gave the inflatable a wistful sigh.

Torby rolled his eyes. "Brigitte, do you want to go inside?"

"Sh-oooop," she said, sucking in a breath.

"What?" You blinked.

"That means "yes." It's a colloquialism," Kseniya said then she went on to say something in Swedish. She gently handed Isha to Reinhardt and the two youngest girls went up the ramp and through the protective netting.

You stared, wondering just how many languages that kid knew. Something prodded your side and you looked over. Torby was frowning heavily at you.

"Now you look after both of those girls, you hear me?"

You almost said something sarcastic, but Torby was giving you that slightly insane mad-scientist look, so you just nodded. "That was the plan."

"And you better help her," Torby continued, jabbing a finger into Jesse's stomach.

Jesse laughed awkwardly. "C'mon Torby, you know me-"

"Which is exactly why I am reminding you to be useful."

Ouch.

Jesse just handed Bandit to Reinhardt and tugged on Fareeha's wrist. "Come on, punkette. We need to make sure no one messes with the little'uns."

Fareeha gave a serious nod and the two of them led the way up.

"Oh, let's go too!" Feng said already kicking off her shoes and bounding up the ramp, Maggie and Michael close behind.

You stayed outside with Reinhardt and Távio, Isha chirping her dismay at not being allowed to go inside. Because inflatables and raptor claws were not a good combination.

"Maybe Winston would be interested in making a heavier duty bounce house," you said. "I know Kseniya would like that kind of project."

Torby raised a brow. "But with titanium springs and crash gel padding..." He tapped his chin. "It would be difficult to get the same liftoff. However controlled gravitational warp might do the trick..."

Reinhardt's entire face lit up. "Winston would love that."

You nodded politely. Yes, because Winston was obviously the one who wanted a custom bounce house.
Winston's science demos included custom fireworks, robot hamsters, and jetpack rides. Feng, Zheng, and Kseniya lingered to talk shop with him, already intrigued by the idea of a modified trampoline or bouncy house.

The three-legged race went well, Jesse and Fareeha winning spectacularly. Brigitte and Kseniya made an adorable showing, and Maggie and Michael kept tripping on each other. Távio's attention remained on the Morrison siblings. You weren't sure if it was just because they would be part of his future posting.

Lunch, was when things got really worrisome. There was a buffet line, and Jack stood at the grill, wearing an Overwatch apron and drinking a beer. The hotdogs, sausages, burgers, and corn on the cob looked edible, but you secretly hoped he hadn't cooked everything himself.

You were pleasantly surprised to see that there was a small station of krema, mayonnaise, lime, spice mixes, and cheese to turn the corn into elote. You helped Kseniya carry Brigitte's plate and reminded Jesse to make sure Fareeha actually ate some vegetables. He got her a beef bratwurst covered in pickles and jalapenos, and you realized that was probably the best he would manage without help.

You brought back kale salad, poured some chili oil on it, and promptly challenged Fareeha to see who could heroically eat the Spicy Doom Horror. Kseniya joined in, though she didn't need the incentive to eat vegetables, and Jesse did too, though he skimped on the chili oil. He gave Brigitte some of his and then promptly had to get the little girl some milk.

Maggie and Michael watched in horrified fascination as the children began to sweat and Feng keyed something into her watch, shaking her head. You didn't miss how Maggie and Feng kept bringing Távio into their discussions, and how he was quickly warming up to the Morrison siblings.

After the kids had suffered through your bad life choices, you let them eat as much dessert as they wanted, while Jesse drank a beer. You sat there with a slice of cake watching the rank and file Overwatch agents chat happily with their families. Jack was greeting everyone, and Reinhardt and Captain Amari were there, helping him serve the growing line. You were slightly disappointed that you wouldn't be able to go over and tease Jack about him "overwatching the overdone burgers," but you had to keep an eye on the kids.

Maggie organized an informal ice cream eating contest, Fareeha and Jesse digging in with extra enthusiasm. Feng was eating slowly, but she had a knowing smile and you suspected she was going to win. Kseniya and Brigitte were "discretely" feeding Isha and Bandit their own miniature ice cream sundaes with dog-safe toppings.

"So, she's really hardcore then?" Távio asked.

"Yeah, but...my experience is unique. I was kind of a dick for awhile and her insane exercise regimen was years of payback in the making." Michael combed his fingers through his hair. "So you've gone into combat with Lucky?"

"Yeah," Távio trailed off. "The mission...ended badly, but she got me out alive."

You sat there, nursing your beer, casually watching Isha steal the cherry off Bandit's ice cream. It would probably be best if they didn't realize you were eavesdropping.
Bandit whined and she hesitated a moment, before handing it back. He licked the whipped cream off her face, and you smiled wryly.

"Good girl, Isha. You don't steal from your friends. Especially not food," you said.

Isha chirped and patted Bandit's face, offering him a broken piece of sugar cone.

"But significant others are fair game."

You blinked as Jack sat down across from you, reaching over to tug on Maggie's hair. Maggie laughed and swatted his hand away.

"I'm busy, Jack! Come on, McCree! I thought you were a tough guy. You're only at five bowls! Look at Feng! She's still going- It's OK Fareeha, don't make yourself sick, oh boy."

Jack snorted and turned his gaze back to you, flashing you an easy smile.

"No, no stealing food," you scowled at him.

"Thanks for looking after them," he said, changing the subject. "Seriously, Ana and I can rest easier knowing you're keeping them in line." You weren't exactly sure if he meant Jesse, his siblings, or the little kids. Probably all of the above.

"Aren't you supposed to be grilling?" You tried to keep your face business-like, because you were in public.

"Gabe's taking a shift." Jack grinned and glanced over his shoulder. Gabriel stood at the grill, eating elote and flipping burgers, now wearing Jack's Overwatch apron. You felt your lips turn upwards. He was saying something sharp to Reinhardt, but Reinhardt just laughed and clapped him on the back, nearly spilling his beer.

Brigitte and Kseniya started giggling loudly, and you looked over to see what caused the commotion. Your murderbird was on Brigitte's lap licking the smeared ice cream off the kid, and while Isha knew by now to be gentle, you didn't want to tempt fate.

"Isha, don't eat her face," you sighed, reaching over to gently remove her from the child.

Brigitte squeaked something to you in Swedish, and you blinked, looking for an Athena drone to translate.

"It's fine, here, give Bandit a turn," Kseniya said, setting Bandit on Brigitte's lap.

Brigitte giggled as Bandit finished licking her face, and you shook your head, scratching Isha's back. She thrummed at you, and chirped at Jack.

"Hey Isha-bird," he said, reaching out to chuck under her chin.

"C'mon Jesse!" Fareeha shouted. "You can do it!"

"Uh...don't think I can, punkette," he groaned, resting his head on the picnic table. "I uh...I know when I'm beat."

Feng just smirked at him, and took another bite of ice cream.

"Maybe I should get in on this," Jack said.
"Bring it," Feng growled, licking her spoon. "I'll end you, blondie."

Maggie clapped her hands in delight.

Shaking your head, you realized Isha was sticky. "Hey, keep an eye on the kids while I get something to clean her up with," you said.

Jack nodded, and you got up, carrying your murderbird under your arm as you headed to grab some napkins and water.

"That's some bird you have."

You turned to see a dark curvy woman in large sunglasses and a vintage bomber jacket over a red and white floral patterned A-Line dress. She had skull earrings, her slender dreadlocks tied back with a giant red bow, also bearing skull accents. Upon closer look, the flowers on the dress were interspersed with skulls. She wore outrageously high heels, her lipstick glossy and red. You weren't sure if she was "pretty" behind the sunglasses, but she had an undeniable presence.

"She's a little messy," you said.

Isha chirped in protest, eyeing the stranger with interest.

"You are." You dabbed at her face with the wet napkin and she squawked at you, obviously displeased.

"That's quite a crew you're running," she said, gesturing at your table of delinquents. "Big difference in ages."

"They're good kids," you said, setting Isha down. "Go on back to Zinnia," you told her, making sure to stand between the woman and the table. She wasn't setting off alarm bells, but she was asking about your charges, and it was better to stay alert.

Isha eyed you, then the woman, and ran back through the picnic area, toward the kids.

"I'm Cat," she said, extending her hand, a knowing smile on her lips.

"Lucky," you said, shaking her hand firmly, and noting the long red nails, with cute little white and silver skull designs.

"You're very good with them," she said, her tone light and breezy.

"Thanks," you said, unsure of how to take that. But apparently she had been watching you, and you really didn't like that.

"Don't look so offended. It's just that Jane said you were really squirrelly about children and-"

You blinked, suddenly feeling like an idiot, because you knew that carriage, and recognized that jawline. "Cat. Catriona Reyes." Gabriel's oldest sister. "You're friends with Jane?"

"Of course. Someone had to form a support group for women with stupid super soldier brothers. Or sisters. Usually brothers though, and since it's mostly just me and Jane right now. We like to drink wine and tell embarrassing stories." Catriona gave you a sly smile, one that echoed Gabriel's wicked playfulness. "I've heard a great deal about you, though my baby brother has been awfully protective, chica. Of course, Jane told me how Christmas went, so I don't blame him."
You stared for a moment, wondering why Gabriel hadn't warned you. You were going to get him for this.

"Come on, let's go say "hi" to Jack and you can introduce me to my precocious daughter, Zinnia." It's about time we met."

A little dumbstruck, you led Catriona back to the table.

Jack was on his feet instantly. "I should get back to the grill--"

"Hello there, Jack," Catriona grinned wolfishly at him as she removed her sunglasses. She was a handsome woman, her features a little sharper than Gabriel's. "They let you cook? I heard about your packed lunches--"

Jack groaned and set his head down on the table. "Come on Cat, give me a break."

Laughing, she went around the table and gave him a big hug. "It's good to see you, Jack. Nice to finally meet Lucky too."

Jack hugged her back. "Oh, and Lucky's been taking very good care of Zinnia." Jack beamed at you.

Kseniya looked up. "Oh, hello Mama," she said awkwardly. Isha sat on her lap, eyeing Catriona suspiciously.

"I have such an adorable daughter," Catriona said, her smile soft. "Why don't we go say "hi" to your Uncle Gabriel?"

"I'm looking after Brigitte right now," Kseniya said, a little stiffly. "Lucky really needs my help."

"I do," you said, quickly, sensing her discomfort. "I don't speak Swedish."

Cattriona's smile widened. "All right. Have fun, kids." She winked at you, and sauntered off toward the grill.

"Did you know she was coming?" You hissed at Jack when she was out of earshot.

"I don't think Gabe knew she was coming," Jack said, shaking his head. "Cattriona...does things her own way."

You glanced at Kseniya, who'd gotten really quiet.

"Is everything all right?"

"Fine," she said, giving you a wobbly smile. "I think Brigitte needs to use the facilities."

"All right," you sighed, getting up to walk the girls to the restrooms.

It wasn't till late afternoon that parents showed up to relieve you. You'd sent Jesse and Feng to make sure Genji and Hanzo got food. Torby showed up first, and promised to spend an
afternoon letting Kseniya work in his workshop. You weren't sure how that was a reward, but she seemed excited. You tried to slip her some money for helping out with Brigitte, but she wouldn't take it, instead asking if it wasn't too much trouble, then maybe she could visit more, those big golden brown eyes hopeful and earnest.

She was totally Tataryn's kid.

Ray had showed up to walk Catriona, Maggie, Michael, and Feng back to Jack's quarters. She was supposed to be off-duty, but she waved off your concerns. It occurred to you then that Ray might not have any family to visit with either, and maybe Jack and Rodriguez had been the closest thing she had.

Jesse escorted Fareeha back to Captain Amari, and from what you could tell, relations had normalized. He wasn't taking her desserts, but he wasn't avoiding her either.

"Gaming tonight in the rec room," Genji told you as he passed by.

You weren't sure if you were going to make it, but Feng would probably like to go. You passed on the message, and escorted Kseniya to the Blackwatch dorms, unsurprised to find Tataryn lingering by your door. You left them to catch up. Jesse waited at the end of the hall, holding Isha and Bandit.

"How you holding up, sugarpie?" Jesse asked as he handed Isha back to you.

"Exhausted," you groaned, petting Isha's head.

"...Ah," Jesse said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, I guess corralling the kids takes a lot out of you."

"Glad you were there," you said, patting his back. "Fareeha really looks up to you. Me? She just looks worried, like I'm two steps from doing something irreversibly stupid- Wait, how does she know?"

"Dunno," Jesse laughed. "But maybe her Ma said something."

You sighed. "Ziv's been laying low all day."

"His little sister came in," Jesse said, adjusting his hat.

"Oh," you said, voice going flat. Why hadn't he said anything to you? Did he not want to introduce you? OK, that was fair: "here's Lucky, she was there when Savta got blown up." Yeah, maybe it was easier not to explain you.

"She ain't a big fan of Overwatch, none of the family is. I don't think he's inflicted her on Lacroix either," Jesse said soothingly and you realized you hadn't hid your disappointment as well as you'd thought.

"It's weird, seeing everyone with their families," you said after a moment. "Shoal was smacking some guy with a hotdog bun. The bun was the bludgeon, to clarify. I assume it was her brother. Had the same hair."

"Riggs' mom is here," Jesse said. "He's still working up the nerve to introduce you to her. Just a head's up."

"Ah," you said, a little perturbed. You wondered then if you should ask Lacroix if you
could show Riggs the harassment footage to change his mind about Petras. It wouldn't compromise Shit Spiders, but you weren't sure how wise the idea was. You would bring it up later.

"It's...strange," Jesse said, softly. "Kind of hollow."

You blinked. You'd felt weird, sure, but you'd been too busy today to think about that. But now that it was just you and Jesse, you realized that it had been extra hard for him to watch everyone. You'd probably need to check on Vo and the Shimadas later too. "We're going up to Jack's quarters to drink and play games. You want to be my plus one? Since you're already walking me up there?"

"Feng bribe you into this?" Jesse asked, narrowing his eyes. "Because she said she had a "surprise" for me later, and I ain't so sure about that."

"It's for Bandit," you said. "At least, I know she has something for Bandit. Dunno about you."

"OK," he said, mollified. "Yeah, I could stick around for a few. If you think Morrison and the boss won't mind..."

"Pfft, of course they won't," you said, clapping him on the back.

When you got back to the room, you found they were waiting for you. Gabriel was pouring drinks, while Catriona and Feng conversed about Jack's decorating or lack thereof. Jack pretended not to hear them while he helped Maggie and Michael clear off the coffee table. To your surprise, Távio was still here, standing in the corner talking to Chang.

"Oh, here!" Feng handed Jesse a package. He gave you a worried look before unwrapping it. Inside was a small dinosaur costume, Bandit-sized.

Bandit held still while Jesse put the triceratops headpiece on him, and then promptly laid down, and did not budge. Isha crooned as she settled against him, poking at the fabric horns.

Feng took a few pictures, giggling.

Jesse just shook his head, a tired smile on his face. "Everyone loves dressing my poor boy up."

"He's a good boy," Feng said cheerfully.

"What're we playing?" You asked as you sat down besides Michael.

"Poker," Maggie said, shuffling a deck of cards.

Jesse leaned over, grinning at you. "Need some help with that?"

"I was specifically told not to use any of Lucky's decks," Maggie said cheerfully. "But no one warned me about the cute cowboy with the shifty eyes."

You snorted as Jesse slapped a hand across his chest. "There ain't nothing wrong my eyes."

"What are the stakes?" Catriona asked, sipping a disturbingly green cocktail.
"Embarrassing stories," Maggie said, rubbing her hands together.

You raised a brow. "Clever."

"No, we're poor," Michael said shaking his head.

"Still clever," you said. "Chang and Távio sticking around?"

Távio blinked. "I uh...well..."

"I want to see his performance on the range," Chang said.

"Aww come on," you said. "He's been on duty all day. You should stay too. I bet you have a bunch of embarrassing stories."

"Not family friendly ones," Chang said dryly.

"Then you should definitely stay," Catriona laughed.

Chang gave Jack a blank look.

"Stay. You don't have to play if you don't want to. Just have a bourbon, some chips, and relax." Jack smiled gently at her.

"I should go," Távio said awkwardly. "Early morning."

You raised a brow, but he shook his head. It was probably better that he didn't learn all Jack and Gabriel's secrets, but you felt a twinge of guilt for excluding him.

"Hey, Genji and Hanzo are gaming in the Blackwatch rec room," Feng said. "I'm heading down there later. Want to meet up?"

"Uh...sure," he said. "If it's not too late."

"If you're any good, you should just go ask to join in," you said. "Genji needs to be taken down a peg."

"All right," he said, waved, and quickly left. You didn't miss Maggie's look of disappointment, and you wondered then, for the hundredth time, if that was going to be trouble.

Jesse dealt the first hand, Gabriel wisely sitting that round out. He brought you an whiskey sour, and sat behind you, gently massaging your shoulders.

Unsurprisingly, Jesse won that round. He grinned at Maggie. "All right, you're up buttercup."

Maggie frowned. "A story about me? Or story about someone here?"

"Either, but keep in mind, mutually-assured destruction."

"Michael..." Her eyes darted to you, and her grin grew wicked. "Still has-"

"I will end you," Michael muttered, giving her a hard stare.

"-That beautiful sweater Gabriel got him," Maggie giggled. "He even wore it to school. Mostly because he lost a bet with Ray."
"It's comfy," Michael said sullenly, but you had the sneaking suspicion that wasn't what Maggie was originally going to say.

"It was eye-blastingly horrendous," you said to Jesse.

Jesse snorted.

Gabriel won the next hand and Catriona repaid him with a story of his misspent youth. Preteen Gabriel apparently went through a goth phase, a punk phase, and a theatre phase in quick succession. His mother had gotten so frustrated with his wardrobe demands that she'd chased him through the neighborhood with a *chancla*. After that, he'd gone to his Abuelita for help. And that, according to Catriona, is how he learned how to sew, knit, and all the other crafty pursuits.

Jack won again. According to Michael, he and Jane once burned a pair of Maggie's shoes because they were so foul.

You took the next hand, and put Jesse on the spot. Apparently, Genji had once stolen Jesse's towel and clothes in the locker room. Jesse "forgot" what he did to upset him, and the cowboy had to streak back to the dorms. And *some people*, he wouldn't say who, got quite the eyeful.

Maggie was up again, because Jack was really going after his siblings. She glared at him, defiantly taking a swig of Michael's drink. "Jack's middle name is Francis."

Jack stared open-mouthed for three seconds. "Goddamnit, Maggie!"

"Wait," Gabriel turned his head. "You told me it was "Franklin." Like the president. Those were your exact words."

Jack ducked his head, mumbling something unintelligible.

"...Nope," Maggie said, smirking. "It's "Francis." He's been living a lie."

"You're dead to me, Maggie," Jack hissed, glaring at his sister.

Michael snorted, but wisely kept out of it.

"Francis," you said, slowly, because you'd never really thought that hard about your lover's middle names. "Huh."

"Francis? That's awful," Feng said, lacking your restraint. "Jack Francis Morrison." She snorted and got up. "Oh, I think I need time to come to terms with this. I'm going to head downstairs now. You coming, Jesse?"

"Sure thing," Jesse said, wearing a shit-eating grin.

"God, and now McCree knows. McCree, if this gets around." Jack rested his face in his hand. "McCree-"

"And that's our cue," Jesse said, smothering his laughter as he pulled on his boots, grabbed his tricera-dog, and skedaddled out the door. Laughing, Feng followed.

"You really didn't know?" Chang asked, leaning on the back of the couch. She gave Gabriel a thoughtful look.

"No," Gabriel said. "How'd you know?"
"Saw his paperwork back in chem camp," she said with a shrug. "Always thought it kind of fit him."

"You're not helping, Ray," Jack groaned.

"Jack Francis, Franny if we're feeling cheeky," Gabriel purred, leaning over to pat Jack's head. "You lied to me. You've been a bad bad Catholic boy."

"We're not actually Catholic," Michael said, trying to divert that conversational trainwreck. "Mom's Methodist and Dad goes to church to keep her happy. They're old family names."

"Well, "Francis," you should be proud of your identity," you told him, kissing his cheek.

"Goddamnit," Jack glared at you. "I don't want to hear it."

"But Fran-cisssss," You drew the name out, as Gabriel embraced Jack from behind, not letting him squirm away. "You lied to us..." You sprawled out in his lap, grinning up at him. "There are consequences, Fran-cisssssss."

Jack just covered his face, unable to escape your teasing and the terrible truth. His middle name was not Franklin, but "Francis."

Chapter End Notes

Family day fluff for Francis! :P

In other less dramatic news, I got a nice pair of speakers on SUPER discount today ($2 clearance!), and I've been having random dance parties around the house and my animals are all terribly traumatized by how LOUD my music is. I kind of feel like a semi-sentient lifeform who just discovered music and is gaining a soul. Sad, I know. I go through phases where I forget how good it is for me to just listen to music to restore some lost soul/hit points. :P

The next update will be delayed for the Halloween oneshot. It's a PWP set in the IAL timeline. It just didn't fit anywhere in the current story arc. It'll post as its own chapter some time next week.
Chapter 103

Chapter Summary

Family Day gets too exciting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When you woke up the next morning, Jack was still sulking. Maybe you and Gabriel should let up, but seeing him pout was pretty adorable. Yawning, you raised a brow when you realized Feng had never come back last night. Chang was in a sleeping bag on the floor, and Catriona had left last night to go back to her hotel.

"Where's Feng?" You asked Athena, as Jack pulled a pillow over his head and pretended not to hear you.

"Feng, Genji, Hanzo, Távio, and Jesse all had a sleepover in the Blackwatch rec room. Genji won at all the games," Athena said proudly. "Ziv stopped by too and made a respectable showing. He's looking for you when you get a chance."

"Sure," you said with a yawn. Today's festivities would only go through early afternoon, so people could spend more quality time with their families. After the hovercar races and the closing speeches, Jack was spending the day with his siblings. Gabriel was going to take Catriona out for dinner. You weren't sure if Jack would be joining him or what you were doing, but you needed to go get Kseniya and maybe Brigitte.

Távio was waiting for you outside of Jack's quarters, with bags under his eyes and asymmetrical hair. You hoped your Athena drone had gotten a good picture of that. She floated silently beside you, not commenting.

Your first stop was Tataryn's room. Kseniya was all ready, wearing purple shorts and purple pachimari t-shirt. You swung by the Blackwatch rec room. Feng was already sitting up, yawning as she stepped over Jesse. Hanzo and Genji had claimed the couches, though Bandit was asleep next to Hanzo and you discretely snapped a picture. Feng combed her fingers through her hair, straightened her t-shirt, and declared herself ready for food.

Jack and Chang escorted his siblings down to breakfast. Jack was still glowering at Maggie for the big reveal.

You registered for the hovercar race at Kseniya's behest. You would probably have Távio and Brigitte onboard. The vehicles seated four people, so Michael, Feng, and Maggie would have to get a separate vehicle. Jesse and Fareeha might have their own too.

"So, did I dream that your middle name was-" Feng yawned.

"Claire, you are my favorite sister present, so I'm going to request that you shut the hell up if you want to stay that way," Jack muttered darkly.

Feng giggled behind her stack of pancakes and elbowed Maggie. "I'm the favorite now."
"Pfft, that doesn't get you anything. It took me years to figure out, but he'll still forget your birthday and have Gabe pick out your Christmas presents because he's a terrible shopper." Maggie didn't look the least bit bothered.

Chang snorted.

"That's cold," Feng laughed.

"But true," Maggie said with a wink.

Jack just hunched over his coffee and muttered to himself.

You reached over and patted his shoulder. "It'll be all right, sir." You tried to keep a professional face. "After last night's revelation, I doubt anything else could shock us."

Groaning, Jack put his face down on the table and refused to budge for ten minutes.

"OK, this pulls us up," you muttered, fiddling with the controls for the hovercar. It wasn't a full-fledged hovercraft, but rather a recreational version. It still reached high speeds, but there were safety measures and a guidance system to keep it on the track. Winston had been play-testing this model for awhile, ostensibly as a training tool, but several amusement parks were interested.

"The cushions are flotation devices," Kseniya said helpfully.

"Like hover flotation?" Távio asked, wrinkling his nose. "Or water flotation?"

"Water, of course," Kseniya giggled, like he'd made a joke.

"Well, we'd really have to fu- mess up if we end up in the water," Távio laughed. "There's no water on the track."

"There is a large man-made lake on the property," Athena chimed in. It was very deep and used for aquatic and amphibious training exercises. You and Jesse had pushed Ziv in a few times when you were doing your swimming tests.

Kseniya and Brigitte sat strapped in the backseat, the Athena drone floating between them. Távio was in the front passenger seat. There were cushioned neck rests built into the seat. You'd reserved the purple one just for Kseniya, and she looked very pleased. A flat-bottomed oval, the hovercraft reminded you of a bumper car. There was no roof, but there were foot-thick rubber bumpers around the entire vehicle. It floated a few inches off the ground, running on electromagnetism and some quantum energy generator that you couldn't really claim to understand. But Winston said it was environmentally friendly.

The course was easy enough. You'd be racing five other drivers. The high-altitude hover function actually slowed the vehicle, but there were soft bumpers that you needed to jump. Hitting them would slow you down more. All in all, it was a simple concept. You were tempted to let Kseniya drive, but twelve was recommended age, so you "reluctantly" took the wheel.

Feng and Maggie shook their fists at you, Michael at the wheel. To your surprise, Jesse let Fareeha drive, and you shook your head, wondering if that was a good idea.

A simulated traffic light clicked Red. Yellow. Green. Ding! And you hit the accelerator. It
went from zero to forty miles per hour in half a second and you grinned as wind ripped through your hair, the boundless blue sky overhead. Brigitte cackled in delight and Kseniya gave a happy shriek.

You were still eating Fareeha's dust, so you pushed down on the accelerator, laughing as you hit an inflatable bumper when you should have jumped. Távio said something foul in Portuguese, and you laughed even harder as Brigitte yelled something just as emphatic and unintelligible.

You were halfway through the course, making good time, but still behind Fareeha, when the vehicle lurched, then began to speed up. You frowned and hit the brake, but hovercraft just went faster. The speedometer climbed quickly. Fifty. Sixty. Seventy miles per hour. The numbers turned red. You heard something tear, smack the rounded front of the hovercar, and whip to the side. Part of the front bumper had come off. Swearing, you tried to pull the hovercraft toward an inflatable obstacle, hoping that would slow you down.

But the vehicle didn't respond, instead, veering off the track.

"Ma'am-" Távio glanced over at you, real fear in his eyes.

"Athena-" You shouted. "Are you getting this?"

There was a terrible moment of silence. You gripped the steering wheel, vainly trying to steer the vehicle away from the oncoming trees. You gripped the wheel with all your might and threw your weight to the left.

Miraculously, the vehicle lurched again, the whiplash making your vision blink. But you narrowly avoiding a massive spruce tree.

"Athena!" You growled through clenched teeth.

"Manual disruption," Athena crackled. "There's....sorry, we're have a situation. I'm splitting resources. I can give you control of the wheel, but someone's interfering with the central control system."

"We've been hacked?" Kseniya's voice was weak and almost lost in the rush of wind.

"Yes," Athena said, apparently too distracted to lie to the kid.

"You can't decelerate?" You asked, eyes on the terrain, because now you were off the track, and had to watch out for logs, rocks, and people. You zoomed across the training ground, the craft responding to your jumps and steering. Eighty. Ninety. You'd driven convertibles at this speed. But the hovercraft wasn't built for this and it shook under the strain.

"Trying-" Athena stuttered. "I can't do this and keep the other situation under control. I'm tracking the interference right now. Jack and Tataryn are moving to intercept. Torby and Winston are on it too, but Lucky you're reaching unsafe speeds."

"Reaching?" You muttered darkly.

"You're going to have to find a soft landing."

"The lake, ma'am,' Távio shouted over the roar of the wind.

"Can you swim?" You shouted.
"Yes!" Kseniya and Távio screamed.

Brigitte gurgled something then laughed, and you took that as a "no, I'm just a small child, and I have no idea what's going on."

"You've done the aquatic landing drill, right?" You shouted at Távio.

"Hit feet first, at an angle, ma'am!"

You kept your eyes on the path, the lake coming into view.

"I need you to take Brigitte and jump off the side, as soon as we hit the water. Kseniya, can you jump too?" The landing would decelerate you, maybe not to a safe speed, but better than what you were doing now.

"What about you?"

"I'll be in right behind you!"

Távio unstrapped himself, and crawled into the backseat, carefully lifting the laughing Brigitte into his lap. You spared a glance over your shoulder. He was watching the oncoming lake with grim eyes and clenched teeth. But he gripped the little girl to his chest, and refastened the belt. He'd need to keep it on till the landing. You had a vision of kids spilling out of the craft, hitting the water headfirst at rapid speeds, and you had to swallow the panic back down.

One hundred meters. Seventy-five meters. Fifty meters. Twenty five... You gave it half a second, then held the hover switch, lurching forward as you rose up across the dock. You were airborne and still gaining altitude, though your forward speed had dropped as you arced over the water. The hover function was limited, and soon sputtered out as you approached the middle of the small lake.

"Get ready!" You shouted, already unfastening your belt.

The rubber bumpers hit the water with a splash, the aquatic landing halving your speed. Távio was already moving. Holding Brigitte to his chest, he leapt off the side of the vehicle.

Kseniya fumbled with her belt, hands shaking too hard to unfasten herself. Swearing profusely, you flicked your fingers, sliced through the material, and climbed into the back seat.

"Now! Keep your feet together!" You pulled her up, even as the craft began accelerating once more. Grabbing her hand you leapt off the side.

The water was shockingly cold, and you slammed through it with bone-aching speed. You cut through the greenish water, leaving a trail of bubbles. Forcing your eyes open, you tightened your grip on Kseniya's small hand, and began to kick your legs. Up, up, up, through the greenish water and toward the shimmer of sunlight on the surface, your lungs starting to burn, your heart still pounding in your throat.

Kseniya thrashed, kicking you in her panic, but you dragged her with you anyway, flesh fingers locked around her wrist.

You broke through the water, gasping for air, and half a second later Kseniya was above the surface, coughing and sputtering. She gave a choked sob and wrapped her arms around your neck. Flinching, you had to work extra hard to tread water with the little girl clinging to you.
Something soft dropped from above, and you gripped the purple seat cushion the Athena drone had grabbed. Looking around, you saw Távio floating there, a laughing Brigitte tucked between him and his own flotation cushion. She splashed happily, gurgling more excited Swedish.

Kseniya grumbled something as you floated there, holding tight to the cushion.

"You OK?" You asked, spitting out lake water.

She nodded, head tucked against your neck.

"Can you tell if Brigitte is OK?" You asked. "She looks OK, but I can't tell what she's saying..."

"She said, she wants to do it again!" Kseniya sniffled, and then began to wheeze hysterically.

"Of course, she does," you muttered, wondering if all kids were insane like this, or if you were just especially unlucky.

The hovercraft crashed into a dock on the opposite side of the lake and immediately caught fire. You began to swim for shore, a crowd already forming around the docks.

Fortunately, Torby and Reinhardt were en route on the training boat. Angela was there too, and that surprised you.

"I told you to be careful with them!" Torby shouted at you, as soon as the engine died down. "What the hell did you drag them into?" He said some other things in Swedish too, and judging by Kseniya's big eyes, they weren't complimentary.

"Because I totally did this on purpose and by divine intervention, somehow gained the technical expertise to get that stupid thing off the track and overclocked its set speed limit!"

A vein in Torby's forehead bulged.

"We know it was sabotage," Reinhardt said, patting Torby's back hard enough to make the smaller man wince. "Calm down, my friend. We both know Lucky Lady did the best she could, and it looks like the kids are unharmed."

"They better be," Torby muttered darkly.

Brigitte giggled. "Papa!" She reached for him and Távio handed her up first. Reinhardt lifted her without any problem, and then helped Távio aboard. Kseniya wouldn't let go of you, and you sighed as Reinhardt grabbed both your wrists and pulled you up. He carefully set you down.

"Hey, it's OK. You can let go," you told her.

Kseniya took a deep breath, and nodded weakly before turning around to face the concerned adults.

You sat down on the bench, shaking as the adrenaline coursed through your system. You tucked your head low and took several uneven breaths.

"You'll be sore, and there's minor bruising, but you should be fine," Angela told Kseniya as
she scanned her with her diagnostic tool. "Let me see her," she said to Torby as she inspected Brigitte. Brigitte tried to grab the scanner, but Angela deftly swapped hands. "You're perfectly fine," she said, lowering her shoulders in relief. "Needs a bath now, maybe some apple pie, but most children do."

You snorted.

Angela scanned Távio. "You botched the landing and broke some toes," she sighed.

"I know, but I was trying to absorb the impact," Távio winced.

Angela's face softened. "It's nothing we can't patch up. Good job shielding Brigitte, agent."

Távio gave her a shaky smile. "As long as the kid's OK."

Angela turned her gaze to you. She scanned you slowly. "You are luckier than you deserve to be. Bruises, some soreness, use an emitter for that neck injury right away, or you'll be sorry. Why don't you two come back to the infirmary with me? Reinhardt and Torby can look after the kids."

"I want to stay with Lucky," Kseniya said, latching on to your arm.

"I think your...guardian is going to want to make sure you're all right," you said, patting her head. "I need to get patched up, and there's no better defender than Reinhardt."

Reinhardt beamed at you. "It is true. I can put on my armor and grab my energy shield if you like." He flexed, his bare biceps thicker than her waist.

Kseniya bit her lip, a small smile forming. "That won't be necessary, Uncle Reinhardt."

"Are you sure? I can get my hammer!" He boomed.

"Hamma!" Brigitte shouted happily.

You exchanged glances with Távio, both of you obviously wondering how a grump like Torby could have such a cute and energetic little girl.

Something was wrong. Gabriel, Jack, and Captain Amari were not among the crowds gathered on the docks. Neither was Tataryn or your Shimada security detail. Where were Fareeha and Jesse? And Feng, Michael, and Maggie? You glanced at Torby, but he shook his head, brows heavy. Reinhardt was busy reassuring Kseniya. Neither could come out and say what was going on out in the open.

Reinhardt was off the boat first, clearing a path, and politely asking everyone to give you space. You dripped water as you passed by the dozens of people, listening to them whisper about your "recklessness."

"It's a good thing Agent Strike's quick thinking kept the damages to a minimum, otherwise things could have gotten messy," Reinhardt boomed, cheerfully. "It seems we are experiencing some...technical issues." He shook his head. "It is very...embarrassing," Reinhardt said, giving the crowd a sheepish, if charming smile. "So I have organized some alternative activities, so you too can appreciate the Overwatch experience. First, we shall take a bracing tour of the grounds! The
Swiss countryside is quite scenic-

You noticed then that Reinhardt was herding them away from the main buildings.

"Join me," Angela said, carrying her staff as you followed her toward the main building. "I need to get the infirmary right away. You are carrying, yes?" She looked at you with worried eyes.

You glanced at your soaked holster under your t-shirt. Your sidearm would fire despite getting wet, but you weren't sure about Távio.

'Yes, ma'am," Távio said, hobbling along.

Angela nodded. "There was a contained attack," she said briskly. "Something took Athena offline for a few minutes."

Your mind jumped to the Zheng bot, and your breathing quickened.

"Winston, Ziv, and your Triad friend managed to get bolster her defenses, but there has been a prison break. Jack, Gabriel, and Ana are dealing with it now." She paused when she saw your face. "They aren't alone. They have trustworthy security forces with them."

You exhaled slowly. "OK. What else?"

"The infirmary wasn't targeted, but I need to get back and make sure my patients and staff are safe."

You nodded, gently pushing past Angela. "I'll take point then. Cover us, Távio."

The fish torpedo sidled up to you.

"I am glad you are unharmed, Lucky. Sorry I couldn't do more."

"Thanks, Athena. Couldn't have done it without you," you said, eyes scanning the green for movement. "What can you tell me about the facilities?"

"I...am still working to regain control. My subroutines are maintaining mainframe security and keeping the defenses online; we are currently experiencing a large-scale cyber attack, but with Zheng's assistance, I have that under control. Unfortunately, that initial viral attack knocked out several of my awareness nodes."

"The infirmary?"

"I'm not focusing on nonessential-"

"Nonessential?" Mercy gave the drone a hard, murderous look. "Just because you can't bleed-" She gripped her staff tightly.

"My apologies, Dr. Ziegler," Athena said. "I am struggling to keep the escapees away from our civilian guests, maintain our cyber defenses, and securely monitoring all attempts at weapons access, friendly and otherwise. My resources are best focused in those directions. My apologies if I am distracted and have spoken carelessly."

Angela exhaled slowly. "No, sorry I snapped, Athena. I'm just worried."

"Of course," Athena's voice crackled. "We are all experiencing strain. I do not know what you will encounter, and I must turn my attention elsewhere. Good hunting, Lucky."
The drone beside went dark and dropped into the grass.

"So...Athena isn't just a really advanced virtual assistant then?" Távio asked, staring down at the drone.

You groaned and rubbed your forehead, definitely not up for this conversation.

Angela snorted.

"You know, we can talk about that later," you said. "For now, please-"

"Remember Blackwatch discretion," Távio said, almost mimicking your cadence. "Got it, ma'am." He trailed behind you, muttering under his breath. "I thought that applied to covert operations, not love triangles, dinosaurs, and secret AIs with attitude..."

You entered from a side door, the main building eerily quiet. Most people weren't on duty on Sunday, but the infirmary was usually bustling. Maybe not cheerful, but a hive of activity. You headed down the hall, not surprised by how light Angela's steps were. Távio was the loudest of you, dragging his wounded foot with a soft scrape across the hard floors.

Your clothes were still damp, but your boots were no longer squeaky and you hugged the walls, keeping your gun up. You turned into the main hall approaching the infirmary, and saw a body sprawled on the ground.

Angela gasped, and you held up a hand, creeping forward to check for vital signs, boobytraps, and identity. It was a brunette woman in an In-Sec uniform.

Her neck hung at a severe angle, and you shook your head at Angela. You checked for wires, deadman switches, and proximity mines. Then, carefully, you inspected the face.

You knew her right away. It was Sakai. She was still very warm and held a strange humming metal box in her hand, a smaller version of the jammer you'd found in DC. It wasn't identical, but you picked it up, and switched it off, hoping it would do something for you. You waited to see if Athena would come back online, but there was only silence. Well, at least it didn't blow up. After another half a second of deliberation, handed it to Távio.

"Get this outside, to Winston or Ziv."

"I can't just leave you," Távio hissed. "I'm supposed to watch your six and there are obviously hostiles-"

"That is important," you said. "Get it to one of our trusted techs. That's an order, agent," you said, already turning around. "Be careful."

Távio stiffened. "Understood, ma'am." He swallowed, his unease clear on his face.

"Winston or Ziv," you repeated. "If you can get Athena to respond, she'll do too."

"I'll come right back," he said, and took off, hobbling along, clutching the cube to his chest.

You smiled wryly and squared your shoulders. "Angela, I need you to stand back."
"Understood," Angela said, and switched on her staff.

You blinked as heat traveled through your body. It was prickly, like an emitter, but not unbearable. Too much nervous energy building up in your muscles, waiting for something to happen. You weren't sure that you liked that. On the other hand, you felt stronger, faster, and maybe like you've been doing stims, really good stims.

"Stay in my line of sight, and I can boost you," she said.

You nodded, and crouched by the main door. It was slightly ajar, and you checked for tripwires. No, whoever was here, was moving fast. You pushed the door open, keeping low.

There was a prone man in scrubs, blood pooling around his head.

You held up your hand, hoping Angela hadn't seen him yet. You made your way across the entryway.

He was breathing. You listened, for gunfire, crying, anything... The infirmary was silent. Some machinery whirred and beeped, letting you know that the backup generator hadn't gone down. You tried to think about who was in the infirmary that would warrant such a violent-

Lao.

You clenched your teeth. She wouldn't have... But Lao hadn't been in control of her actions in Lucerne. There was always the chance she wasn't in control of them now, despite what Angela and Torby had done.

If it was Lao, you had to find her, before anyone else did. You touched your stomach, the scars on your skin long faded.

You glanced over your shoulder. Angela was kneeling over her injured nurse, her expression cold. She looked at you, nodded, and got up. There was nothing she could do for him right now, and you had no idea if that was good or terrible. You headed for Lao's suite, making sure the check each room en route. It was Sunday, and thankfully there was a skeleton crew. Less civilians to get hurt.

Lao was under observation as she acclimated to her new spinal implants. Theoretically, they should have cleared out some of the electronic compulsive programming. But she had gone through some rigorous mental conditioning. Maybe...

There were occupants in some rooms, but they were bedridden and had probably been unconscious all weekend. Angela checked the charts and nodded at you: they were who they claimed to be.

When you reached Lao's room, the door was slightly open.

"But you didn't just come to ask about my new arm, did you?" Lao's voice was cold.

"Fancy. Almost fucking useless, but pretty enough, I guess."

You couldn't see the speaker, but you didn't need to. You knew that voice. You hung back. Lao sounded like she was sitting in her bed. You drew back, angling yourself so you could see into the room. Richard Prince was sitting in the same damn chair you'd taken to talk to her when she invited you in.
There was an awkward silence.

"Why are you here?" Lao asked, and to her credit, her voice stayed strong.

"They patched you up nice, Bái Shé," Prince said. "A little bird told me that you were getting all better. If you keep switching sides like this, you won't have any friends left."

You released a breath you didn't know you'd been holding. Lao wasn't rampaging through HQ, killing people and releasing prisoners. You wanted to kill Prince, wanted to kill him very badly, but you knew Lacroix and Gabriel wanted him alive. For now. You just needed a moment to plan it.

"If you're here to kill me, just do it," Lao snapped. "I'm not going back."

Prince gave an ugly laugh. "Now that's a funny thing to bring up. In fact, that's what I'm here to ask you about. Never really paid much attention to the Ukrainian. Chumak, was it? I knew he was a fucking piece of work, knew he was all about his cute little pet Bái Shé-"

"Shut up!" Lao snarled.

"Oh, you didn't like playing doctor?" You could hear Prince's smirk, and you wanted to knock his teeth out. "Doesn't matter. Reyes let slip something interesting. Said you were programmed to kill your best friend. I have to ask, were you actually pissed at her outside of work? Did you secretly want her dead before Talon fixed you? Or was it compulsion? And what kind? Was it a facial recognition trick keyed into your cybernetics? A little voice in your head?"

"Why do you care?" Lao sounded confused.

"...Professional curiosity," Prince said. "And the only reason you're still alive. So answer me, how did your protocol work?"

"...It was a mix of methods," Lao said after an uncomfortably long pause. "Some of it was psychological reinforcement. "She abandoned you. She stole the man you liked. She failed you." Constant reminders of irrational things," Lao said softly. "Some of it was blatant, some of it was subtler, but it happened daily."

"I didn't sit there like some brainwashed zombie muttering "kill her, kill her." Gérard Lacroix's kill order supposedly would have been triggered by facial recognition. But they didn't have a picture of her on file-"

"Strange," Prince muttered. "Girls are all about taking useless pictures. There weren't any of you together?" Prince paused.

"Not that they could recover," Lao said, sounding pleased with herself.

"Clever," Prince said not sounding pleased at all. He didn't know the half of it. She'd misidentified you on purpose.

"But when she came out and said her...full name: I couldn't stop myself. I didn't want to stab her. I tried to stop myself. It was like...watching a movie. I didn't have the control of the wheel. Some of the shrinks theorized that I was disassociating myself from it, that I couldn't accept the guilt. But I fought it, I swear I fought it, and I failed."

"Hn." Prince was quiet for a long time. "Would you call it an impulse or...?"

"...I don't know. I didn't hear a voice telling me to do it. I just...did it, even though part of me was trying not to. It was like watching a movie. And then, when I'd completed the task, I was
"...Waking up from a dream," Prince said.

Lao exhaled. "Yeah. A bad dream." She took a shaky breath. "Who'd they send you after?"

Prince was silent for a moment. "My ex. Not torn up about it like you are. But I guess between you and me, I don't like the thought that they messed with my head. Always told me the treatments were experimental, a risk I was willing to take. But they never said nothing about putting leashes on me." The chair scraped against the floor and you tensed, ready to go.

"So you killed your friend, huh?"

"...Yeah," she said, and your heart clenched, because even now, after all this, Lao was trying to protect you.

"And you feel bad about it." Prince laughed. "Well, don't worry, you can join her soon. I'll even make it quick-

Your nascent reasonable plan evaporated. You charged through the door, fingers primed.

Prince had his big metal arms attached, of course, and his eyes widened comically, as you slugged him across the jaw with your metal fingers. His head snapped back, and spun around for another strike. You weren't fast enough, one of those metal fists lashed out and you flew backward into a counter.

"Lucky!"

Prince was already on his feet, blood staining his orange jumpsuit. The sleeves had been ripped off.

"I remember you, bitch. You were there on the beach..." He laughed harshly. "Guess I get to pay you back now."

You dragged yourself up, and he seized you by the left wrist, grinning at your gloves.

"Got some attachments there? You think that trick would work twice?" He pulled you against him. "I've got news for-

You snarled and slammed the crown of your head into his nose. Because even if there was the chance he wouldn't feel the pain, the blunt force trauma to his head would do something.

Swearing, blood gushing from his crushed nose, Prince threw you at the wall and you spun around, gun drawn. You weren't supposed to kill him, no, but you wouldn't regret it either.

"Can you stop me with that peashooter before I-?"

Prince faltered then, his eyes widening briefly as blood began to trickle from his mouth. You didn't hesitate. You darted in and jammed your injector into his thigh.

Prince moved his mouth a few times, and then crumpled to the floor, Angela's pronged staff partially buried in his back.

"Lao, are you OK?" You asked, wiping your bloody face.

"I'm not the one leaking all over the floor like some kind of hazardous waste faucet," she
"You are not allowed to hang out with Ziv any more. He's a bad influence," you muttered and turned around to check on Prince.

"He'll live," Angela said tightly. "Don't know if he'll walk again, or if I caused permanent damage to his cybernetics, but I don't care right now." She gave you a fierce look. "I thought you were going to shoot him-"

"Need him alive," you said, not wanting to admit that you didn't think your handgun would be enough to bring him down quickly.

"I suppose I should do something about that," Angela scowled. "After I take care of Henri. He's got a bad concussion, but I think he'll be OK." It took you a moment to realize that she was talking about the nurse you'd found on the ground.

"You're still bleeding," Lao said. She was wearing a t-shirt, and still under the blankets.

You shrugged. "What's a little blood between friends?"

Lao stared at you, fear, anger, and shame all crossing her face. "You're an asshole," she shouted, and promptly burst into tears.

You reached over and hugged her, not caring how mad she was in that moment. Just grateful that you'd got here in time and that she was still on your side. "Sorry I'm late. I'm glad you're OK," you said, squeezing her, and then you straightened up. "Now, I'm going to go make sure the rest of the infirmary is clear."

There was another concussed nurse shoved behind a desk, but other than that, the infirmary was clear. Athena was back online ten minutes later. Távio had apparently reached one of her active security nodes, and she'd guided him to Winston. All the escapees were dead or accounted for, and Zheng was helping run a system diagnostic. Jack and Gabriel were reported to be fine, but handling the situation. There had been some injuries on your side, but everyone would live. Genji and Hanzo had already been by to pick up Prince. Genji looked amused, possibly by Angela's frazzled state. Hanzo just looked constipated. As usual.

You sat through a nanite injection and an angry German lecture, though you already knew all that vitriol was not directed at you. Angela gave you your shot there in Lao's room, handed you an emitter, and went to check on her injured staff members.

"You OK?" You asked, as Lao blew her nose, her eyes bloodshot.

"I'm fine! Stop asking," she growled.

"I gotta head back out in a minute. Want to do this again some time? Maybe without the cyborg mass murderer?" You sat in the chair you'd taken back from Prince.

"...You can come by again," Lao said, staring at the wall. "It's getting boring in here."

"What do you do for fun?" You asked, because it was better not to assume anything now.
"I've been giving input on the cybernetics," Lao said. "I know I'm not the only one in Dr. Ziegler's program. But I have the engineering and programming background to highlight things that she and Torby miss."

"That's...fun?" You wondered aloud.

"I don't want to have fun. I want to be useful!"

It was a far cry from the young soldier you'd met a few years ago. No, that wasn't entirely accurate. Lao had always wanted to be useful. But back then, she could still let herself play. Now, it was all about making amends for the bad things that had happened. You understood that track. "All right. Let me know if I can get you anything."

Lao stayed silent for a minute. "I'd like news about my parents."

You were prepared for that question. "Your mother has been offered a civil engineering job in Numbani, and your father will probably get a job offer from the university as well," you said, carefully, because you couldn't reveal Kwento's involvement.

"Numbani?" Lao tilted her head to the side. She muttered something in Cantonese, and shook her head. "Do you think they'll go?"

"No clue," you said. "Heard it was a pretty sweet deal though."

"And it's safe...?"

"Yeah," you said. "No Talon involvement." Because you'd double-checked Kwento's dealings. Just to make sure everything was aboveboard.

Lao pondered that. "So why were you dripping wet when you came into the room?"

"Oh, I'd just bailed out of a speeding hovercraft into the lake. It's the new thing. All the kids are doing it," you said blandly.

Lao stared at you for a very long time, then shook her head. "I'm not even going to ask."

"That's probably best," you said, deciding to avoid another lecture.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. The Final Girl really set me off schedule a bit. But also am still getting over this stupid cold, started training at my new job (it seems like a really good environment!), and I technically haven't left my old job yet, going in this weekend to help out.

I'm adjusting to the new schedule, and we're not allowed to use the wi-fi at the office for reasons, so I'm going to have to develop a different editing procedure. I'll probably convert my drafts to epub and read/notate them on my nook. That's what I did when I went to Texas in May.
Chapter 104

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Family Day and some unforeseen consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Torby and Reinhardt still had Kseniya and Brigitte. Chang was covering Feng, Michael, Maggie, and Fareeha. Athena said Isha had stuck with Gabriel throughout the operation, but was fine. You massaged your temples, glad that you hadn't known that during the attack. For the moment, all the big fires had been put out, and you could let yourself relax for a few minutes before the next heart-stopping crisis.

So you did the only logical thing and popped by the cafeteria vending machines for some ice cream and coffee. After all that...excitement, you needed something to boost your blood sugar.

You sat quietly at an empty table and let yourself breathe. You did not like mixing kids with violence. And Isha? What the hell had Isha been doing? Athena had been awfully tight-lipped about Gabriel and Jack. Could you say that about an AI, especially since none of her drones had anything that resembled lips? And what kind of tech had the attackers used to take her down? Since Sakai was involved, you had no doubt that Petras had some role in this. Had it been triggered by your confrontation with him? Or had he always been planning to get rid of Prince before the cyborg could reveal too much?

"Oh, there you are."

You looked up to see Ziv in his dapper canary yellow suit, one sleeve torn. You stared, checking him for other damages.

"I'm fine," he huffed. "Pissed about the suit, but that's it."

You shook your head. "Been wondering where you disappeared to."

Someone cleared their throat right then, and you realized that you needed to eat less ice cream and drink more coffee, because your alertness levels were dropping. Behind Ziv was a much shorter girl with those same slightly wild amber eyes and a cloud of reddish-brown curls. Where Ziv was lean and angular, she was round and soft, except for her expression. She had that bitchy "Ziv has no patience for anyone" expression down pat and it was a little weird to see it on someone else's face. Was it a genetic thing?

You stood up and held out your hand. "I'm Lucky. You must be Tali."

"Talia," she said, arms staying firmly at her side.

You dropped your hand. "All right."
"Only family calls me "Tali," she said, unable to resist getting another jab in.

You shook your head, seeing a distinct pattern in Mihret family manners. "OK."

Ziv just rolled his eyes. "Stop being a little bitch, Talia."

Talia's nostrils flared and she glared at her brother. "You abandoned me!"

You raised a brow. You didn't think moving to Zurich from Tel Aviv constituted brotherly abandonment, but you weren't really an expert on sibling relations.

"One moment we're eating bland hamburgers, the next, you're running off and telling me to follow the giant German! And then she goes and crashes a fucking hovercraft into a dock!" She pointed at you. "There were children onboard! This is your "good friend" Lucky? The one who watches your back? She's a fucking menace! What the hell, Ziv?"

You snorted and switched over to your coffee. "Because my idea of a good time is crashing hovercrafts at crazy speeds."

Your sarcasm did not fly over her head. "Then why did you do it?" Talia scowled at you, and you couldn't bring yourself to get angry, because she looked so much like a little angry Ziv, and you didn't usually take a normal-sized angry Ziv very seriously. "You were the one in control of the vehicle..." She trailed off, looking again at Ziv's torn sleeve.

You just sipped your coffee, a wry smile on your face. "Uh-huh."

"Ben-zona!" She swore, eyes lighting up as she realized that something serious had transpired. "What happened?"

"That's classified," Ziv said smugly.

She punched him in the arm. "You said you were just a tech! That you weren't doing dangerous things!"

"So did Savta. Did you actually believe her?" Ziv laughed.

Talia looked at you again, brow furrowed, then glared back at her brother. "I believed you, you ass!"

Ziv shrugged, not looking ashamed at all. In fact, he had the smuggest shit-eating grin you'd seen on his face in a long time. You sat back in your chair, a little worried.

"You've got blood on your shirt," Talia said, her angry glare having no effect on Ziv. You glanced down, seeing that she was right. You'd forgotten about that. You definitely needed more caffeine.

You shrugged. "I'll go change after I finish my coffee."

"Is it yours?" Ziv asked sharply, his amusement draining away.

"Not all of it," you said cheerfully.

"Idiot," Ziv scowled. "Tell me you at least hit him once for me."

"Nope, just for our friends." You paused. "But I head-butted him once for me. I think that might be my signature move."
Ziv grumbled something in Hebrew, but you were used to his mutterings and didn't think twice about it.


"I said, "no it's not." Don't believe her lying ass." Ziv flashed her a mean little smile. "Lucky's signature move is stabbing people through the throat."

Talia watched you with big wary eyes, and you just sighed, wishing Ziv could keep his damn mouth shut.

After your snack, shower, and change of clothes, you headed back out. Most of your guests assumed there'd been an electrical issue - that was the story anyway - and Captain Amari had returned to preside over the closing ceremonies.

Tataryn had picked Kseniya up already. No word on how mad he was, and honestly, you didn't have the emotional fortitude to handle him right now.

Jack, Gabriel, Feng, and their family members were all in Jack's quarters, where you were heading right now. Távio was getting patched up in the infirmary. Lacroix was overseeing the rest of the cleanup. Jesse, Távio, and the Shimadas had all gone to the infirmary for minor wounds. You shook your head, exhausted from the combat, but mostly from the socializing.

The guests were speaking in hushed voices around the living room, and Feng pointed at the bedroom.

"They're in there," she said. "You should probably talk to them without an audience." She gave a great disappointed sigh.

You walked into Jack's bedroom, a little worried about the response you were going to get, but all thoughts evaporated when you saw Jack sitting there on the bed with a black eye, one arm in a sling, blood still staining his torn shirt.

You were at his side immediately, hands cupping his face, checking him for other injuries.

"I'm OK, sweetheart," he said, giving a gruff laugh. "Come on, stop poking me. I'm all right."

"You don't look all right, Francis!"

"OK, I'm injured, a little. No need to hurt me more," Jack said, kissing your nose. "I've already gotten it from Gabe."

"The pendejo put himself between me and a hacked prototype infantry omnic," Gabriel said roughly. "He thought he was Wilhelm, but without an actual shield."

You turned to see Gabriel leaning against the window, looking absolutely fine. Isha sat on his shoulder, trilling happily. You squinted; there were rusty stains smeared on her mouth and talons.

"You took her into combat?!" Your voice was louder than you intended.
Gabriel just laughed, patting her head. " Didn't have a chance to send her back to the office or our quarters. She just followed me in, against orders. Sound familiar?"

You swallowed roughly, trying not to imagine all the things that could have gone wrong. Velociraptor or not, she was only a little dinosaur with hollow bones and shiny feathers. She wasn't bulletproof... You clenched your teeth, trying to focus on the present. Now you were going to have to bathe her. "How'd it go?"

"We let her scout through the vents. And she clawed a man's eye out." Gabriel looked very proud, and Isha puffed up, chattering happily. Then she made a gouging motion with her gummy toe talons, something you distinctly remember Gabriel teaching her, and you groaned.

You wanted to yell about how they could have at least disinfected her claws by now, but the words wouldn't come out.

"It's OK," Jack murmured, turning your head to face him. He kissed your forehead. "We're all OK -"

"No, you're not. You're all idiots!" You scowled. "You're reckless-" You glared at Gabriel, jabbing a finger in his direction. "Clumsy-" You turned your gaze back to Jack, one fist clenched. "Insubordinate-" You glanced at Isha, who watched you with her head cocked to the side. "Idiots!"

"I love you too, baby," Jack murmured, kissing your cheek. "You're so adorable when you're angry." He gave you a lopsided smile.

"I will cut you, Francis!"

There was the rustle of wings, and Isha fluttered down from Gabriel's shoulder and strutted up to you, rubbing her face against your leg. She chirped, just looking pleased to see you, and you sighed, scooping her up and hugging her to your chest, careful to avoid the eyeball gunk on her claws. Because bloody or not, she was your hatchling.

"You have an excuse, murderbird. You don't know any better. These jerks-"

Gabriel crossed the room, and caught both you and Jack in a hug.

"Hush, corazon. I've heard about your exploits today too. Just take a moment, and appreciate that we're all here, together." His tone was gentle, but the words hit like a punch in the gut.

You exhaled slowly, nodding feebly as he pressed a kiss to your temple and then to Jack's. Jack pulled you onto his lap with his good arm, and kissed the top of your head.

"We're all here," he told you softly. "We're all OK. That's what matters."

You didn't get to linger over your relief. Isha needed a bath. Gabriel and Jack needed to write up their own incident reports and host a strategy debrief. You had reports to write too, both for the hovercraft malfunction and the infirmary attack. Thankfully, you weren't going to have to take part in the post-festivities clean up. You just had a bunch of paperwork, and probably a meeting with Lacroix.

Maggie, Michael, and Feng crowded into the bathroom to watch you bathe Isha. She
ignored them, happily splashing in the sink, the water running an alarming shade of red. You just lathered her up, not missing how Maggie and Feng snapped tons of pictures. Isha didn't seem to mind. She even let you brush her teeth, and there were shreds of fabric caught in the back of her mouth. You disinfected her claws too. She ate with those... A terrible thought occurred, and you grimaced. Did she eat the eyeball? Oh God. Did you really want to know the answer?

"She's not hurt, is she?" Maggie asked.

"Doesn't seem to be," you said, as you checked her for injuries.

"That's not her blood," Feng said, sounding terribly proud.

There was an awkward moment of silence.

"Whose-" Maggie began.

"No idea," you said.

There was another awkward moment of silence.

"So, what happened out there?" Michael asked. "Feng knows, but she won't say a thing."

Feng gave a light-hearted laugh and said nothing. You could just picture the insufferable smirk on her face.

You sighed, toweling off Isha. She chirped at you, and you fluffed her crest feathers, before setting her down. She gave Maggie a curious look, before strutting out of the bathroom, probably to go raid the snacks on the coffee table.

"If you say "that's classified," I will scream," Maggie added.

You glanced at Feng who shrugged. "I told them, I swore a blood oath. Loyalty, friendship, not running my mouth..."

You rolled your eyes. "That'll be the day."

Feng just laughed at you. "I keep your secrets too, Lucky. I'm that kind of friend."

Shaking your head, you dragged yourself out of the bathroom, noting that Isha was watching Chang with keen interest. Chang, for her part, was standing watch by the door, her suspicious gaze on the Zheng drone.

Michael rested his hand on your shoulder and you turned around, a little surprised by the forwardness.

"We saw your hovercar go off track," he said, his worried face almost exactly like Jack's, minus ten years or so. "At first we thought you were just having fun..." He shook his head. "But then we heard about the crash when we finished the race."

"Why does everyone think I'm so irresponsible?" You tried to look innocent, but both Chang and Feng snorted.

"Your division has a...reputation," Feng said delicately. "And having spent the night getting my ass handed to me in Smash Brothers, I will say that reputation is not entirely deserved."

"So, what happened?" Maggie popped up behind Michael. "Were you the target? Or was it
Távio? Or..." Her expression darkened. "Was someone actually after those cute little kids?"

Groaning, you sat down on the couch, lifting Isha off the coffee table and out of the chip bowl.

Feng just gave you a sneaky little smile.

Chang narrowed her eyes at Maggie, probably picking up on her familiarity with Távio. You really hoped that wasn't going to be a problem, but then, you doubted Chang would let it be a problem.

"It was probably me," you said.

Maggie gasped dramatically.

Michael's blue eyes grew cold and he grimaced. Suddenly, you had visions of young pre-SEP Jack. It was...kind of cute actually.

"I don't know anything though," you said with a shrug. "I mean, there might be some soon-to-be-dead asshole who was after the kids, but I am the most likely target."

"Why?" Maggie asked.

"Beats me," you said with a shrug. "I'm just so damn loveable."

Chang made a rasping noise, and it took you a moment to realize she was laughing. She gave you a pointed look, not buying your explanation for a moment.

"OK, so there might be professional reasons some people want me out of the picture. Hell, there might even be some personal ones too." You and Feng exchanged wry smiles. "But we don't know anything yet. Winston will be examining the tech. I've got good backup. And Jack and Gabriel are very motivated to find out what went wrong. There's nothing to worry about." You gave a cheerful smile.

Neither Morrison sibling looked like they bought your neat and tidy explanation.

"Someone attacked Jack," Maggie said. "Don't tell us something fell on him. He already tried that. And I quote, "it was an omnic. It was just sitting there on the shelf, but I bumped the shelf and- Ow, why are you hitting me? I'm not a liar!"

"I mean, it might have happened like that," Feng said, stifling a laugh.

"Whoever was behind this attack specifically timed it for a civilian event," Michael added, crossing his arms. "These people are dangerous, ruthless, and willing to kill little kids."

"I know that much." You wondered if you were going to have to explain everything to Kseniya, or if Tataryn would ever let you near her again. "Honestly, there's no point in getting worked up right now. We haven't confirmed anything yet, guys."

"We're already worked up!" Maggie growled. "Telling us that doesn't change a damn thing!"

"I know. You're right." You stroked Isha's chest. "But there's nothing you can do right now. We'll handle the situation. We always do."

Maggie grumbled something under her breath.
Michael gave you a long searching look, his skepticism at your "plan" very clear.

"You do know she can't tell you details without risk of court martial, right?" Chang asked casually.

"Jack wouldn't-" Maggie began.

"Maybe not. But don't put them in that position," Chang said. "Strike has enough on her plate. She's trying to figure out who, out of a long list of people, might feel bold enough to kill her right now. She doesn't need you two complicating things."

"But Ray!" Maggie wailed. "We're worried about her!"

"OK," Chang said, her tone not changing at all. "Worry about her less invasively. Maybe over in that corner, sitting down, with your mouth shut."

Maggie threw her hands in the air, shook her firsts, and stomped over to the corner. She plunked down, and sat there, glaring for thirty seconds. "THIS ISN'T MAKING ME FEEL BETTER, RAY!"

"That was never the point of the exercise," Chang said, giving that rasping laugh once more.

"I'm invited too?" Feng beamed at you.

"You and your drone," you said, as you carried Isha into the hallway. You'd just finished writing and submitting your reports. Feng put on her floppy hat and the two of you left Jack's siblings and Chang in the Strike Commander's quarters. Lacroix was holding a debrief and strategy meeting. An Athena drone floated beside you. Isha reached out to smack it playfully. "Don't do that," you scolded.

"I think it's cute how much they like you," Feng said as you walked.

"They like you too," you said.

"Maggie does. Michael's a little standoffish," Feng said with a shrug. "I mean, I understand it. I do have a...reputation. Not quite like yours. But misleading enough." She gave a shrug. "Maggie's fun. It's nice to pretend to be...normal again. She kind of reminds me of me at that age."

You winced at that. "Really?"

"Well, I was less gung-ho about militaristic training regiments, but the unbridled enthusiasm, chaotic energy, and the slightly stick-in-the-mud older brother...yeah. Only I don't think Michael is conflicted about liking other men." She winked at you. "I know for a fact, Michael likes a very specific woman."

You just shook your head. "Be nice."

Feng cackled. "Did you just...? You?"

Isha puffed up, glaring at Feng.

"Anyway," you said, quickly. "I appreciate you looking after them and asking Zheng to
"Pfft, blood oath!" Feng said, holding up her long-healed palm and letting you change the subject. "Anyway, I've had a great time. Maybe I should invite Maggie and Michael over for a visit. Get them out of rural Indiana for a weekend..."

You shuddered then, having mental images of Maggie with her own flock of killer raptors. "We should plan another Shanghai trip," you said, trying to distract her once more. "I know Genji and Hanzo both need to get out more..."

"Oh good, me too! I've been wanting to ask, but I didn't want to be too pushy," she said. "I still think we could visit the opera, a club, and maybe a Shaolin temple. Something cultured, something fun, something educational... When did I get so boring?"

You reached the conference room, still listening to Feng suggest restaurants and possible activities. You opened the door, and found that they'd started without you.

Feng's mouth snapped shut, and her eyes widened, because Kwento was there, giving both of you the disapproving auntie look.

"Strike. "Claire." How nice of you to join us." Her tone was on caustic side of civil, and you squinted at Jack, because no one mentioned she would be here. "Us" consisted of Jack, Gabriel, Captain Amari, Lacroix, Winston, Reinhardt, Zenyatta, and to your slight horror, Lao.

"Undersecretary Kwento!" Feng said brightly. "Wow, can I say I am a big fan? Your work in Numbani really helped me reshape the On Sing structural model for omnic integration. I mean, I'm a big admirer of your sentient being rights record."

Kwento blinked, then looked like she'd swallowed a fishbone. "I find it disturbing that the head of a large organized crime organization admires my civil rights work."

"Ms. Zhai actually has been building quite a reputation for ensuring fair employment and legal protections for her omnic workers," Zenyatta said, with a nod in Feng's direction. "My understanding is that she has already moved away from the property-model of omnic manufacturing and offers quite the benefits package for omnic employees. It is to be lauded."

Feng just gave her best rural "aw shucks" shrug, her smile wide and a little sharp. "Tekhartha Zenyatta, it is an honor. I am also a great admirer of your brother. One does not have to embrace pacifism to respect the strength of character and principle it takes to follow such path."

"Are you actually the power in On Sing? Or is it your Great Aunt?" Kwento asked, undeterred by Feng's pretty speech.

"I would never presume to disrespect my beloved auntie," Feng said, her smile flattening. "I pay the proper obeisance and always take her wisdom into account before critical decisions are made-"

"And then she promptly ignores me, and does whatever she wants," the Zheng orb said coolly. "Her methods are different than mine. But my reign was forged in blood, genetic engineering, and war. My niece is a different creature. She wishes to prosper in peace and altruism, and I find her actions terribly foreign and risky. But I cannot deny her results."

"That...is the nicest thing any elder in the family has ever said about me, including my parents." Feng shook her head. Then she pinched herself, winced, and gave you a wry smile.
"But do not mistake her congenial nature for weakness. Betray her, and my niece will hunt you to the ends of the earth and tear your treacherous heart out with her bare hands."

"Wow," Feng said. "That sounds more like Mom than me." She laughed nervously, her shoulders drawn up like she was embarrassed. Except everyone here knew she'd charged single-handedly into a secret mountain base to rescue her brother. Just like they knew she'd declared war on the southern branch of On Sing, solely because they'd gone after her mother, whom she didn't even seem to like that much.

"And Winston, you are certain On Sing had nothing to do with today's attack?" Kwento asked, still eyeing Feng suspiciously.

"On the contrary, we could not have maintained system integrity without Zheng's aid. We have never encountered such an advanced viral tunneler. It was meant to trigger a destabilizing cascade of critical system failures and it was used in conjunction with a targeted EMP. It would have destroyed most mainframes, but our construction is radically different. The best analogy is the difference between square building blocks and honeycombed structures. Our...format is atypical, and we do waste some computational power in converting files and programs, but our defenses are unparalleled."

Kwento glanced at Zenyatta. "I've seen no such description or mention of this "atypical" build."

It's been a closely-guarded secret, precisely for the reasons we encountered today," Jack said, unbothered by the implication. "We all know the Director cannot be trusted."

Kwento grimaced. "Well, he won't be in for awhile. He is on medical leave, resting from...overexertion."

You and Feng stared at the table, doing your best not to look at each other and break out cackling, because even if Kwento already knew what you did, it would be most unseemly to laugh about it in public. Isha sat quietly in your lap, her gaze traveling between Zenyatta, Lao, and Kwento.

"There will be a note in several intelligence reports that Overwatch experienced technical difficulties at a very public event," Lacroix said. "But we managed to keep the severity of the situation under wraps. It will be a minor embarrassment, and maybe some of the tabloids will run stories about Chanceux's unfortunate driving "accident," but the fallout should be minimal. In fact, her hovercraft crash should provide excellent cover for us. The story we're choosing is that the vehicle hit a transformer and caused some electrical issues in the main building. But nothing we couldn't resolve quickly."

Lao blinked, and then turned her head to give you a hard look.

You hung your head and sighed. There went your reputation again: Scapegrace Lucky, the embarrassment of Blackwatch.

"For the record, it should be stated that we found evidence of tampering in the wreckage. There was foreign control chip implanted directly on the internal sensors, masking the actual readings from our central systems. It's why Athena had couldn't force the vehicle back on track or control the speed. She managed to short out the GPS control chip, giving Lucky back manual steering of the craft. But she couldn't reach the one affecting the internal speed and safety sensors, not without causing critical damage to the entire engine." Winston shook his head. "We've reviewed footage, and found Agent Sakai tampering with the hovercraft shortly before the
You snorted. Sakai was dead now. And you hadn't even gotten a shot at her.

Kwento stared at you stone-faced, bearing a strange resemblance to someone's pissed off auntie. You were getting the same stoically angry look from Lao. It hit you then, that they might be angry at you, but both women were actually angry for you. Lao, well after your talk in the infirmary, you suspected as much. But that Kwento might worry about you? That was still kind of unexpected.

"We've accessed Sakai's private communications. We're still decrypting some. She had a few personal military-grade tablets concealed in her quarters. I have Agent Mihret working on it. That intel should be available by tomorrow," Lacroix said.

"After sabotaging Lucky's craft, Sakai met up with Agent Bakker out of Dispatch. From what we can piece together-" Captain Amari played the security footage on the projector, showing Sakai and a pinched-looking blonde man coming from different directions, then pairing off, and heading for the Blackwatch containment cells. They had bags, and they pulled out a few electronic devices, and then the first camera went out. "We know they caused the system crash. They then manually released the prisoners and Bakker reprogrammed some of the confiscated Omnica Corp tech we'd had in storage in the same area."

"They released everyone, but the real target was Richard Prince," Gabriel said, picking up the presentation. The security footage changed to the hallway in front of the infirmary. "From what we can gather, Sakai was supposed to get him off the grounds ASAP. Except Prince didn't want to go." There was a shot of them arguing, and Prince's metal hands reached out, twisted her head around, and down she went. "Prince was very bothered by something I had said in one of our...talks. About the mental conditioning Nguyen has subjected her cyborgs to. So he came to interrogate Agent Lao."

Lao sat ramrod straight under everyone's scrutiny. She didn't look at you. She didn't look at anyone. She just took a deep breath and stared so hard at the wall in front of her, you wondered if she had figured out a way to see through time.

"And what exactly happened, agent?" Kwento asked, her expression almost gentle as she looked at Lao.

"He wanted to know how my conditioning manifested. I explained as best as I could, and he seemed to understand exactly what experiences I was talking about," Lao said. "Though he had less misgivings about the process than I did. I included the details in my report, ma'am."

"As did Agent Strike, who had very fortuitous timing," Lacroix said. "And thankfully, a miraculously dense skull."

You gave a mock bow, though no one looked amused. In fact, Gabriel was giving you a disapproving frown, and Jack was shaking his head, face in his hand.

"The details of the conditioning effect are consistent between both accounts," Lacroix continued, ignoring you. "For those of you who haven't yet had a chance to review it."

"So...what happened to Agent Bakker?" Feng asked innocently.

"Killed in action," Lacroix said, without any change in intonation.

Both Winston and Reinhardt looked away, their discomfort all too clear. Kwento was too
"Seriously? You just left out the part where you knew someone tried to kill you earlier! You said you jumped out of a hovercraft into a lake like it was a fucking recreational event!" Lao snarled at you. She was in a wheelchair, you realized, and you wondered how much trouble she'd had acclimating to the new implants. It definitely wasn't a good idea to ask right now.

"I mean, the four year old had a great time. She wanted to do it again," you said with a shrug.

"You had a baby onboard?" Lao slapped her flesh hand against her forehead. "Of all the stupid-" she paused. "She isn't yours, is she?"

"Nope, nope, and nope." You shook your head rapidly. "Nope. This is mine." You held up Isha who yawned. "Isha meet Lao. Lao, Isha."

"Is that..." Lao sighed. "You know what. Ziv said you had a dinosaur. I thought he was joking. I thought he meant a chicken or a large lizard. You know, what. I'm sure there's a long convoluted story that you can only tell me in declassified pieces. And I really don't have the patience for that right now. So you can tell me later, when my current Lucky-induced headache has dissipated."

You sat Isha back down on your lap. She gave a little huff of annoyance and turned her back to Lao.

"Now you've offended her," you said.

"I..." Lao squinted at you. "What?"

You gently stroked your murderbird's chin. "It's OK, Isha-bird. Lao's had a long trying day. It isn't you. She's just grumpy. You're the best murderbird in the whole world." Isha thrummed happily and rubbed her face against your chest.

"Yeah," Lao said, now staring at you in disbelief. There were a few odd moments of silence while you petted Isha and Lao just took it all in. Then she cleared her throat and glanced over at Kwento. "What's up with the suit?"

"Friendly," you said.

"She's making my skin crawl. Staring is rude."

"She might be watching Isha. And if she isn't, she means well," you said, knowing you couldn't tell Lao about the connection between Kwento and Nwazue. Not yet anyway.

"Come along, Chanceux. We have work to discuss," Lacroix said. "Claire, you are welcome to come too, or you can return to socialize with the Strike Commander."

You looked up to see Gabriel pushing Lao out of the room, Winston walking with them. Gabriel leaned over and said something in Lao's ear and she laughed dryly.

"Oh...I guess I'll come with you. As much as I want to help Maggie redecorate his quarters, I should probably get some work done." Feng slunk along beside you. Kwento left with Captain
Amari and Reinhardt, the three of them already deep in a discussion on handling Petras.

Zenyatta hovered beside you, looking serene as always. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore," you admitted. "But-

There was a familiar prickly warmth and you shivered as Zenyatta began use his omnic energy to mend your injuries.

"Huh," Feng said. "That's...interesting."

"Do not worry. Adaeze has asked me to check in on Agent Lao as well. I understand she isn't recovering as quickly as they would like from her surgery," Zenyatta said. "But for now, I am to accompany you and Gérard for an intelligence debrief."

"Well, thanks for the pick-me-up," you said. straightening your shoulders. You hurt just a little less right now, and that would translate into hurting a lot less tomorrow.

Your group made it to Lacroix's office, Zheng orb included. There were enough chairs, and while you held Isha in your lap, you were a little worried about her eating something expensive and toxic. Who knew if Lacroix's weird post-post-modern art pieces had lead paint or worse?

"We have a few issues to discuss," Lacroix told you. "First off, Zenyatta is going to join our medical corp as an official Overwatch agent. It isn't just a PR move. You both know how talented he is."

"I have no problem with that," you said. "Congratulations."

Zenyatta gave a nod. "Thank you. Your sincerity means a great deal to me."

"Hey, I think it's great too! Very inspirational. You should get action figures," Feng said matter-of-factly. "I can help you there. We can donate the proceeds to a charity focused omnic rights issues..."

Zenyatta seemed at a loss for words. Or maybe he was imagining getting to play with an action figure version of himself. You weren't sure.

"That isn't a bad idea," Lacroix said. "You can discuss it later though. Chanceux, I'd like you to...break it to our Blackwatch agents. We'd like it to be a smooth transition, and we both know some of our people will have concerns. Your support will mean a lot."

"I know Genji will help-"

"Genji's regard is something other agents will find easy to stomach, however, you have more...social influence."

"He means you're more persuasive than Genji, because Genji doesn't try to use civil social skills to get what he wants any more," Feng told you cheerfully.

You snorted, already knowing that. "Yeah, all right. I'll put the word out. I know some people are going to be hard sells, but at the very least they shouldn't give you any trouble, Zenyatta. And if they do, let me know. I'll deal with them politely. I promise."

Zenyatta chuckled. "Is that so, Lucky? Because I have heard stories..."

"I am always polite, at first. And then if they're assholes, well, I handle it," you said with a
shrug. "Either way, it's not on you, and yeah, maybe it is about time we had an omnic Overwatch agent. I think Athena needs more inorganic friendship. No offense, Zheng."

The orb hovered there, ignoring your comment.

"I appreciate the support. It means a gives me hope to see how far you have come. I am very glad that-"

You shrugged again, unsure what to say to that. Because while it was growth, you weren't so sure you liked admitting that maybe you'd been prejudiced against omnics. At the very least, Zenyatta had been a pain in your ass for awhile, and it did speak well of you that you could put that aside and make peace. Sure, he'd had to heal you a few times, and bail you out of trouble, and stand up to Kwento in your defense... OK, so maybe Zenyatta was just a good guy, and you were kind of stupid. Either way, it was growth and you'd take it.

"Our next issue is Ainsley Petras. We have been monitoring her communications, and I thought you might be interested in the transcripts."

You raised a brow. "I thought it didn't matter since we had the footage."

"Perhaps," Lacroix said, inclining his head back. "But I understand your dislike of surprises."

Shaking your head, you picked up your tablet and opened the file Lacroix had sent you. Ainsley Petras had indeed called her mother. The first few pages were small talk, gossip, and so mind-numbingly boring, if there'd been a code concealed, you would have missed it. But then Ainsley's mother, Valerie Petras, brought up the topic:

VP: Your uncle seems...distraught. He called your father yesterday.

AP: *unintelligible*

VP: What was that?

AP: He should be.

VP: Have you quarreled with your uncle? Ainsley, you know he's a busy man. He doesn't have time for-

AP: He tried to rape my friend.

VP: *surprised laughter* Ainsley, that's...ridiculous. You must be mistaken. And must you use such crude language?

AP: No mother, I was there. I heard everything. He was using his position as director to try to force her to-

VP: Ainsley, you've always had such an imagination and such a good heart.

AP: Mother, he tried to slap me.

VP: *sharp intake of breath*

AP: But that was after I tried to pull him off of her. It was a stupid move. I know.
VP: I'll say. Your uncle's business is his own. You can't just barge in-

AP: He told her-

VP: Not every young woman has your upbringing. Some of them, well, they leverage their wiles for influence. Your uncle is only a man. He can't help it when women throw themselves at him-

AP: That's not what happened. She said "no." He grabbed her, and told her he was the boss and she had to do what he said.

VP: Ainsley...you know some women like that kind of treatment-

AP: Mother, you're not listening. I know her. She's not that kind of person, and frankly, most people don't want someone twice their age manhandling them and trying to take advantage of them! It's happened to me once or twice, and I have our good name for protection. She has nothing of the sort!

VP: And why do you have that good name, "Ainsley?" Is it the result of any of your actions? Have you done anything to deserve that protection? No. It's from your uncle and your father's influence. It's her word against his. And her word means nothing. His word means everything.

AP: Mother?
VP: Let it go, Ainsley. Apologize to your uncle for interfering. It was not your business and you probably misunderstood the situation. Don't let some street trash get between you and your family. Your uncle is having health problems right now. He is very distressed over your behavior.

AP: But mother...

VP: Can you imagine the scandal if something like that got out? Ainsley, you're right, your good name has protected you. Our good name has protected you. And what happens if that is tarnished? You are at the mercy of the masses, like all the other slag, and I don't think you're prepared for what that entails. I understand, you're a kind, thoughtful girl. But we have to look out for family first. This friend of yours should understand that. If she's really your friend.

AP: Uncle needs to leave her alone. She won't start trouble if he leaves her alone.

VP: Ainsley, your uncle is in a rocky position. If this girl is going to make trouble for him, he needs to deal with her accordingly. That is the great burden of leadership. Do you understand me, Ainsley? Your uncle loves you. He dotes on you. He only wants the best for you. And I know you love your family. So that means you would never do anything to hurt them.

AP: I can't just turn my back on her.

VP: But you can do it to your own family? *long silence* Of course not. We both know that. And I know this is hard to hear, but you're doing the right thing. You have to protect the ones you love, Ainsley. Do you understand me?

AP: I...yes, mother. I understand.

VP: I know, it's hard dear. A woman's lot is always hard, but with the help of a good man, you will succeed.

You stared at the transcript, slightly horrified by what you were reading.
"Eww, gross," Feng said, shaking her head as she read over your arm. "That family is the worst."

"Well, I didn't expect her to report her uncle," you said. "But...wow. Valerie Petras married into the family and she's a real piece of shit."

"So my second cousin Qi is really good at car bombs," Feng said. "Can take out almost any vehicle with no civilian casualties, provided there are no civilians in the front seat-"

"Uh...I can do my own killing, Feng. But I don't think it's necessary to kill Ainsley."

"I meant the mother," Feng said. "And the father. And the uncle..."

"Ms. Zhai, I find your blatant disregard for human life somewhat alarming," Zenyatta said. "I'm just trying to make Lucky feel better." Feng gazed at Zenyatta with big almost-innocent green eyes.

"So this is gallows humor?"

"Sure," Feng said happily, though you knew she meant the offer.

"Well, thankfully, Ainsley's testimony isn't what my evidence hinges on. And I don't really care," you said. "We have more important things to worry about."

"Yes. Director Petras is going to come after you again," Lacroix said. "Valerie Petras all but said it. So what would you like to do? Do you want to go public early? Do you want to go into hiding?"

"I want to nail him, Talon, and all the traitors," you said.

"Then we need more evidence. And we need more time to secure it."

You sat there, waiting for Lacroix to say something you didn't already know.

"He will be focused on you."

"So he'll get clumsy," you said with a shrug. "He already has. Maybe he'll call in some of his Talon contacts. It will make it easier for us to gather evidence."

"He was willing to kill two children to get to you," Lacroix said. "And everyone knows Ishana is your pet. Do you think she'll be safe?"

You stiffened in your chair.

"It would be a simple thing to leave out poisoned meat, antifreeze, perhaps a rare neurotoxin if someone is feeling pompous. Can you watch her all the time? What about your Távio? Or Ziv? Everyone in Blackwatch knows that to cross Ziv is to invite an unpleasant visit from you."

"What are you suggesting?" You asked, clenching your teeth.

"I'm merely reminding you that the stakes are higher now, Chanceux. And you are directly in the director's crosshairs. He will find your weaknesses, and he will use them against you."

"Do you want me to go public? Or are you telling me to fake my death?" You asked,
because you had ratlines in place.

"Not yet," Lacroix gave a tired sigh. "We are almost ready for Hanoi. Agent Lao and Prince have provided some key insight into the facility. Perhaps on the mission, you will suffer an "accident." And then we will start to move against Petras. For now, I need you to keep a very low profile. You will be on medical leave and possibly awaiting suspension for "reckless endangerment." And while I doubt your bullet ant operation has been traced back to you, I am certain that the strain of the experience has made Petras careless. He is escalating far too quickly."

You sat there, a terrible pit in the bottom of your stomach. "So if I fake my death, then what? Am I out? For good? Where do I go?" You stared in horror at Lacroix. Because Overwatch was your life. And you were in no way prepared to leave it behind.

"There are a few options. I know you'd rather die than go to Antarctica, but so does everyone else. You could spend time with Jack's family and Sergeant Chang. You could go out to LA with Catrina..."

"She could come to Shanghai with me!" Feng said brightly.

"That was another prospect," Lacroix said. "Keep in mind, Chanceux, that these are only potential solutions."

"You can't just send me away," you snarled.

"I can and will, if it is necessary," Lacroix said coldly.

"That's ridiculous! I shouldn't have to-"

"None of us should have to deal with this, but we must! Do you want to jeopardize all the work we've already put into Shit Spiders?" Lacroix snapped. "Do you want to risk any more innocent lives in this vendetta? Because you've overtly thwarted him twice now, and he won't simply go away. Not till you're out of the picture."

You sat back as if slapped.

"Captain Amari backs me on this. But we haven't reached that point yet, but I want you to be prepared for the possibility." The word he seemed to be thinking was "inevitability." But he was too shrewd to use it just yet.

You slumped in your chair, Isha nuzzling your hand. You'd built a goddamn life here. You'd made friends. You looked after your fellow agents. You had Jack and Gabriel. You had a goddamn mission. Petras couldn't just take that all away. Except, that he could. Because he had the money, the power, and the influence, and because you were no one.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update. We went out of town Sunday and my cousin's car broke down. Got towed back home, and it's all the fun you probably expect.

I really like the new job's environment. I'm catching on pretty fast, and look forward to finishing training. It's a nice mix of "friendly competition" and "everyone is a goddamn smartass and that's OK." Though my boss nearly killed me with Walmart
brownie today. I'm not diabetic, but I ate half of it and was like "...my head is spinning and my pancreas is on fire. This is pure sugar. Halp." I discretely threw it away when he wasn't looking. It's probably revenge for making all those jokes about him. :P

For all you 'Muricans, here's a reminder that it's already Thanksgiving next week, and how did it get here so damn fast? I'm cooking my own dinner as usual. Having some friends over and maybe teen!cousin. We'll have 3-6 people, and I have no problem cooking for that many, but I keep going "how the hell did it sneak up on me?"
Anyway, hope you guys have a fun holiday. Even if you aren't 'Murican.
The walk back to Jack's quarters was quiet. Feng had tried to cheer you up, offering you penthouse suites, secret mountain fortresses, and expensive hotels for your temporary relocation. But she'd figured out pretty quickly that you weren't quite in the mindset to think that far ahead.

"You know, it might not go down like that," she said after a moment. "Like, Lacroix is an extreme pessimist and a sneaky spymaster who likes to give you problems to solve. This could be his crappy way of motivating you."

You nodded. "Yeah, maybe." You hugged Isha tight to your chest, and she crooned softly at you, her head resting against your shoulder.

"And you should talk to Captain Amari. She isn't going to make you go through all that unless there's a really good reason."

You took a deep breath, taking more comfort in that then Feng's aim to lure you into On Sing employ. You didn't begrudge her the attempt, you just couldn't think about leaving home, not now.

Faking your death was extreme. But it would be more bearable than faking a convincing dishonorable discharge. You didn't want to walk out of Overwatch, everyone whispering behind your back about your shitty reputation. You didn't want to go through that again; you'd worked too hard to earn your colleagues' respect. Lacroix understood you better than you thought.

Of course, you could always eliminate Petras first. That thought cheered you immensely.

"Are you good at torture?" Feng asked out of the blue. Or maybe it wasn't. She looked at you with hooded eyes, her expression thoughtful.

"I can make people talk," you said. "But I don't like going beyond a certain point. I can. But I don't like it."

"I figured you didn't. You're not a sociopath or a sadist," Feng said. She swung her arms. "I can do it. But I don't like it either. I know, I know, I have people for that. But this leadership gig is really going to my head. I feel overly responsible. Like I should personally oversee the bad shit, so I can be sure that I've already exhausted all my other options." Feng paused. "But I digress, a
lot. I know. Look, if you want more permanent help taking care of your problem, I'm happy to help. For friendship!" She struck a pose, both hands locked in the "V is for Victory" sign.

You snorted, because her offer did raise your spirits.

"But talk it all over with your people first, you know." Feng jammed her hands in her pockets. "You're surrounded by good people and it helps." She threw her head back and blew out a frustrated breath. "I'm kind of envious really."

You almost said something like "but you're Zhai Feng, the Triad Tech Mogul of Shanghai, the On Sing Dragon Head, the Dinosaur Resurrectionist." But she looked so somber, and all of her twenty two years, that you held your tongue. Feng was surrounded by family that she wasn't sure if she could trust, thieving raptors, and other ruthless opportunists. "You've got us. And Zheng. And Bayan."

"I know. But here, I can just be "Claire." Your weird friend. Back in Shanghai..." She shrugged. "I know logically I can ask you, or Genji, or Jack for help, and you'll come running. But it's hard to ask. It's hard to put myself out there. Because I'm not just "Claire" any more. I'm Zhai Feng, the Crazy Rich Asian Mobster." She paused. "You know, only a few people from high school realize I'm Zhai Feng. I went by "Claire." It's kind of hilarious, like all Asians look alike to them or something. I was expecting all kinds of messages from them, but there's been very little. A couple of my close friends check in with me, but I think they're kind of scared by what I've gotten myself into." She paused. "Anyway, I'm sorry, I keep getting distracted by my own pathetic moping. My point was, you've got your guys. You've got your friends. Between all of them, you can probably find a solution. Just talk to them. Don't pull that dutiful "I must suffer for the greater good" bullshit, OK?"

"Yeah," you said. "That's good advice."

"It is," she chirped, nodding vigorously. "I wish I'd taken it when I had the chance."

"That is Mr. Lacroix's recommendation? It seems awfully drastic," Kwento said, not bothering to mask her surprise.

Gabriel's frown deepened as he and Jack walked into Wilhelm's office, Ana and Kwento already deep in discussion about the current situation. All the while Wilhelm looked on with his big ridiculous face scrunched up, like he was going to cry.

This meeting was about you. And it came on the heels of a goddamn murder attempt and Jack had been injured in a related attack. Gabriel could feel his control wavering. Tense and angry, he fought the urge to say something that would push Wilhelm over the edge. Sure, it would be good for a laugh, for a minute, but then Ana and Jack's combined disapproval would leave him in a worse place than before. Gabriel knew, on a rational level that Wilhelm wasn't his real target. That it was all too easy to lash out when he was in this state. Wilhelm was a fool, but none of this was his fault, and he didn't deserve Gabriel's cruelty. That was reserved for someone else.

Jack patted his shoulder, giving him a small encouraging smile, like he could read Gabriel's internal struggle on his face and appreciated his self control. They both pulled up chairs around Wilhelm's desk.

"What do you think?" Ana turned to look at them, her dark eyes somber. "What is the best
"Kill him first," was on the tip of Gabriel's tongue, but he glanced at Kwento and shut his mouth, not willing to be that open in front of her. He had plans, several in fact, but he had no desire to show his hand just yet. Yes, she was an ally, but she was also a politician and a civilian.

"We have leverage, but I know we don't want to tip him off to how much we already know about his off-the-books operations," Jack said, crossing his arms. "I know what my gut says." He glanced at Kwento. "But I also understand that such actions could come into direct conflict with our long-term goals."

"Not necessarily," Kwento said, hands folded in her lap. "If you kill him and make off with the right computer drives, documents, and contents of his safes, you might have enough evidence to keep it from being detrimental to Shit Spiders."

Gabriel's head snapped back in surprise. He stared at Kwento, her deadly serious expression mirroring his own. "After all that talk about decency and civil liberties, I didn't think you had it in you to plan a cold blooded murder, Ambassador," he said, voice low.

"He's a clear and present danger to Agents Lao and Strike," she said, holding her head up, her posture military-straight. "And a disgrace to us all. I do not make such judgments lightly. And I still do not approve of Blackwatch. But I would be a fool if I failed to understand its importance. We will do a better job vetting the future civilian Director."

"Looking for a new job already?" Gabriel asked, unable to resist poking her.

"Don't make me come over there, Reyes," Kwento said, with mock severity. "I'm not an easy civilian target."

Gabriel had to bite his tongue, because he remembered DC and all of Kwento's not so easy civilian targets. But throwing that in her face would be in bad taste. Sometimes it was hard to reign in his own pettiness. It was a work in progress.

"As much as I would like to hastily eliminate our problem," Wilhelm said, the words uncharacteristically hesitant. "There is the fact that we are talking about murdering our agency head. I am very fond of Lucky Lady. And my own goddaughter was in the vehicle that Petras' pawn sabotaged. I am all for getting him out of the way. But I am not sure this is the right way to do it."

"Not enough honor and glory for you?" Gabriel scoffed.

"Removing the Director is a priority. But I have always thought we would hold him accountable for his actions. He did not act alone, and there is an entire network of corruption around him. Simply taking him out of the picture does nothing to fix that." Wilhelm sighed. "It is like a hydra: cut off one head, two more replace it, and it is all very frustrating. But...maybe I do not understand how these things work. Maybe I am wrong."

Gabriel grimaced, hating just how fucking reasonable Wilhelm was being and how the old knight coached his words in mythic terms.

Ana reached out and rested her hand on his arm. "You're the expert, Gabe. What will keep her the safest?"

"Long term? Getting rid of the whole network," Gabriel exhaled, knowing things were bad when he agreed with Wilhelm of all people. "But Petras is the biggest threat right now. We all
know that he'll make another attempt. She's wounded his pride and foiled his plans more than once. His behavior is erratic and he'll try something again." He glanced at Jack. They'd talked about numerous options. Maybe it was time to share with the class.

"If she disappears on an op, and we rule her KIA, that might be enough," Jack said staring at his lap. "She's good at living in shadow, and we wouldn't abandon her. She could stay with my family, or Gabe's."

"She would be safe in Numbani," Kwento said.

"On Sing would be safer, and she could still aid in operations," Gabriel said after a moment. "Zhai Feng is exceptionally fond of her. And it wouldn't be the first time they took in one of ours for their own good."

Kwento made a face, her distrust of the Triad boss very obvious. "On Sing's dislike of Talon and the Shimada have become well known. No civilians seem to have connected Overwatch to this policy shift, but I can't say that I approve of your close ties."

"On Sing is providing a valuable service while reforming their formerly violent structures," Ana said. "And while they may always remain a shadow organization, Zhai Feng has done an admirable job of offering her family a chance to operate within the law, while minimizing abuses. I have been pleasantly surprised by Zhai Feng's progressive measures." Ana leaned back in her chair. "My greater concern is Lucky's mental health. She won't be in isolation, but she won't have her support network readily available. How do you think she will handle this?"

"She'll hate it," Jack said softly.

"Yes," Gabriel agreed. "But faking a dishonorable discharge would hurt her more. She worked hard to reform her undeserved reputation. It would devastate her to see that fall apart."

Jack winced. "Agreed."

"That is what Gérard thought as well," Ana said. "And I concur."

"All of our options are troubling," Wilhelm said, resting his face in one hand. "But I will go along with whatever is best for Lucky."

Gabriel bit his lip, somewhat relieved that he hadn't said anything nasty to Wilhelm. Because that doopy golden retriever of a man was a good friend to you, and right now you needed as many of those as you could get.

"We don't have to decide anything today," Ana reminded them all. "But we will have to choose a course of action soon. Talk to her first. I'm sure we can guess what she thinks about it. But Lacroix and I both think it will be safest for her to keep a low profile for awhile. Whether or not that entails faking her death? Well, we're open to better ideas."

No one spoke for a few minutes, because they had no other suggestions to offer.

Gabriel swallowed roughly, already knowing just how much you'd hate this.
You came back to Jack's quarters to find Chang sitting on the couch eating chips while Michael and Maggie watched some scandalous reality dating series. Feng sat down beside Maggie.

"They're with her? Oh. Umm...I guess love is blind?"

"Well, she cheated on them with her, and honestly, I think Mimi is too good for the likes of Deenie. But, they'll probably vote Cici off the island and-"

"Jack and Reyes are in the bedroom talking," Chang said, saving you from this conversation.

You nodded and went in, shutting the door behind you. You set Isha down, and she scampered over to her bed to flop over on her dog. She'd had a long day too.

Jack sat on the bed hunched over, Gabriel rested his head in Jack's lap, an empty glass on the floor by Jack's feet.

"Hey," you said.

"Hey," Gabriel murmured, his voice thick. He raised his head and give you a sad smile. "Missed you."

Jack straightened up, his arm still in the sling, one hand tangled in Gabriel's curls. "About time you got back."

"Lacroix had a lot to go over," you said, your words tight. You sat down beside Jack, a little surprised when Gabriel took both your hands in his.

"Corazon, I was just telling Francis here-"

"Really, Gabe?" But there was no bite in Jack's voice, only weariness and it made your heart ache.

"I was telling him how goddamn important his sexy blonde ass is to me and how much I love him. How I can't imagine life without him. How I adore his steamed cornmeal and milk toast ass."

You snorted, mostly at Jack's flustered look. "It's a nice ass. Very...squeezable. Not weak at all."

Gabriel kissed your gloves, holding your hands to his cheeks. "Don't let me get distracted by Jack's ass, baby. I had more I wanted to say."

"About Jack's luscious ass?" You asked, giggling as Jack rolled his eyes at you both, the cheeks on his face very, very red.

"Always," Gabriel laughed. "But no, I had other things. I like your ass too. Could sing a few songs about it if you wanted."

"Do it," Jack whispered and you elbowed him.

"No, didn't want to talk about your asses. Assets. Well, not those assets." Gabriel chuckled to himself.

"Are you...drunk?" You asked, picking up the glass and sniffing it. It was either paint
thinner or bad whiskey, and to be honest, you weren't sure if whiskey was enough to affect his enhanced metabolism.

"Nah, just a little...relaxed." Gabriel sat up, sighing heavily. "I know, it's pathetic. You and Jack are the ones who got hurt, and I'm the asshole lying here, drinking Jack's questionable whiskey and brooding." He leaned over Jack to kiss your forehead. "Your hair smells nice. So glad you're finally here. Because I love you too, corazon."

You laughed softly, delighted by this side of Gabriel. He tugged your wrist and reclined on the bed. You curled up beside him, Jack on his other side. You rested your head on his chest and Jack lay his on Gabriel's shoulder.

"I'm all twisted up inside," he said. "Normally would spar or lay you out on the bed, but both of you are hurt, and I don't want to make it worse. Just...needed something to take the edge off. Built for action. Not for waiting. Not sitting around, watching you two bleed." He shuddered. "It's like the goddamn Omnic Crisis all over again."

"We have to protect our delicate lover," you said, kissing his chin. "You are the sensitive sort, prone to music and poetry. Jack's a rough and tumble country boy, used to hard labor and plain food. And me? I'm a goddamn badass."

Gabriel roared with laughter, hugging you tighter against his chest. "You're a goddamn smartass!" He turned his head to kiss Jack's lips. "But you're right about the rest of it."

You clung to Gabriel, his skin warm against your body, the steady drumming of his heartbeat lulling you into a softer place. Jack's fingers curled around yours and he peeled your gloves off, his lips brushing against your bruised knuckles.

"We're going to have to do something about Petras," Jack said after a moment.

You blinked. "Lacroix said I might have to...go away for awhile."

"We talked about it. It might be the safest option." Gabriel's fingers dug into your arm. "And you know, I'd do a lot of things to protect you, things that I know you'd hate."

You exhaled slowly, resting your forehead against his chest. You didn't have the energy to hear this now.

Gabriel reached over, and tilted your chin. "Hey, I'm not done. Stop jumping to stupid conclusions, chica." Those deep brown eyes searched your face, and he gave you a sad smile. "I'd rather kill Petras preemptively. Fuck it. Overwatch was our creation. I didn't join SEP and devote my life to building an international military organization just so I could watch the people I love get thrown under the bus. Just say there word: you, me, Jack, Crazy Feng, we can all go together. I'm only suggesting her because she'd have to drive and that might be a good cover."

"But Shit Spiders. And Talon. Evidence." Gabriel's offer took you off-guard. And now you couldn't even form proper sentences. "Jack."  

"We're both in agreement on this," Jack murmured, pressing your palm to his heart. "We all understand the bigger picture. We might find something incriminating. We might not. But I'm getting tired of this political bullshit. I'm so past giving a damn. Petras has this coming, baby."

You were used to making the tactically sound decision, even if it sucked. Used to knowing that the mission came first. You closed your eyes, taking deep shaky breaths, because their offer meant more than you expected. "If I have to go, I can do it. I'm a fucking badass after all."
"I know." Jack's voice was gentle. "But I don't want you to go. And neither does Gabe."

"She could go MIA on a mission and just live in my room," Gabriel murmured. "I like that idea."

"Three days, and she'd be stir-crazy," Jack said. "Also, my room is bigger."

"I don't-"

"The point is, you don't have to resign yourself to misery and heartbreak," Jack said. "We can both see how unhappy the idea makes you. And we're willing to find another solution. Because we love you. Just, work with us, all right?"

"Of course," you sighed, even as Gabriel pulled you across his body, setting you between him and Jack. "I just...tunnel-visioned. Panicked. Thought that maybe I'd have to go it alone, you know, keep my head down, not be such a risk to everyone else. And that broke my heart."

"Well, at least you didn't hare off to try to convincingly fake your death without telling us," Gabriel growled. "Because I would have been fucking pissed."

"I would never. At least, not without telling you and Jack beforehand." You nodded vigorously. "Even I know better than that."

Gabriel relaxed, wrapping his arms around your waist. "I know." He kissed the back of your neck. "I trust you, corazon. Even when you do idiotic things, you usually have good reasons. Just questionable judgment."

"I...yeah. I trust you too. When I'm not panicking and being dense," you said. "It's a work in progress."

"Sweetheart, you've got us, and a whole lot of friends at your back. We just need to come up with a good plan. And there are a lot to choose from," Jack said, his grin wolfish. "Feng sent me a schematic for a musical guillotine."

"What?" You blinked.

"Really. I don't know why we'd need that, but if it would cheer you up..."

Gabriel coughed, giving you both severe looks. "Focus, you two. We're going to prioritize on Petras. We're going to start with what went down here this weekend. Kwentó's backing us. Gérard is pooling resources. Tataryn is calling in some very questionable favors. Mihret is actually working and not picking fights with everyone else. The list goes on. I'll see to Prince. We're past-due for Hanoi anyway. We can tie up all these Shit Spiders loose ends this year. We were going to do this anyway. Now Petras has just lit a fire under our asses, and we're going to destroy him twice as fast as we'd initially planned."

"OK," you said, lips quirking up.

"You're just going to have to put up with extra security measures," Gabriel said. "Because I do love you, and I worry."

"Same," Jack said.

"OK, I'll cooperate with increased security protocols. Just don't worry so much," you said. "It'll give you wrinkles. Not Gabriel, because he has a skin care regimen. But you should be
"careful, Jack," you said, repeating one of Amélie's wine-fueled observations.

"What?" Jack squinted at you.

Gabriel reached out, cupping Jack's face. "Mmm, you're right. I think I can see worry lines. Crows feet forming too, unless Isha's been walking on your face recently. Maybe you should start using more moisturizers, Jack. I have some night packs that will really help with the bags under your eyes. You could start using some enhanced fillers, gene-stims, and collagen masks."

Jack scowled, slapping Gabriel's hand away. "You're not funny, Gabe."

You laughed, hugging Jack tightly, your shoulders shaking. "He's kidding. You're fucking beautiful, Jack."

Jack sighed, shaking his head. "You two are mean." He kissed your nose. "I don't know why I'm such a sucker for the troublesome ones."

"Because you're Jack Fucking Morrison, the goddamn Strike Commander of Overwatch!" You announced cheerfully.

"Don't you mean Jack "Francis" Morrison?" Gabriel asked innocently.

You squealed as Jack smacked you both with his pillow.

"Have you seen this, Ray?" Maggie screamed, as you emerged from the bedroom. Jack followed you, but Gabriel was going to lie down for another five minutes.

Maggie held up Feng's phone.

"Oh, everyone in Overwatch has seen that," Chang said with a shrug.

Feng was giggling.

Michael sat on the couch, staring at the coffee table, his cheeks very red.

"Seen what?" You asked.

Maggie proudly showed you the video of you, wearing nothing but a bloody towel, stabbing a cyborg in the neck. Your face had not been blurred out in this version.

You groaned.

"Oh, that's one of my favorites," Jack said, leaning over Maggie's shoulder. "What was your kill count that day?"

"I don't know," you muttered. "More than five, less than eleven."

"Three of those were with her knife. One was with her bare hands," Jack said proudly.

"Oooh," Feng said, hand over her heart. "Sexy."

Michael just turned redder and ducked his head down, pretending not to hear the conversation.
"She was just running around the building in that skimpy little wet towel by the time I got there," Gabriel chuckled as he leaned against the bedroom door. "It was adorable."

You rubbed the back of your neck. That was a lot tamer than he'd originally described it. But you couldn't exactly retell that entire story to Jack's siblings. Shooting Feng a dirty look, you blew out a breath. "It was a stupid day. Too many dead civilians, and afterward I got sick from dehydration and caught a cold."

Maggie's smile faded and you winced, realizing that you'd said too much.

"She's a miserable patient," Gabriel said, diverting the conversation. "She didn't want to stay in bed, and then she didn't want to get up. And she whined the entire time-"

"I did not. I was cold and just wanted to sleep!"

"And soup. You wanted soup," Jack laughed. "She wasn't *that* bad. Gabe's much worse. He doesn't get sick often, but when he does, he acts like he's dying..."

Gabriel snorted. "I do not. It just takes a lot to bring me down. And if it's got me under the weather, you better believe it's severe."

"I distinctly remember you bellyaching at Jack because he hadn't added enough honey to your tea one flu season," Chang said, raising a brow. "And I was outside building. If your throat hurt that badly, maybe you shouldn't be so damn loud."

"...No one asked you, Chang," Gabriel scowled.

Jack laughed, kissing your cheek. "I'm a good patient. I just need lots of hugs."

"Bullshit." Chang snorted, giving up all the secrets. "He'd be crawling out of bed as soon as he's conscious. The army bonesaws used to give him extra doses of sedatives so he wouldn't hurt himself. He'd protest, "oh, I'm fine. Never felt better. Sure I had to be carried here, but that was all just a misunderstanding..." Chang rolled her eyes as she spoke, her voice an octave lower. "Hmm. Mateo did a better impression." She froze after she said that, closed her eyes, and shook her head.

"I'm a great patient," Feng said, raising her hand. "I like to stay in bed. I will take my medicine with soup, tea, or honey. I will get lots of sleep." She nodded sagely. "Too bad I don't actually get sick any more..." She muttered under her breath.

"Neither does Ray," Jack laughed. "We'd go out and eat discount seafood after a night of drinking...and Ray was the only one who could walk upright the next day. And it wasn't because she was too smart not to eat the shellfish. She ate more than anyone else-"

Chang shrugged. "I walked it off. Easy to do when you're not weak."

Everyone stared at her incredulously for a moment. Feng lost it first, doubling over with laughter. Jack was next and then everyone else. Even Gabriel chuckled.

Chang rolled her eyes, but you did not imagine the faint smile on her face as she turned away.

"Michael's quit smoking," Chang said, the two of you sneaking cigarettes on roof. "Can't
keep up with me and smoke." She paused. "Well, he couldn't keep up with me anyway, but the smoking wasn't helping."

"That's...impressive. I mean, how do you do it?" You asked, a little curious.

"SEP. Willpower. Spite," she said with a shrug. "I don't know. Why do Reyes and I overheat? Why do we heal twice as fast as our compatriots?" She inhaled deeply. "I don't worry about it, Strike. It's not the cigarettes that will get me in the end."

You shook your head, not quite in the mood to go down that conversational rabbit hole. Black ops agents didn't tend to die peacefully or of old age. That truth applied to super soldiers too.

"But you," she pointed a cigarette at you, narrowing her eyes. "You should be more careful."

You nearly swallowed your cigarette in shock. "I think I've just witnessed the pinnacle of hypocrisy."

"Oh, Andre is here?" Chang asked, looking around.

You blinked, also looking around the roof: there was no one else up here with you. "Wait...was that a joke?"

Chang snorted. "Of course not, Strike. I don't tell jokes. I just grunt and smash things. Sometimes I set them on fire."

"Oh good," you said, laughing. "I was worried."

Chang just shook her head. Her glossy black braid whipped back and forth. She sat there, chewing on her cigarette, staring off at the rising moon. You offered her your flask, and she took it, having a sip of your cheap whiskey without grimacing, and then she handed it back to you.

"I know a lot of my comrades don't think I understand other people," Chang said after a moment. "I admit, I have trouble differentiating between civility and blowing smoke up someone's ass. Something in my head doesn't process that right. But I understand how to deal with people just fine. Wouldn't have kept my squad together this long if I didn't."

You wisely said nothing, and just took a gulp of whiskey. Chang had gotten progressively more talkative this evening, and you strongly suspected it was the amount of alcohol Jack had provided.

"The reason Reyes and I don't get along? We're too similar. We do things our own way. We don't ask permission. We don't apologize so well either."

"Gabriel's actually pretty good at apologies," you said dryly. "I think it's because he's had a lot of practice. At least, that's been my experience."

Chang laughed. "You're in the minority, Strike. Most of us can count on a single hand the number of times Reyes has actually apologized to one of us. He might be sorry for being an ass, he might take your patrol shift, or make sure you get some of his carne asada, but he doesn't flat out say that's he's actually sorry and you were right."

You shrugged. "I guess our experiences are very different." You kept your tone diplomatic.
Chang sighed. "I'm not trying to pick a fight, Strike. I'm trying to tell you something and I don't have the eloquence to do it right in one go. So bear with me." She stared off into the distance.

You sat back, disarmed once more by Chang's blunt honesty.

"Jack is a lot like Mateo. He's a peacemaker with a core of steel. And he's got a way of inspiring loyalty in complete strangers. Reyes and I? Our people will follow us to hell and back, because they know we'd do the same for them. But Jack can just charm some chump off the street to join his cause."

"Sounds right," you said, cautious about where this was going.

"Jack and I work well together because our skills and leadership styles are complementary. Same with Reyes and Jack. But the difference between Reyes and me, is that I've always been lower on the hierarchy. Yeah, I'm strong. Yeah, I'm a good CO. But I'm not the kind of leader that Reyes is. I lack the charisma and the skill at political maneuvering," Chang said, tone matter of fact and without any resentment. "There's a reason you don't see a lot of us together, Strike. We're stubborn. We take charge. Put us together too long without a clear mission, and we start to grate on each other very quickly. Sometimes it doesn't even take that much." Chang leaned back on her elbows. "Some of us played well with others: Mateo, Hsieh, and Lucy. But they were always the exception, and two of them are dead." Chang held out her hand and you passed her your flask.

This was the most she'd ever said to you, and it was almost gossip. You knew better than to point that out though.

"Jack and Reyes were having problems before you came along," Chang said. "We all knew it. Honestly, I thought it was a bad idea of Jack to stay involved with Reyes after everything that's happened, but I know, I'm biased." She gave you a wry grin.

"They're doing well now," you said, pursing your lips.

"Yeah." Chang nodded. "They are." She lit another cigarette. "I have...trouble with romantic relationships. They don't interest me, and I don't understand their appeal."

"Fair," you said.

"After Maya, I thought the worst thing Jack could do was trying to bring another person into his already tumultuous relationship with Reyes. Maya was toxic, always playing games, pitting people against each other, tearing people down." Chang shook her head. "Having a romantic relationship with one person seems like a headache. Two people at once? A goddamn nightmare."

You laughed at her disgusted expression. "OK."

"And then the reports filtered in. I hear they've gone and done it again. It didn't take long for me to realize that "Lucky Strike" was a goddamn shit magnet. Only you're nothing like Maya."

You sighed. "There is a logical explanation-

"Don't care," Chang said, waving her hand dismissively. "You're nothing like Maya and that was a goddamn relief. My point is, keeping you safe is the mission that Jack and Reyes are on together. It's a good teambuilding exercise. Though given what I've seen, it might take more than their combined efforts to succeed at that."

"Why are you such a dick?"
Chang snorted.

"I'm not their goddamn pet project!" You glared at her.

Chang sighed, tapping the ash off her cigarette and shaking her head. "That's not what I was trying to say. I'm not downplaying their affection for you. I'm saying that you're good for them, because your presence makes them think twice about whatever bullshit they're about to pull. Jack and Reyes are comfortable together to the point of complacency. Jack lets Reyes' bad habits slide, and then is disappointed when Reyes doesn't change. And he overcompensates by cracking down on everyone else for the exact same shit he lets Reyes get away with. Reyes makes excuses for Jack's mistakes, while simultaneously resenting Jack for ignoring the advice that would have prevented the problem in the first place."

Chang's words were harsh, but unemotional, and while your kneejerk reaction was to rush defend Jack and Gabriel, you understood that Chang wasn't trying to pick a fight, and worse, she wasn't wrong at all.

"But you altered that dynamic. You keep them on their toes. They like you, and they know that with you they can't get away with the same way they've acted toward each other for years. Your presence is...stabilizing, in a healthy way, even if you yourself are all fucked up."

"I..." You trailed off, not sure what to say.

"Jack's mentioned that you've mediated their fights on more than one occasion. He says the extra complexity makes the three of you work harder to ensure that there are no misunderstandings. Frankly, I have no idea how that works, but it seems to." Chang paused.

"Thanks?" You didn't sound particularly gracious.

"Outside of family, I've known both of them longer than anyone here." Chang gave you an annoyed look. "I know what I'm talking about." She lit yet another cigarette, her chain-smoking a little intimidating. "Jack's my best living friend. But I'm well aware of his shortcomings. I told you once, that if things went to shit, you'd be the one picking up the pieces. You were the one with the most to lose. And maybe that's still true. But now Jack's heavily invested, Reyes too. If something happens to you, they're not going to walk away unscathed. The point of that godawful speech isn't that "love is grand" or some other sentimental bullshit. It's a reminder that you need to be fucking careful." Chang fidgeted. "And while I still don't really like Reyes, I won't take any pleasure in watching him self destruct."

You sat there silently. Chang wasn't...wrong. And her analysis of Jack and Gabriel's dynamic ran true. No one had ever laid it out quite that plainly for you, but you found yourself appreciating Chang's candor and unvarnished insight, even if you didn't completely agree with her. That, or the whiskey was going to your head.

To be fair, it wasn't like Jack and Gabriel were just using you as a placeholder for stability. And you gave back as much as you received. You collaborated with Gabriel to feed Jack and get him out of the office if he'd been there too long. Just like you and Jack would lay out food and act extra ridiculous to lift Gabriel's moods.

And yes, there'd been moments when you'd cut it too close, moments when you realized that your death would hurt them badly. But you'd never let yourself dwell on it. You'd always considered yourself the plus one, the extra, the nonessential personnel.

Except you weren't. Your people cared about you. And if you weren't careful, if they lost
you, well... you still dreamed of Shin and Captain Patel. You still lit incense. You still craved Shin's cooking, not just because it was better than yours, but because he made those dishes just for you, and nothing in the world tasted quite like that. Nor would it ever again.

Loss had left its gouges in your heart, and you knew it well enough to understand that you didn't want to do that to anyone you cared about, let alone Gabriel or Jack. Ziv had taken you to task over that after Candle Arc went to shit. But you were dumb. Sometimes the lessons didn't stick. Sometimes you had to be reminded. And if someone as emotionally-stunted as Chang had to do it for you, well, more power to her, but damn were you dense.

"You're right," you croaked. "I'm working on it."

Chang didn't say anything. She just offered you one of her cigarettes and a light. You took it, and passed her your flask.

"Where's Zinnia?" Maggie asked you when got back to the room, stinking of Chang's cigarettes. Chang leaned against the wall, arms crossed.

"Working on homework," you said automatically.

"But her mom's here," Maggie groaned. "And I want to hear more stories about "Uncle Gabe."

You rubbed the back of your neck, a little surprised that Catriona had returned. She was supposed to be back at her hotel, since her dinner plans out with Gabriel had been cancelled. But there she was, sitting on the couch cheerfully chatting with a very uncomfortable-looking Michael. Today she wore a black and silver dress, little pearlescent skulls screened onto the fabric and matching gladiator platform sandals. She had on a silver headband, her matching jewelry large and intricate.

"My brother is wonderful with children, probably because he is the largest one of them all."

"Commander Wilhelm should actually get that title," Maggie said with a laugh.

"Oh, yes, the cute older man in power armor with the nice smile," Catriona laughed, and it was rich throaty sound. "He's a doll."

"...Fucking Wilhelm," Gabriel growled as he emerged from the bedroom. "Don't even think about it."

Catriona just laughed harder. "But those muscles-" She fanned herself, eyelashes fluttering. "And that smile." She winked at you. "Come on, Lucky. Are you going to deny that Commander Wilhelm is a dashing and attractive man?"

"He's cute for an old guy," Maggie said.

"He has nice armor," Chang said, blandly, obviously trying to get Gabriel's goat. "Very sturdy."

You glanced over to see Gabriel giving Catriona a disgruntled glare, before his gaze darted
to you. He narrowed his eyes.

"Sure, he's attractive, but not really my type," you said breezily. "I like them tall, strong, and grumpy."

Gabriel gave you a dirty look.

"Come on, why don't you like Commander Wilhelm?" Maggie asked, big blue eyes wide with worry. "Is there something we should know about him?"

"Yes, Gabi," Catriona purred. "Does he have some dark secret past we should know about? Is he dangerous?"

"To my sanity," Gabriel groaned. "No. He's an idiot, but he's not evil." Gabriel screwed up his face, like it hurt to admit something nice about Reinhardt.

"That's mean," Maggie said, wrinkling her brow.

"Doesn't make it less true," Gabriel said.

"I think Gabriel's had a long day," Michael said, fidgeting on the couch. "He probably doesn't mean it like that." You blinked, a little taken aback by Michael's intervention. He gave Gabriel a weak smile. "Do you have any idea when Feng and Jack will be back with food?"

Gabriel's frown slowly eased into a thoughtful expression. "They should be back any minute."

Catriona arched a brow, her smile widening. You knew someone would be giving Jane all the gossip tonight, and you decided that maybe you should avoid Indiana for awhile. Say ten years? "I really hope it's not any more leftovers," Catriona sighed. "I didn't come all the way to Zurich to eat reheated hotdogs. Maybe Commander Wilhelm has a good recommendation?" She opened her purse and began applying bright red lipstick.

Gabriel groaned. "Really?"

"Maybe we should go get Zinnia," Maggie said, frowning at Catriona. "She must be missing you. Today was really hard."

You sighed, wishing that the Morrison kids were just a little less upstanding.

Catriona just smiled. "I know. Today really shook her up. But she wanted some alone time, Maggie. She isn't really doing homework. We were making excuses for her." She shook her head. "That girl is too old for her age. I know her well enough to know that she doesn't want me hovering over her right now. She'll come out when she's ready."

"Oh," Maggie said.

That was a half-truth, but not one that you would comment on. Catriona's analysis was spot-on, minus the lie about "alone time." According to Athena, Kseniya was holed up in Tataryn's quarters, having tea with her father. As soon as he'd been released from duty, Tataryn had skipped all the formalities like debriefs and medical checkups, and gone straight to Reinhardt to retrieve her.

You did not look forward to your next meeting with him.
"Is Távio OK?" Michael asked.

"He broke some toes in the landing," you said. "Then walked on them. Angela is probably skinning him alive as we speak."

"But she seemed so...pleasant. That was the blonde genius who gave the lecture on systemic nanite applications and cellular regeneration?" Maggie asked.

You blinked at her, unaware that she had an interest in medicine.

"Feng wanted to go," Maggie said with a shrug.

"It was actually pretty interesting," Michael chimed in.

"Ziegler has a good public face," Chang said. "But she's a micromanaging tyrant when it comes to medical care. It's taken her years to accept that I don't need a goddamn checkup every time I get shot."

There was a long pause as everyone took a moment to digest Chang's comment. Was Chang part cyborg? You'd never asked, because it was damn rude, but you were really starting to wonder.

"And who are those guys Feng was talking to earlier? The cyborg and the hot Asian guy with the long hair?" Maggie grinned. "He looked like a diva."

"That's classified," you said, noting Catriona's interest.

"Wait, how pissy did the diva look?" Gabriel asked. "On a scale of zero being "neutral" and ten being "already engaged in bloody murder?"

"Who is he?" Maggie asked.

"Honestly? No one you've ever heard of," Gabriel said. "But yeah, he's a diva."

"He seemed tense, but he didn't storm off or anything. Feng just said "hi" and talked more to the cyborg while he stood there kind of awkwardly. You know, I feel guilty just calling that other guy "the cyborg." It seems rude. He's a person. With a name." Maggie gave Gabriel a brilliant smile.

"Doesn't work on me, Margarita," he said, clicking his tongue at her. "Some of my people's identities are need-to-know. And you don't need to know."

Maggie drooped dramatically. "But Gaaaaaaabe-"

"Would you describe the diva's expression as "extremely constipated?" You asked, trying to sound casual.

Maggie's jaw shut and she stared off for a few seconds. "...Yeah. That's spot-on. Wow, I thought he was kind of pretty in a broody way, but now I won't be able to get that image out of my head. Thanks a lot, Lucky."

You just smiled innocently, happy to wreck anyone's misconceptions about Hanzo.

Chapter End Notes
So guess who bit off more than they can chew? This person!

I originally thought I was going to have Thanksgiving with 4 people max. Because most of the time, that's how it is. This year, I got 12. I didn't mean to. But I did. I didn't know I was getting most of them till after I went food shopping. So...yeah. I always make a lot of food, but now I'm like "we're going to need more food!!!" Everyone is bringing stuff, but, you know, I like to freak out a bunch. This weekend has been panic cleaning, washing bad dogs, and cleaning up the yard after the massive ice storm we had brought down a ton of branches. Took out some of the lilac bushes too. Fortunately, no major property damage.

Anyway, this week will be spent panicking over the Thanksgiving meal. I think at least 3 of the people will have already eaten, but you know. Panic!

So that's why this chapter is late. Also, some angst!anon who is totally anonymous, goaded me into a drabble on tumblr. That monster.
Chapter Summary

A study in families and uncomfortable situations.

Chapter Notes

Yumi drew a lovely sketch of Isha with her toy dog AND a sketch of Lucky AND a Bandit and Isha napping together picture. Ded.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack and Feng had gone the extra mile and picked up food from Gabriel's favorite Mexican food truck, hit up a bakery, and came bearing a cooler filled with a variety of drinks. It was a little odd to see Feng carrying so much more than Jack, and both Maggie and Michael's eyes got real big when she walked in with the cooler on one shoulder and a massive box of food on the other, chatting cheerfully at Jack, who still had one arm in the sling, as he swung a couple bags in his good hand.

Catriona just settled on the couch, almost feline in her pleased regard of the entire situation, her smiles edged in mystery and a very high dose of "I know something the rest of you don't." And while that was probably true, you suspected that look was her default expression.

Isha emerged from the bedroom as you unpacked the food. She climbed up the back of the couch, craning her neck as she tried to get a good look at what was available. Unsurprisingly, Maggie and Feng immediately began calling to her, offering her progressively larger portions of their meals, from soft tacos, churros, and cupcakes, to whole tamales, milanesa, and little cups of horchata.

She ignored Feng and sidled up to Michael, cooing when Maggie spoke to her. She tugged on Michael's hand delicately, chirping at him, and he immediately gave her a whole soft taco. The delight on his face was reminiscent of Jack, and kind of adorable.

Everyone sat around the coffee table, even Chang, as you passed out disposable plates and finished laying out the food.

"Your murderbird is a spiteful little shit," Feng said, taking a grumpy bite out of her tamale. "I love her."

"She takes after her mother," Gabriel laughed, sitting down on the couch beside his sister.

You blinked, a little taken aback by that term. Jesse had been calling you "Raptor Mom" just to annoy you, but hearing it from Gabriel took on an entirely different level of meaning.

"Your raptor seems to be excellent practice for children," Catriona said.
You choked on your horchata, coughing violently as Jack began to pat your back. What was with these sisters and their baby-craziness? You gave Catriona a dirty look, but she was grinning wolfishly at Gabriel. And you had flashbacks of Jane's terrifying level of scrutiny. Though Catriona wasn't looking at you. This, you realized, was directed at Gabriel. Maybe it wasn't about you at all. Maybe this was some kind of sibling retribution and you were just collateral damage.

Gabriel just shook his head, looking slightly irritated. "You do understand that managing dozens of highly-specialized black ops agents is akin to babysitting, right?" That was actually terribly true: Vo's eccentricities, the Shimada brattiness, Tataryn's petty games, and Jesse's half-civilized upbringing... There was always a lot of work to be done.

"I will say, you've done a good job with your boy McCree. He's really come a long way," Catriona said, not looking bothered at all. "And your little divas have really opened up." She gave you a sly smile. "Something you didn't do alone."

You wondered if you could pay Michael to save you again. Or Feng. Hell, Chang could step up at any moment now...

"After watching the three of you together, I really think you'll do fine with kids, provided someone spends the majority of their time at home," Catriona continued.

Your shoulders stiffened, and you felt your teeth grinding together before you could force yourself to relax. You did not like the direction this conversation had taken. Not one bit.

"Cat-" Gabriel began.

"It should be you, hermanito," Catriona said, pouring some pico onto one of her tacos, her motions precise. "You are definitely the most domestically-inclined. And probably the most responsible, no offense Lucky."

Chang snorted, loudly.

Feng clapped a hand over her mouth.

The Morrison siblings, nodded in agreement.

Jack just rolled his eyes and ate a soft taco in one sulky bite.

You blinked, still processing the fact that Catriona had told Gabriel that she thought he should stay home and raise the hypothetical children. Did that mean she didn't trust you or...?

"See, he tells me that he issues the edicts, and that his trusted agents are mostly self-policing, but when there are problems, Lucky is his...best representative. She uses varying methods of diplomacy, and if that fails, then he steps in." She smiled at you. "But your combination of food, charm, and carefully applied threats of violence have worked beautifully. He's been very pleased by your handling of some of the more...difficult agents," Catriona said and you wondered just how much Gabriel shared with his sister. "So from my understanding, Gabriel could do most of his work remotely, while you and Jack continued your more hands-on managing of the job."

"Gabriel still goes out in the field," you said.

"I know," Catriona said, her lips pursed. And you understood then that maybe she knew about his condition, and she didn't want him out there any more than you did. "But you and Jack can occasionally help out too, right?"
"Of course we would," Jack growled, sounding offended.

You just raised a brow, not quite willing to let yourself be drawn into a loaded hypothetical situation.

"Reyes is probably the one I’d trust most with a small child," Chang said after a moment.

Jack began to cough, like he was shocked that she could say anything nice about Gabriel.

"Jack has fed a baby honey, would forget to give it vegetables, and doesn't understand the concept of regular bedtimes." Chang poured herself some horchata. "Strike would just teach the brat to knife fight, drug it for naptimes, and possibly let her dinosaur do most of the work."

You opened your mouth, and then shut it, because even if Chang was kind of wrong, you didn't need to convince anyone that you would be a good permanent caretaker for a child. That was practically volunteering for more work, and you fucking knew better.

Gabriel rested his face in his hand, but you didn't miss how Chang and Catriona exchanged wry looks.

"It's settled then," Catriona said cheerfully. "Gabriel's going to stay home with the kids. I can rest easy now. My girls have been asking when Uncle Gabriel's going to give them some new cousins to fuss over."

"Yes!" Maggie pumped her fists. "Jane's not having any more kids, Michael's single, and Aunt Maggie doesn't have nearly enough small children to spoil!"

Michael just gave you a wry smile, and shook his head. You weren't sure if that meant "Catriona is too much," or "Maggie's deranged," or "Jack's not responsible enough to have kids." But you suspected it was all of the above.

"...Dinosaur...babysitters?" Feng mused to herself. She gave Isha a thoughtful look. "Too small. But..."

"No, Feng," Jack said, shaking his head, eyes wide.

"Maiasaura would be too big, unless..." Feng continued muttering to herself.

"Oviraptors," you said, because on one hand, you were very relieved that she wasn't trying to push for nieces or nephews. On the other hand, you really weren't sure about some of her ideas.

"They were carnivores," Feng said. "But."

"And little nursemaid outfits!" Maggie shouted.

"Yes," Feng said, suddenly fired up again. She pumped her fist in the air. "With cute uniforms, how could anything go wrong?"

You stood in the docking bay waiting room, Isha in a chair munching on Jack's plain salted potato chips. Maggie was hugging Feng, already planning a weekend in Shanghai. Chang did not look happy, and you weren't entirely sure that that trip would get approved. Távio and Michael shook hands, the two of them speaking in low voices, and pointedly not looking in your direction.
Jack shook his head, going over some instructions with Chang, while she rolled her eyes at him.

Maggie moved on from Feng to hug Gabriel, her eyes already misty.

"Hey." Michael rubbed the back of his neck, giving you a sheepish smile. "Thanks for having us."

"It was fun," you said, glossing over all the not-fun shit that had gone down. "Sorry about the...interruptions."

Michael’s jaw tightened and that tense look echoed Jack. "Take care of yourself, Lucky." He hugged you then, squeezing a little too tight. "Please," he said softly in your ear. "You already look after Jack, Reyes, and apparently your entire black ops division. Don't forget that you're important too."

You blinked, a little unsettled by that declaration. "Oh definitely," you laughed, trying to play it cool. "Things would fall apart if I wasn't around."

Michael just frowned, not quite taken in by your bravado.

"Lucky! You be careful! And bring Isha next time! Dad will love her!" She reached over to chuck Isha under the chin, and Isha gave a tolerant thrum.

You hugged Maggie too, and she gave you a loud kiss on the cheek, before smirking at Michael. She then threw herself at Jack, laughing as he caught her. Michael went to shake hands with Feng.

Chang was talking to Távio now. They both looked at you too, and you sighed. He was supposed to go back with her to Indiana, but there'd been no word on that, and he didn't seem to be packed or dressed for traveling.

"I have no problem with you joining my squad at a later date," Chang told him. "The offer will remain open."

You raised a brow. Távio had been very enthusiastic about learning from Chang. She was damn impressive in a fight, after all.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, executing a crisp salute.

"I agree with this choice. For now, you'll be more useful watching Strike's back. And that will be plenty challenging, agent."

You sighed, realizing that they'd already discussed this without informing you, and you wondered who else had been involved. You snuck a look at Gabriel and Jack, but Gabriel was saying something to Feng, and Jack was hugging Michael. That didn't rule out their interference, but you couldn't be sure who did what.

Maggie and Távio shook hands, while Chang, Jack, and Gabriel watched them a little too closely. Maggie just rolled her eyes, and Távio maintained a friendly demeanor, looking less intimidated than you expected.

Chang ushered the two Morrison siblings into the shuttle bay, both of them waving as they disappeared behind the double doors.
Távio gave you a slightly guilty look, like you were going to be upset that he postponed his career opportunity. You just shook your head, smiling to yourself. He relaxed then.

Feng just sighed wistfully, and glanced down at Isha who'd been eating chips the entire time. "Did you save me any?"

Isha handed Feng the bag, and Feng squealed happily, only to find the package empty. Your murderbird hopped off the chair and went straight to Jack, ignoring Feng's disappointed sighs.

Gabriel raised a brow. "Don't you have to get back to Shanghai?"

"Probably, but I'm staying an extra day," she beamed. "Gérard wants to talk business. Athena and Auntie Zheng are doing some preventative maintenance, under Winston's supervision, of course. And Hanzo is very vocally demanding a rematch in Mario Kart."

"Of course he is," Gabriel muttered.

"No, you were right to suggest briefing Agent Riggs on Petras' bad behavior," Lacroix said, sitting on his desk. "He did not take it well. And having heard about the "accident" that occurred this weekend, he drew the right conclusions very quickly. You should expect a visit from him soon. He was most distraught."

You raised a brow, somewhat surprised by Lacroix's actions. He'd been content to sit on Riggs as a liability. But now he was using him as an asset? Well, that shouldn't surprise you. Not really. Except Lacroix was awful about volunteering information. And wait, did he just say you were "right?"

"Have you thought more about what we spoke of last time?" Lacroix continued, not giving you a chance to bask in your "rightness."

"If I have to go, I'd prefer to go with Feng," you said, after a moment. "Because at the very least, I can liaise with On Sing and still be useful."

Lacroix inclined his head. "A good assessment," he said, looking pleased. "I know it will be difficult, Chanceux, but I will do my best to ensure it is a short-term arrangement. And of course, Gabriel, Jack, and Ziv can always find excuses to go to Shanghai. Perhaps you and Amélie can do your raptor photo shoot then."

"...I'm supposed to be dead and laying low. Doing an ad campaign for White Rabbit is the exact opposite of hiding my existence," you scowled, not wanting to address the "modeling job" at all.

"What better cover than as a model? Amélie and I have discussed a variety of layouts, and you would be best served showing maybe a sliver of your face, and looking off into the distance. Isha, perhaps with some color alterations, would be the focal point of the shot..." Lacroix trailed off. "Well, yours would be the most minimalist. Long bias-cut black coat, exposed prostheses. Isha looking stylish and intimidating in platinum armor, perhaps with a single jewel in the chestplate, a nod to Gabriel, of course. Though I think the gem should be black. Her eyes are shockingly blue, like someone else we know, and the rest of the photograph would be in black and white. You would be a shadow, a backdrop, a study in chiaroscuro."
"Lacroix, focus," you said, snapping your fingers. "I'm sure your artistic composition is brilliant. But we're talking about the logistics of Operation Crash Hawk," you said. "I have ratlines. I have resources in place. But...I'd like to be able to step back into my life when this is all over."

"Yes, we both know there is more to this than ruling you KIA on an operation," Lacroix said. "Your absence will leave a power vacuum and hobble Blackwatch. Who should be your successor?"

"...I would have expected you to step up," you said. Lacroix ran counterespionage and anti-Talon operations, but so much of his work complemented Blackwatch's. It was a natural progression.

Lacroix shook his head. "I am not talking about your operational planning skills, though they are useful. You make things run smoothly within the ranks. You look after your subordinates and Gabriel. You are his right hand, and the person his agents can approach with their individual problems."

"Jesse and Tataryn," you said. "Jesse for ops and to support Gabriel. Tataryn to handle agent concerns and balance out Gabriel's...brusqueness. Jesse can do that too, but he'd be better at looking after Gabriel," you said. "Though, Amélie could step in too, unless she's too busy supporting your operations."

Lacroix smiled. "No, I think you might be on to something. Amélie is very good at managing difficult people."

It took all your willpower not to say, "Like you and Ziv." But your jaw quivered, and Lacroix could probably read the look on your face, very clearly.

He just smiled. "She might be even better at it than you."

You shrugged. "I believe it." Amélie had the charisma and the people skills. Maybe it made you a little jealous, knowing that Amélie could replace you operationally. But honestly, you were just happy that someone competent would be there to take care of your people. You trusted Amélie to keep them in line and to go to bat for them.

Lacroix brought up a screen. "It seems the Petras family is having some internal disagreements. While Valerie Petras has...regrettable leanings, she is no fan of the Director and has taken several family members to task over his treatment of Ainsley. It's quite the drama."

You skimmed the call transcripts. Valerie Petras had left a series of blistering messages for the Director. She called him "Willy." It made you snort. None of her ire came from how he treated you, of course, but rather that he would do such a thing in front of her precious daughter and then raise hands against her. In fact, Valerie Petras was calling for him to "clean up his mess" and to not "leave his whores lying around the office." You didn't like how that sounded one little bit.

Her husband Robert got a dressing down too, and Robert meekly called the Director to have conversation about what bitch Valerie was. But Robert also reminded the Director that his behavior toward Ainsley was unacceptable.

The Director did not answer any of Valerie's calls. Though he had some very choice words for Robert about the kind of ball-busting bitch he'd married. Robert didn't defend his wife. He just told the Director to clean up his mess and stop attracting scrutiny on the family because that that uppity African bitch had financial regulators looking a little too closely at their assets, and they
There were some exchanges about the vacation homes in Martha's Vineyard, what those damn curry-stinking Korpals were doing in DC and New Delhi, and other details you filed away. But it was Robert who asked the Director if he'd "finally found it." The transcripts noted a long pause. "It has to be Morrison."

The rest of the conversation blurred after that.

You stared for a long time, wondering what Jack had that Petras wanted so much. You pointed at that passage, looking at Lacroix.

Lacroix's face remained blank.

"You know, don't you?" You glared at Lacroix. "Does Jack know?"

"We have spoken about it. Jack's had his suspicions. I share them," Lacroix said, evenly. "Rest assured, that if it's what we think it is, Petras isn't going to get it."

You sat back in your chair. "Well?"

"Chanceux, you understand the concept of "need to know" and you do not need to know. Even if Petras was to find a way to leverage Jack, Jack could not give Petras what he wants." Lacroix gave you a hard look. "There is nothing we can do about it now. Jack is aware of the danger. We've known for a long time that Petras wants to influence Jack. When the carrot did not work, he got out the stick. And neither has been effective. The reasons why don't matter in this instance."

"That's a shit answer," you snapped.

"That's the only answer you're going to get," Lacroix said coldly. "You should be more worried about yourself. Petras thinks Jack has something that he wants; he knows better than to kill him. You are an inconvenience to the entire Petras clan, and much easier to erase."

You sat back in your chair. You were used to compartmentalized intelligence and receiving incomplete answers. You knew, logically, that you didn't need to know why Petras thought he needed Jack, only that he thought so, and he would do a lot of unethical things to secure Jack's cooperation. In fact, you were more at risk, because if a whiff of your relationship with Jack reached Petras, then you were leverage to be used against your lover.

It took you a little while to work through those thoughts. You weren't happy with Lacroix's lack of explanation, and you would discretely ask your lovers about it later. However, as much as it pained you to admit it, Lacroix was right. The reasons why Petras weren't as important as the fact that he thought Jack had something he wanted and what plans he had for getting it. Of course, what "it" was, would affect those plans.

"It would be helpful if we could eliminate other possibilities," you said, taking a deep breath. "Or if we knew what angle he was going to come from. There are different approaches based on what he's after: data, tech, rare cheeses..."

Lacroix laughed. "That is better reasoning, Chanceux." He offered you a cigarette. "I will consider it."

You took the cigarette eyeing him suspiciously. Your instincts didn't buy that for one second. Lacroix had caved far too easily. He would consider it very briefly, then deny your suit.
Unless you got Jack or Gabriel to confess. You had to be careful there. There were lines you were going to cross, and you wondered if you would be better off doing some research first.

You smoked the cigarette, trying to play it cool, while Lacroix broke down some of the tech details from the cyber attack and jailbreak.

Zheng hadn't been able to actually bolster Athena's defenses. Instead, she'd provided your AI with guidance on which areas to devote resources to, while Zheng helped craft her own counterattack on the viral tunneler. The attacker had been custom-tailored to bring down a powerful Virtual Assistant. Athena was a true AI, and while she wouldn't have been deleted, the assault could have left several Overwatch systems vulnerable to attack. Ziv, Riggs, and Athena were still decrypting Sakai's tablets, but so far they'd found quite a bit of data on the jailbreak.

"It should come as no surprise to you that we have Agent Bakker in custody," Lacroix said.

You smiled wryly, because he'd told Kwento that Bakker had been killed in action. "Yeah, I figured that out. And so did Zenyatta."

Lacroix raised a brow.

"He pays attention," you said, happy that the omnic monk was thwarting someone else. "And he'll know if we do something reprehensible."

"Torture isn't our best interrogation method," Lacroix said, rolling his eyes at you. "I cannot take it off the table, especially since the mere threat of it does work in some cases." He sat back in his chair. "In fact, the threat of it coupled with "kindness" is usually effective in inducing a form of Stockholm Syndrome. "We could hurt you, but we are not. We will treat you special. You can trust us." While we are, in fact, emotionally exploiting them. Still morally-reprehensible, but less so on the scale of mortal sins." He smiled thinly.

"Actual torture seems to work short-term," you said.

"It can," Lacroix agreed. "But it is not ideal, and the cost for our personnel is high. And in cases where we want large quantities of intel, it is not reliable. We aren't just being nice to Prince because of the international scrutiny."

"I know," you scowled.

"We'll give Prince another week in isolation, and then send Gabriel in. That should be enough time to soften him up."

You assumed he meant Prince, but then Gabriel needed to cool down from this weekend too. "So who's handling Bakker?"

"No one yet. I was thinking you or Amélie. I'll let you do the research and decide," Lacroix said. "You have full operational permissions."

You put out your cigarette. Lacroix had given you the go-ahead to torture Bakker if you deemed it necessary. Or you could ask Amélie to do it instead. But Lacroix knew you better than that. You would not put your friend in that position. And after that discussion, you tacitly understood that Lacroix was testing you. Obviously, he wanted you to find a more...effective method. No problem. You could make people talk. You'd just have to approach it carefully.
An Athena drone hovered beside you as you walked to Captain Amari's office. You knocked, and there was a long silence. You glanced at Athena, wondering if the captain was even in.

"Enter," Captain Amari said sharply.

You opened the door, Athena's drone following behind you, like she was angling you as a shield.

Captain Amari sat at her desk, jaw clenched, brows knit together as she scanned her screen. Her hat was in place, and her uniform crisp. There was no sign of biscuits or tea. She did not look at you or offer you a seat, and you knew then that you were in deep trouble.

You stood at attention in front of her desk, knowing better than to interrupt. You could feel the Athena drone bumping against the backs of your knees, like she needed comfort. That, or she was trying to hint that you should get down and grovel for mercy. You thought about that for a moment. Well, it wasn't like you had that much dignity anyway. Would she prefer the wailing and gnashing off teeth? Or were you supposed to offer her your life as penance? Or maybe just a finger? Your tanto was right here, and if you were fast, Angela could totally reattach it...

Oh hell, you'd been spending too much time with the Shimadas.

You fidgeted, deciding against any kind of self-mutilation as a form of atonement. That was just the fear talking and it was completely irrational.

She tapped her screen off, and folded her hands on her desk, turning those fierce eyes on you, her gaze stony.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," you blurted out, knowing that your fear was only partially irrational.

Captain Amari stared at you, and you could feel that cybernetic eye laser through your skull. Unless it was her flesh one. That was a distinct possibility too. Maybe she was born with death beam eyes and they had to remove one and seal it with the eye of Horus tattoo because she was just too dangerous otherwise...

"And what exactly are you sorry for, agent?" She asked, voice low.

"...Leading an unsanctioned mission, dragging other agents along, and letting your daughter eat that much ice cream, though in my defense, I did get her to eat a whole bowl of green vegetables first."

Captain Amari sat back in her chair, her expression cool, but the pressure in your skull diminishing.

"And how exactly did you do that?"

"I poured chili oil on it, called it the "Spicy Doom Horror," and marketed it as a strength-training exercise," you said.

Captain Amari stared at you for thirty seconds and then shook her head. "Do you know the worst part about raising your child surrounded by super soldiers, knights errant, and ruthless spymasters?"

"They're a...bad influence?" You guessed, because said child would be the safest damn kid in the world.
"Worse, they're inspiring. My daughter wants nothing more than to be a hero. She's grown up watching Jack, Gabriel, Reinhardt, and Gérard do unspeakably foolish things and surviving, and she sees no reason why she can't as well." Captain Amari shook her head with a rueful smile. "And here I am, left weighing my choices. How do I continue to protect my daughter? Do I crush her nascent dreams to keep her safe? Or do I let her follow in my foolish footsteps already knowing the hardship it will bring her? Knowing the world will eventually let her down and she will have to live with one foot in the grave? Knowing that I gave up everything to try to bring her peace, and that she would innocently and whole-heartedly throw that away for a chance at glory?"

You had no idea. You stood there in silence.

"Something about being around us warps all good sense," Captain Amari said, her tone equal parts warm and bitter. "Jack has this way of making you believe that you can do anything. And sometimes that belief is enough to make it so." She gave you a hard look. "And Gabriel, well, he will do anything to protect us." She shook her head. "Cut deep enough and he doesn't give a damn about rules and causes. His first goal is to protect those under his command. And let's be honest, even if Jack is now the Strike Commander, even if I've always been my own person, Gabriel has never actually relinquished that responsibility."

You weren't sure what to say to that.

"So tell me, Lucky, why did you do it? Because in one evening, you jeopardized our alliance with On Sing, Ms. Zhai's safety, and Agent Maeda Vargas' career."

You flinched. Because it would look really bad for On Sing if their Dragon Head was busted for going after the Director of Overwatch. And you had taken her with you... "Távio was just following orders," you said weakly.

"So he gains a reputation as a hothead who can't be trusted to follow the rules or a coward who can't stand up to bad orders?" Captain Amari asked, her tone too reasonable.

"...I...didn't consider that," you said after a moment of squirming.

"I know," Captain Amari said, shaking her head. "I've seen you bend that stiff neck for the sake of the mission. I know you are capable of it. I know you are vindictive by nature, but this goes beyond petty revenge."

"I..." You stared at the ceiling, trying to compose yourself. "There wasn't just one reason, ma'am. Yes, I am petty. I don't have your reputation and a man with more power than me tried to lay hands on my person. I don't take that lightly. But...that's no excuse for my actions."

"Go on," Captain Amari said, her voice dangerously gentle.

"I was afraid he would go after someone else. Someone less capable of defending themselves, because I'd denied him, wounded his vanity." You rubbed the back of your neck. "I know it wouldn't have been my fault, but I felt...responsible because I was involved." You half-expected a scathing comment about your faulty conscience, but Captain Amari nodded. "Is that all?"

"...I didn't want to go to Jack and Gabriel with this. I didn't think they would...take it well. I wanted to have a have a solution in place."

"So it all comes back to Gabriel and Jack's overprotective tendencies?" She narrowed her eyes. "Are you still having trouble handling them?"
"...No," you said, hanging your head. "That's not it at all. Jack and Gabriel...would have behaved reasonably, after some discussion, I think." You sighed. "It was all me. It was my clumsy attempt to shield them. I was...irrational. I put all my thinking into the op and not enough into anything else."

"Yes," Captain Amari agreed. "You did."

"...That was a mistake." Even if the operation went off without a hitch. You should have planned better for the aftermath. That was a major blind spot, and you couldn't really call it a success now that you were standing here in front of a displeased Captain Amari, struggling to give an account of yourself. "One I won't make again."

Captain Amari just shook her head. "Perhaps you won't overlook these same details, that is true, but your disregard for rules is only getting worse."

You cringed inwardly. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm trying to do the right thing and the smart thing."

"And failing spectacularly," she said.

Damn, she did not pull her punches.

"But you are trying," she said dryly. "The Lucky I watched stumble out of our holding cell after Gérard's interrogation could not have refrained from attacking Petras immediately. The Lucky who came to me after the Overwatch Ball, incensed that Gérard and Agent Mihret had gone to Shanghai unsupervised, did not yet have the skills to put together a professional team and prepare such a flawless operation. The Lucky who woke up in her hospital bed after the events in Lucerne, would not have taken the blame and the responsibility for her poorly thought-out actions."

You opened your mouth to protest, that you had admitted fault for your recklessness in Lucerne. But you stopped, understanding that while the circumstances were markedly different, you'd stepped up and accepted the blame, for your actions and assumptions, and had not spread it around, even if the operation hadn't been solely your idea.

"I do recognize your growth, Lucky." Captain Amari gave a pleased nod. "And I am very familiar with the trouble superior officers can cause when you reject their advances. I am not happy about your actions, but I am sympathetic. And perhaps, I am just a little put out, that you didn't invite me."

Your jaw dropped. It took you a few tries to get it back in place. "I...um...sorry?"

"You should be," she sniffed.

You stood there awkwardly, because you'd just tried to emphasize how repentant you were for fucking up. Yes, you were sorry you'd been dumb. But you weren't sorry that you'd incapacitated Petras' junk. "We can go back if you want?" You jerked your thumb over your shoulder. "Like today. I'll do it again. But better."

The Captain threw back her head and laughed. "That won't be necessary. We have more important things to do and you know it. Especially given the events of this weekend."

You bit your lip. "I told Lacroix that if I had to disappear, I would probably do best with On Sing."

"I thought you would," she said, suddenly serious. "Under other circumstances, I would
have put you back on training duty for six months," she said coolly. "In charge of the PT portion, because I do not need you corrupting yet another batch of recruits."

You winced, because you'd probably have to run alongside all the cadets and spend a ridiculous amount of time on exercise regiments. At least you could borrow some of Chang's training ideas.

"But events are moving quickly. Between Petras, Hanoi, and what transpired this weekend, there is too much work to do. And I need you at your best. So I am willing to let this go this once, Lucky." She gave you a hard look. "Do not make me regret it."

"Thank you, ma'am," you said, saluting. "I won't let you down."

"You will not," she said, eyes locked on yours. "I expected better from you, Lucky."

You sucked in a breath, wondering if she was going to issue a coup de grace after that deathblow.

"If you're ever taken with the idea of setting up a revenge op against the Director, invite me next time. I will either talk you out of it, or take responsibility myself. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," you said, sneaky scheming wheels already turning in your mind. Her sniper support would be invaluable, but you suspected she wanted a more personal role in the revenge plot...

Captain Amari just smiled. "And if you could, please send me that Spicy Doom Horror recipe. Fareeha's father has requested it."

They were waiting for you outside your room, somber as he slouched against your door and she stared at her shoes.

You took a deep breath, and tried to look relaxed. "I thought you'd gone back to school already," you said to Kseniya.

She gave you a weak smile. "I...wasn't ready." She looked up at her father. "I don't think Tat was either."

Tataryn bobbed his head, not looking at you. "The Commander's sister is staying in town all week. Kseniya may spend that time here, for family visitation. She will be doing her schoolwork remotely." He gave her a severe look. "And her grades will not be affected in the least, or else."

"Yes, Tato," Kseniya said cheerfully.

Tataryn finally deigned to look at you, dark circles around his eyes. You couldn't read the blank expression on his face. Tataryn normally telegraphed emotions, and while you knew better than to believe his smiles and frowns, it was unsettling to see the blank mask on his features.

You swallowed, unsure of what to say.

"My quarters are more hospitable," Tataryn said, pushing off the door. "We should talk there." He brushed by you and kept walking.

You stifled a groan and stared at his back. You felt a tug on your right hand and looked
down, a little surprised to see Kseniya holding it.

"Thank you, for saving me," she said earnestly. "I know I didn't say it right yesterday and I'm sorry-"

"You have nothing to apologize for," you said, starting to walk. And still she held onto your hand, speeding up to match your pace.

"I feel bad," she said. "I should have been more help. I panicked and couldn't move." She gave you a guilty look. "I'm really sorry."

"Kseniya, please stop apologizing. You shouldn't feel bad about any of that."

The two of you reached Tataryn's quarters. He'd left the door open, and you followed her inside, noting that the room looked marginally less messy, and that Tataryn had his back to you while he prepared tea.

"That was the first time I've frozen up like that. I've been in real danger before," she said. "But I was younger and I guess I didn't realize..."

Tataryn flinched at that, but didn't turn around. He set plates on a tray.

You took a seat on the couch, Kseniya sitting beside you, still latched on to your hand.

"Jumping out of a speeding vehicle into a lake gave me pause," you said. "But I've had years of practice ignoring good sense and throwing myself into dangerous situations. Your reaction was perfectly natural and a lot healthier."

"I panicked," she repeated, staring at her knees.

"A little," you said. "But you didn't overreact."

"I should have been more-"

"Kseniya." You placed your hands on her shoulders, and stared at those soft sad eyes.

"You're still young. You haven't had time to build up the reactions that the rest of us have. You don't have the training we have. You're a little work-in-progress human: you have time to learn. So please stop comparing yourself to me. Having such unrealistic expectations isn't reasonable or fair to you."

"I held you back. I could have drowned you!"

"Probably not," you said. "I mean, you kicked me a few times, left some nasty bruises, but that was it." You grinned at her mortified look.

"Lucky!"

"You should take up martial arts," you said. "You have a mean snap kick."

"I take it back! I'm not sorry at all!" She scowled, looking furiously cute.

"Good," you said, patting her cheeks. "That's exactly what I wanted to hear."

"...You're as bad as Tato," she snapped.

You wrinkled your nose at her. "Hey, that's not true. You can apologize for that right now."
"It's true, and I won't," she said, crossing her arms.

You laughed, because as much as you wanted to defend yourself, you couldn't do that without badmouthing Tataryn to his kid, and that wasn't OK. "All right, all right. I'm the worst." You sighed. "But it's not like I could let anything happen to you on my watch and still look myself in the eye. You looked after Brigitte for me. I couldn't let my best Swedish translator get hurt. Do you know what Torby would have done to me? Nothing good, let me tell you." You blinked as she threw her arms around your chest, hugging you.

"You're awful," she muttered. "I was trying to apologize and all you can do is make jokes and blow me off!"

"And I keep telling you, you have nothing to apologize for," you sighed, patting her back. "None of what happened was your fault. If anything, I need to be apologizing to you, because we're pretty sure I was the target and you were in danger because of me."

Kseniya's eyes widened, and she gripped your elbows as she glanced over at her father, who probably hadn't shared that information with her. "Who?"

"...That's classified," you said. "But we know who."

"Is Uncle Gabriel going to take care of it for you?" She asked, looking very serious.

"...We might go together," you said, thinking about how your lovers wanted to plan a Petras-assassination date. A smile crept across your face.

Kseniya's frown eased up, and she gazed at you thoughtfully. "I guess you're used to...dangerous things, aren't you?"

"Sure, still think it's damn rotten someone dragged you and Brigitte into it though," you said. "Távio too, if I'm going to be honest, but don't tell him I said that. It'll hurt his pride and he handled himself very well."

"He did," Kseniya nodded vigorously. "But...Uncle Gabriel's "your special person" you mentioned before, isn't he?"

You sighed, knowing better than to lie to her. "Yeah."

"That's good. He needs someone who makes him laugh. You need someone patient and strong to save you from consequences of your own idiocy, or that's at least what Aunt Ana said."

You stared, dumbfounded, at Kseniya. She beamed at you, playing the "I'm just a cute kid, you can't be mad at me for telling the truth" card. And she was probably right.

Tataryn set a tray of tea, cookies, and small sandwiches in front of Kseniya and filled cups for everyone. The fragrant scent of bergamot let you know that he was serving Earl Grey. You took a cup.

Tataryn sat down, drained a cup, and set it back in its saucer. "I told you," he said, voice hoarse. "I told you to be careful with her." He gave you baleful look.

"I'm sorry," you said. "I never meant for anything like this to happen."

Tataryn just gave a tired sigh. "I know." He put an arm around Kseniya, and she grinned up at him. Tataryn's brow furrowed, his teeth pressed firmly together, like he was struggling to keep
his words calm. But you understood; his fears were all too evident on his face.

"Do we need to go to the mats?" You asked, keeping your tone casual.

"No." Tataryn's answer was clipped. "I already know that you are just cursed, like me."

"I wouldn't go that far," you said. "It was-

Tataryn waved his hand dismissively. "I know it is not your fault, Lucky. I know what kind of people we are dealing with. In the beginning, I was very...upset with you, and with myself for trusting you."

Kseniya took a shortbread cookie, pretending like she wasn't listening in very closely.

"But I have calmed down now. Because your Fedya is a wise man and never does anything rash." He gave you a devastating smile, all charm and flash, and a cheeky wink to top it off. It was one of those expressions he threw around to strangers, one you knew better than to trust.

"No, never," you deadpanned.

"Never ever," he agreed, patting Kseniya's back. "I think it will be good for me to have you around for a few days," he told her. "Hearing about your adventure aged me, Ksenya. You will make me a frail old man before it is my time."

Kseniya just laughed, kissing his cheek. "You are young and strong, Tato. Not as strong as Uncle Gabriel or Uncle Reinhardt, but at least you're still younger."

Tataryn rested a hand over his heart. "My own daughter..."

"Mr. Lindholm, Winston, and I are going to start on the gravity warp trampoline tomorrow," Kseniya told you. "I got a special dispensation from my science teacher, so I'm excused from classes all week." She grinned. "Oh! Brigitte drew you a picture. Let me go get it." She sprung up and headed to grab her backpack.

"I was angry," Tataryn said softly, staring straight ahead. "At you specifically. I know that was unfair. It's easier to blame the woman in front of me than the shadowy conspiracy that doesn't have a real face." He didn't look up from his teacup. "And Kseniya wouldn't stop talking about all the fun she had with you, and how bad she felt that she'd gotten you hurt, and how worried about you she was." Tataryn set his cup down. "Hearing her go on and on about it, just made me angrier."

You said nothing, because you had come to understand that not every statement needed a response. Tataryn hadn't actually been angry at you. You got that. He was angry at the people he couldn't reach out and punish immediately. He was angry because someone had tried to kill his daughter. He was angry, because he'd been terrified for someone else, and helpless in the face of that danger, and you of all people understood how fucking terrible that was.

"But when Lindholm came to personally invite her to his workshop, he had some choice words about your involvement. That meddlesome Swede has a way with short rude sentences. Mostly, I think he likes upsetting the applecart." Tataryn shook his head. "I thought we were going to commiserate about being two old fools who nearly lost their daughters under your watch. Instead, he loudly and self-righteously let me know I was being an ungrateful...person. I think Lindholm just likes being difficult and contrary.

"Yes, you always seem to be in the center of some kind of terrible mess, but when things
go wrong, you are a good person to have on one's side." Tataryn sighed. "I am not happy about this, Lucky, but I appreciate you taking care of my daughter. I will spend the week recovering from this, and I will have Kseniya nearby so I can keep a close eye on her. Because I am selfish and weak."

"Because you love her and want her to be happy," you said. Kseniya was obviously elated by the prospect of spending more time with him. It would be good for them both. "Because life is unpredictable, unfair, and offers no guarantees."

Tataryn's lips curved upward in a cynical smile. "There you go, Lucky. Balancing the sweet with the bitter. Charming away what's left of my bad feelings."

"I think you're better at that than I am," you said.

"Oh no, I am a simple soul, no good at flourish or fancy speeches," Tataryn said, shaking his head.

You nearly choked on your tea and Tataryn flashed you that familiar wicked smile.

"Did my fair face make you forget how to swallow?" He asked, straddling that line between suggestive and downright smug.

Coughing, you wiped your face, cursing him under your breath.

Kseniya brought a very blue picture to you, there were stick figures that sort of resembled you, Távio, Kseniya, and Brigitte bobbing in the lake, all smiling, and, inexplicably, the border was lined with cat stickers.

"She made one for Távio too. But you got more stickers," Kseniya said. "She really liked your driving." She giggled in delight.

You couldn't tell if this damn child was fucking with you or not. But you understood wholeheartedly that she was most definitely Tataryn's kid, genetics be damned. "I will treasure it always," you said, solemnly. "Or Torby will cut off my ungrateful head."

Kseniya just laughed, like she thought you were joking.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the lateness. Thanksgiving wiped me out. I cooked seven dishes, hosted 12 people, and it went smoothly, though I'm never inviting that many people over again. Most everyone brought food too, but I was worried and spent the whole time running around trying to be a good hostess and it was exhausting. We have lots of leftovers and my rib roasts was fucking delicious. Hope everyone had a good week.

Getting some elbow and wrist twinging, so a little worried since my new job has a lot of typing. Wearing a brace, but we'll see how that goes. I have terrible posture.
You sat at your desk, going over Lacroix's files on Agent Luuk Bakker. Bakker had been fast-tracked to Dispatch, though his background looked solid enough that he hadn't needed the political patronage.

"Lucky, Ainsley is pacing outside the door," Athena said, her drone hovering by your desk.

"Thanks for the warning." You sat there, reading through Bakker's skill sets. He'd done fine at the job. So it wasn't like Petras had gotten him a position he wasn't able to do. But Bakker had no family, very few friends, and little to no community involvement. Sure, he was an agreeable guy and everyone knew him, because he worked in Dispatch, but...

Well, you knew a fake identity when you saw one. If only because you'd lived it yourself. Sakai, was really Sakai. But Bakker? You were going to have to run some checks, maybe put out feelers with Interpol.

The knock came as you were putting the folder aside.

"Recording?"

"Yes," Athena said.

You straightened up. You could buzz her in, or you could go get the door like a human being. Gabriel liked to remotely open the door, and remain at his desk, looking busy, bored, and annoyed at his visitors. But you weren't going to use his intimidation approach today. Not on Ainsley anyway.

She was already turning around to leave when you opened the door. She timidly glanced over her shoulder, face falling when she saw it was you.

She looked...rough. That wasn't entirely accurate. Ainsley always looked very presentable. She had an expensive haircut, stylish clothes, and professional makeup skills. She was dressed nicely in a navy blue skirt suit, her makeup subtle, and not a hair out of place. But she stood there tense, unable to hold eye contact. And her eyes were bloodshot, like she hadn't been sleeping so well.

"Hey Ainsley," you said, trying to sound friendly. "Everything all right?"

"I..." She bit her lip. "Umm...can we talk?"

"Yeah, come in. Can I get you anything?" You asked, like you had no idea what this was about. Maybe that was a little sadistic of you.
Ainsley followed you into the office, shutting the door behind her. "No, thank you." She gave you a weak smile. "Are you doing all right? I heard about the accident-"

"Yeah," you said. "Just bruised and embarrassed." You sat on your desk, facing her. "What's going on?"

She stood there, shrinking under your gaze, nails digging into the palms of her hands.

"Are you all right? Your uncle apologized, right?" He didn't do anything... unpleasant, did he?" You asked, laying it on thick, because you were petty.

"I can't file a formal complaint against my uncle," Ainsley blurted out. "I talked to my mother. And I can't, Lucky. I can't put my family through the shame and the recriminations." Her voice broke. "The scandal would be too much. What kind of daughter am I, if I put my parents through that?"

You inclined your head back. "I see."

"I mean, you said you'd understand if I couldn't," she continued, like she was daring you to take it back. "Like, he is my uncle. And you're supposed to stick by family. I don't know if you know what it's like to owe someone so much, but Uncle William has always been good to me and-"

"OK," was all you said, no matter how much you wanted to argue. Lacroix said you needed to work on deception. Zenyatta had been a goddamn expert at turning your own words against you with seemingly harmless statements and gently-worded questions. You could learn from that.

"Don't hate me," she squeaked.

"I don't," you said, trying to mask the disgust in your voice. You knew this was coming. You just didn't know why you expected better from Ainsley Petras, of all people. Disappointment made you bitter. It made you mean. You needed to work on that.

"I mean, now that he knows I know, he probably won't try anything, Lucky. I'll talk to him, OK? He'll leave you alone. I'll make sure of it!" She said earnestly, though her smile verged on panicked, and you already knew she wasn't convincing herself.

You crossed your arms. "And anyone else?"

"Anyone else?"

"You know, so after he leaves me alone. What about someone else's personal assistant? Or that green recruit fresh out of boot camp? Or anyone who doesn't have the benefit of you as their friend?" You asked, keeping your voice level. "What then?"

Ainsley flinched. "I...

"Do you really think he'll leave me alone?" You wondered aloud, tilting your head to the side, trying so very hard to not sound cynical. "That was a pretty harsh confrontation. And the Director isn't known for being...forgiving."

Ainsley didn't meet your eyes. "Of course, he will!" She said loudly, like if she just said it enough times, it would be true.

You stared at the ceiling. Lacroix had given you permission to play this how you wanted. Either way, Petras had to go, and if he went, well, there wasn't going to be space for Overwatch
"So...no hard feelings?" Ainsley asked.

"No," you said. "None at all. Not everyone has a friend like you watching their back. And I appreciate you doing your very best to help me out." You kept your words measured and calm, concentrating on maintaining sincerity. Because if this was Ainsley's best, on some level, you had to appreciate that attempt, even if it was ultimately useless and insulting.

Ainsley winced.

You just patted her shoulder. "Thanks, Ainsley."

She stared at you, like she expected a more volatile reaction. You just looked back, trying to channel Captain Amari's serenity.

"You're upset," she said.

"Disappointed," you said. "But I can't fault you. The nail that sticks up, gets hammered down. Risking your family's good name is a lot to ask of anyone," you said, still trying to keep your tone as neutral as possible.

"That's not fair," Ainsley said, obviously picking up on some of your disquiet. "It's not about our "good name." It's about-" She trailed off. "It's about..." She stared past you, her expression lost as she tried to find the argument to justify herself. It was a lot harder when she looked you in the eye and realized, on some level, that it was all wrong.

"It doesn't matter," you said, shaking your head. "I'm not sore about it. I get it. Was there anything else you needed?"

"I...just wanted to see if you needed anything. Your accident freaked out some of the guests." Ainsley gave a nervous laugh. "I mean, I know you're a daredevil and all, but there were kids in there with you-"

The air around you seemed to solidify as you raised your head to meet Ainsley's anxious gaze. Those delicate blue eyes kept flicking away from yours, unable to hold the contact for long. "You keep saying "accident" like I'm known for being that careless, Ainsley. Like I'm some kind of showoff who would put small children at risk. You've seen how I operate. Does that really sound right to you?" You asked, trying to keep your scorn from seeping out.

Ainsley actually took a step backward.

"But if it wasn't an accident, Lucky..." She trailed off, eyes widening as the pieces came together in her mind. Because Ainsley might be oblivious, but she wasn't that stupid. "Are you sure-"

"It wasn't an accident," you enunciated. "I had Távio and two kids under the age of ten with me. You can be damn sure I was being careful."

"But then-" You could see the wheels turning. "Who- It couldn't be. That's ridiculous," she said, her laugh too loud and shrill.

"Indeed." You held eye contact, making no accusations, just confident in what you knew about yourself and what you knew about Director Petras.
Ainsley looked down at her shoes, breathing rapidly, hands clenching and unclenching by her side. "I...I'm sorry. I need to go."

You watched as she spun around and sped out of the office like you'd threatened her. It took you a moment to realize you'd been flexing your fists, and you had to slowly unfurl your fingers.

"Are you sure it was wise to tell her that?" Athena asked.

"No, but Petras has to know that I know that what occurred this weekend was no accident. We can chalk it up to "faulty wiring," or the cyber attack, or some technobabble bullshit, but neither of us are fools. He's going to try to bury me, whether Ainsley knows about it or not."

"What are you expecting Ainsley to do with that information?" Athena asked.

"Expecting? Not much." But maybe, maybe on some level, you were hoping she'd do the right thing. Or the rightest thing she could do in her shoes. What a fool you were.

"I didn't know," Riggs said, shoulders drawn up. His hair had grown out, and he wore it in a pretty black braid. Riggs dressed in office business casual, khaki pants, Blackwatch Henley, clean-shaven, and very neat. "I should have. I really should have. I mean, the Director isn't known for mentoring people. He's a consummate politician. But I... I guess I got caught up in it."

"He can be very charming," you agreed. "He didn't get to where he's at by showing off his uglier tendencies. Most people don't have to look beyond the mask."

"I should have known," Riggs muttered, the words barely squeaking past his teeth. He sat in front of your desk, hands jammed in his pockets as he stared at his shoes. "I mean, he's a bigshot political appointee. I'm just...a tech. But he'd stop by, joke with me, and ask me about how my work was going." Riggs gave you a rueful smile. "I was flattered. He'd praise my skills and call me "son." He never did that to Ziv."

You snorted, pitying the old fool who tried to call Ziv "son." In fact, you'd pay to see Petras do that. But then Ziv had a very combative relationship with his father. Riggs didn't have a father in the picture.

"I'm not like Ziv, you know. I'm a good programmer, but I'm not a combat tech like he is," Riggs sighed.

Ziv was shit in a straight fight, but he was good in the field. And he could commandeer, blow up, and otherwise wreck enemy tech. Riggs maintained the Blackwatch systems and cyber defenses. His self-assessment wasn't really fair, because he was a competent hacker.

"Sometimes I worry that people don't take me seriously. I mean I can't tell people off like he does," Riggs said, cheeks pink. "He's amazing."

"I am extremely grateful that you have more self control than he does," you told him, knowing that your regard meant something to him. "Do you know how far he pushes people? I have a discretionary budget solely for bribing, blackmailing, and intimidating people into leave him alone. He's very good at making combat-trained agents violently annoyed with him."

Riggs just laughed. "Ziv? Noooooo. Ziv's so nice. He never gives me crap about my lousy sparring scores and he always shares his snacks."
You stared, wondering if Riggs was really *that* goddamn oblivious.

"Plus he's rarely in my office, usually yells at Ronald instead, and really likes my mom's cookies," Riggs said with a cheeky wink. Ronald was an Overwatch IT guy. You didn't deal with him much.

You sighed, rubbing your forehead. You cooked for that ungrateful bastard all the time and it didn't get you a reprieve from his awful attitude. But all Riggs had to do was act innocent and give him cookies, and Ziv was nice. What the hell? It was because Riggs was cute, you realized. Nothing had ever come of the dinner dates they'd been on, probably because Ziv was so enamored with Lacroix, but it seemed Ziv maintained some fondness for the guy.

"Sorry I didn't get a chance to introduce you to Mom," Riggs said meekly. "I think she was a little put off by the hovercraft crash, but I reassured her that it wasn't your fault. I don't know if she believed me."

"It's OK, I'm used to it. I'm a convenient scapegoat." You stared down at your desk. "I'm just glad no one else got hurt."

"...I know it wasn't an accident. And I know you weren't being careless. And given the footage Agent Lacroix showed me, it's...hard not to draw conclusions about the Director's involvement," Riggs said. He pressed his lips together into a thin line. "I'm really sorry about everything."

"I know. It was an honest mistake."

"I uh...I can tell you what I told Agent Lacroix. I shared gossip with him, but I never gave up any compartmentalized secrets. Never. And he was really curious about our defensive capabilities. He didn't seem that interested in Athena, but sometimes he asked questions about AI." Riggs shifted nervously in his seat. "I almost slipped up and told him about her a few times. But I didn't. I followed the rules."

"I'm glad," you said, relief relaxing your shoulders. For a black ops hacker, Riggs was weirdly law-abiding. You'd done more research after Lacroix revealed he was Petras' Blackwatch source, but either Riggs was a fucking genius mole, or something was broken in his head. Well, it was Blackwatch; none of you were normal, and there were already too many flippant rulebreakers who were out of touch with their feelings, yourself included. Riggs was a refreshing change from that stereotype.

"He wanted to know about some really specific things though. I mean, I never got the impression he was a real tech savvy guy, but he asked a lot of questions about experimental projects, mostly military stuff. I couldn't really answer much beyond the cyber warfare questions."

"Such as?"

"Had we recovered anything like a god program? Could we store something like that securely? Could I explain a weirdly specific concept in layman's terms?"

You nodded. "I see."

"There was a lot of experimental stuff. I mean, I know Athena has some really odd limits, and no one but Winston is cleared to fully examine her hardware...but the Director was talking about highly potent god program level stuff."

You sat there for a moment. "Go on."
"Well, you know most first and second gen omnic bodies haven't achieved true awareness. That's not meant to dehumanize them, that's just the limits of their processing power," Riggs said, a little nervous. "Like the older OR-14s and Bastions just don't have the hardware to go very far beyond their programming. When the omniums went bad during the Omnic Crisis, there were higher levels of sentient omnics coming out of the hostile factories. And not all of them were hostile, despite their origins. The omniums were just building better omnics period."

"Still with you," you said, because you already knew that.

Riggs stared off into space for a moment. "The civilian models have a higher rate of sentience. Well, that could be a questioner's bias too. Most people aren't going to walk up to a Titan and ask how it feels today. And maybe that's why they're so damn grumpy. Because no one treats them with any manners. We never really asked the combat mechs if they wanna be violent, you know? Maybe they'd rather program, or monitor gravity wells, or bird watch. Without high-level Omnicode implants and proper translation tools, we really have no way of knowing."

You cleared your throat, not really wanting to go down that rabbit hole. "How does Athena tie into this?" Because you distinctly remembered the fact that Feng was stumped over Athena.

"I don't know," Riggs said with a shrug. "Maybe she doesn't. Just that he was asking questions, but it really seemed like he was looking for information on some kind of super weapon. Also, I've not worked with a lot of mainframe AIs. Sorry, it's not my specialty," he said, sounding embarrassed. "But whatever Winston's cooked up, it has to be really advanced to house her. Way beyond what we have in the server rooms. She's got some serious power and normally I'd worry about her overextending herself, especially after yesterday, but..." Riggs trailed off. "But, she handled it. Like a pro." A smile slowly spread across his face. "I know she had help. Maybe that's it."

"What?" You asked, trying to keep your frustration out of your voice.

"Athena has been putting more and more awareness nodes into our drone fleet. She isn't just a simple program or line of code. She's a hive. And the more connections she has, the more complex she gets."

You sat back, dread building in your stomach.

"I know we have a "visiting AI" and a "Shambali monk" on the premises," Riggs said. "Did you bring them in to jumpstart her? Because if she starts cloning some of their processes, she could... Well, there is the hardware restriction. Too much and it would become a massive strain on the system," Riggs said, half thinking aloud to himself.

"If she starts cloning their processes, then what?" You asked sharply.

"I don't know," Riggs said. "But her capabilities would increase exponentially provided she had the hardware to contain and process all that data. Is that why you brought them in, ma'am?"

"...No," you said, with heavy sigh. Because Athena powering herself up exponentially had never occurred to you.

"Oh." Riggs blinked. "Umm, is it true then that the monk is joining Overwatch as a real agent?"

"Yup. Do you think that's going to be a problem?"

"Oh no, I think it's great!" Riggs smiled. "It's really past time!"
"Agreed," you said. "He put Agent Daniels back together, saved several civilians, and has helped me out on numerous occasions. If anyone starts complaining about his...admittance, you wouldn't mind reminding them of these facts? Or you can send them to me."

"Oh no, I don't mind at all!" Riggs shook his head vigorously.

"I mean, if they think he's preachy, annoying, and didactic to fault and they dislike him because of it, fair enough. That's all true. But they don't get hate on him because he's shiny, made of metal, and sometimes glows in the dark."

Riggs blinked. "I see. Umm, that sounds like personal experience talking. Is everything all right between you two?"

"I actually like Tekhartha Zenyatta," you said, testing the words on your tongue, and they didn't feel wrong. "But he's a real pain in the ass for all the reasons I just listed. And you can tell him I said that."

"Oh no, I really couldn't," Riggs winced, shaking his head. "No. Sorry. Not me."

You sighed, really wondering how Riggs ended up in Blackwatch.

"He put in an application to Overwatch, but Blackwatch needed a tech, and I vetted him personally," Gabriel said, giving you a wry look. "And he's my favorite hacker in the entire world, because he stays in his lane, works quietly, and doesn't start shit with the rest of my agents."

"...That was less dramatic than I was expecting," you said, actually having pictured Gabriel rescuing poor Riggs from sadistic terrorists and Riggs agreeing to work for Blackwatch out of breathless gratitude.

"Yes, well, Mihret brings enough drama for everyone," Gabriel said, stretching in his chair. He grumbled something under his breath and beckoned you over.

Rolling your eyes, you wrapped up your supply order, shut off your screen, and got out of your chair.

"I do appreciate you putting up with Ziv."

"I've seen what happens to agents who don't," Gabriel said, wiggling his eyebrows at you with mock severity. "They get a personal visit from you."

You snorted. "I'm always professional and polite, and I never swing first."

A skeptical smile crept across Gabriel's face. "Is that so?"

"Uh-huh." You sat on his desk. "Anyway, I'm the lesser evil. Have you seen what happens to the people who really piss Ziv off?"

"I'm skeptical that he slashed Jones' credit score; the ass obviously had terrible impulse control. And Cooper could have just slipped up and accidentally shared his private browser history with all his potential employers," Gabriel said without batting an eye.

You blinked. So maybe you had leaked their sexual misconduct reports to their respective parents after the events of the Overwatch Ball last year, but you hadn't realized that Ziv had taken
it a step further. Of course he had. The only shocker was that he hadn't bragged about it to you.

"I put up with Mihret because he's exceptionally skilled," Gabriel said, wrinkling his nose, like it hurt to admit something nice about Ziv. "And because you'll do terrible things to me if I don't."

You weren't fooled. You cupped his face, smiling as your fingers stroked his beard. "I love you too."

Gabriel's expression softened, a small smile turning up the corners of his mouth. "Mihret's rabid loyalty to you makes him somewhat more tolerable, but it's barely worth mentioning."

You kissed him, a burst of emotion welling in your chest. He pulled you into his lap, hands around your waist as you perched there carefully, wondering if the chair would hold.

"I appreciate it," you said.

"You better," he growled, kissing you again. "Because he's an irritating little shit who gives Michael a run for his money."

"Michael's not that bad."

"Any more," Gabriel acknowledged. "But you've only been around him for a few days at a time."

That might change. You winced, and pressed your forehead against Gabriel's. "Lacroix really thinks I'm going to have to go MIA."

His grip on you tightened briefly. "I know. I don't like it, but...his plan does make sense. Give it a week, corazon. We'll have a better idea then."

"I know. Just...I don't want to. I know I might need to. I know if Petras figures out that he can leverage me against you, or Jack, then things will get worse. And it's not like I don't know how to live under the radar."

"Jack has already been planning some trips to east Asia. Particularly cities with a strong On Sing presence. We're not abandoning you."

You nodded. "I admit, I...worry about the distance. Not just "what if something happens and I'm not there?" I mean that keeps me up at night too. But also the strain on our relationship."

Gabriel rubbed your back, sitting in silence for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "Jack and I have managed long distance. We've gone months at a time without seeing each other. It wasn't good for us, but we held it together. Though we did have that break between SEP and Kandahar. It is hard. But this isn't permanent. A few months tops. And we'll have visits. Think of them as mini-vacations."

You nodded, trying to swallow the lump in your throat.

"I'm more worried about you meeting some brilliant, insane, and incredibly attractive mobster and falling into a lifestyle of decadence, violence, and sexy tattoos."

You nearly choked on your tongue. "What?"

"It could happen," Gabriel teased. "I'm sure you could resist diamonds, fancy weapons, and
even expensive restaurants. But once they started bringing you extravagant cakes, well..."

    You laughed. "You're awful. I wouldn't-"

    "I know." Gabriel kissed you again, soothing the outrage in your belly. "Just like I know we can handle this. I trust you. I love you. I know you feel the same way. And I know Jack feels the same way." He exhaled slowly. "After all this time, we're smart enough to talk about our problems now, right?"

    "Yeah," you said, still worrying about circumstances. The Strike Commander and the Blackwatch Commander held high-pressure positions. They were often overworked and had enough trouble making time for each other when you all lived in the same complex. Going to another continent was going to make that even more difficult.

    "Stop panicking and start working on solutions instead," Gabriel said, flicking your nose.

    You bit your lip, not denying that you'd been thinking the worst. "So I was reading some of the Petras family transcripts. The Director seems to think Jack has something important in his possession."

    Gabriel frowned. "I know. But Jack can't give him what he wants. It's not possible any more."

    You raised a brow. "What is he looking for?"

    Gabriel narrowed his eyes at you. "Are you trying to pump me for information, chica?"

    "Trying to figure out what he's looking for," you said, not quite denying the assertion. "I get that he wants something Jack doesn't have in his possession. But he's going to use different methods based on whether or not Jack has a prototype bomb, versus a rare albino marmoset, versus an embarrassing Petras Sex tape in his possession."

    Gabriel snorted. "You are skirting a line."

    "I'm worried," you said, because that was the truth and it showed on your face.

    Gabriel sighed. "I don't know what Petras thinks he can get from Jack. I know what it is Jack had. And I know Jack doesn't have it any more. And I know that you aren't cleared for that information. All that you need to know is that it is most likely coordinates."

    "To buried treasure?"

    "Sure," Gabriel said, giving you a sour look. "Now stop asking."

    Sighing, you realized you'd pushed too hard on his good will and affection. You tucked your head against his shoulder. "Sorry. I'm just anxious."

    "I know," Gabriel sighed. "Gérard warned me that you'd pry. And he's warned Jack too."

    "...I know this is separate from our relationship, but...we're all tangled up in it. I just..."

    "I know," Gabriel said. "You're meddlesome and ridiculous. I know you're going to go ask Jack for more details later on." He shook his head. "He won't tell you either. Because you don't need to know. There's nothing you can do with that information. You'd be in more danger if you did know. So just trust us."
"I do. I just want to do something. Set the right bait. Get all the evidence. Nail Petras for his sins," you grumbled, not quite feeling grateful that he didn't try to order you not to ask questions. "Waiting is not what I need to be doing now."

Gabriel's hand rested on your back. "I know. And I'm not going to tell you not to ask Jack. But I am going to warn you against pushing. You do that, and we'll let Ana handle you."

"Ouch," you muttered, straightening up.

"It's a hard limit," Gabriel said, no longer smiling. "Think Red Kandahar."

"OK," you said, because you understood that. Because even if you didn't agree, Jack, Gérard, and Gabriel all thought you didn't need to know. And maybe you trusted their combined, if annoyingly stubborn, judgment. Fine, you didn't need to know what it was. But why did Petras seem so convinced that Jack had these mysterious coordinates? That was another question altogether and practically more important.

"That's just like him," Ziv scowled. "He's such an arbitrary bastard."

"Did you mean Gabriel or Lacroix?" You asked, sitting in the chair across from his desk, sipping the tea he'd made you. It wasn't as good as Jesse's or even Tataryn's, and definitely not Captain Amari's, but you knew better than to say that.

"Both," Ziv said. "But I meant Reyes." He scowled. "I'm surprised you didn't come up against this earlier. You know he has secrets."

"We all do," you said with a shrug. "Lacroix is a veritable depository of conspiracies and lies. Or has he started sharing the juicy tidbits with you? Like Top Secret pillow talk? Or maybe Amélie has...?"

Ziv glared at you. "He just laughs and tells me I don't need to know, then distracts me with some kind of disgustingly smooth compliment or terribly important mission." Ziv dropped his gaze. "But I understand compartmentalized intelligence. I know I don't need to know, and I trust him." The last declaration was said quietly.

"Same," you said. "Except about Gabriel and not Lacroix." You set your cup on its saucer. "Do you have any idea what Petras is looking for?"

"Some kind of weapon." Ziv shrugged. "Morrison isn't the boy scout everyone thinks he is, but he isn't the kind to hoard secrets for his own gain. I don't think Petras gets that. It's too much for his reptilian brain."

"That's really not fair to tortoises, lizards, and Mongolian Death Worms."

Ziv snorted. "You're right. His spider-like brain. It's probably in spilling out of his body cavity and bulging into his legs, like real spiders."

"...That's horrifying," you said.

Ziv gave a satisfied nod. "I know. But anyway, he probably thinks Morrison is biding his time, waiting to use whatever it is as a means to get ahead."
You nodded, thinking back on what you already knew. "Talked to Riggs today. Thought he was going to collapse under the weight of his unduly burdened conscience."

Ziv gave you a sour look. "Don't make fun of him. He's really upset about this."

You rolled your eyes at Ziv's newfound empathy. "I'm not making fun of him."

Ziv pulled up a screen with transcripts. "I was there for his debrief with Lacroix. He actually did go into some pretty technical detail. We think Petras has someone feeding him data, but he doesn't have the knowledge to understand it all and either doesn't want them to know that, or is stealing parts of the data on his own and trying to figure it out himself, hence his cozying up to Riggs." Ziv scrolled through some pages. "Let's see, he asked about weaponry, sure, and Riggs can give all kinds of weapons specs, but he's not privy to the experimental prototypes coming down the pipeline."

"Didn't realize he could shoot," you said, because you rarely saw Riggs on the range.

"He's worse than me," Ziv sighed shaking his head. "But he likes memorizing facts about weapons. Like some kind of precocious preteen." He continued looking through the transcripts. "There are some interesting notes about quantum swarm kernels, advancements in evolutionary multimodal optimization, and spiraled omnicode matrices. Get that glazed look of your face. I'll make it easy for you: that's all high-tier AI stuff."

"Any thoughts on the big secrets, Athena?" You glanced at the drone at rest in the chair behind you.

"Based on your clearances, I am not authorized to provide any useful commentary," she said hesitantly. "But knowing what I do know...I must agree with the leadership position on this. I, of course, believe you both to be utterly trustworthy. But this isn't a personal judgment."

"Yeah, I get that." You waived your hand. "Just bitching about it to Ziv because he has the same disregard for authority that I do."

"Worse actually," Ziv said. "Because I'm only sleeping with one of my bosses. You can't claim to be a rebel when you're banging the goddamn golden boy of Overwatch."

"...You really are the worst," you said, rolling your eyes. You looked around, not missing the little framed picture of Isha on his desk. She had her mouth wide open, and it looked like she was smiling. It made you smile too. "Amélie is probably going to get a murderbird, you know."

"I heard," Ziv said. He gave you a sardonic look. "Feng's batshit insane, but I guess she's been a decent friend to you. Amélie likes her too," he grumbled. "But Zheng still gives me the creeps."

"I quite like them both," Athena said. "Though Zheng is considerably more reserved than Feng. She does share more in Omnicode, though it isn't her first language and some of her phrasings are quite odd. Poetic, but strange."

"Huh," you said. "You linking up with Zenyatta too?"

"There has been data exchanged. Nothing improper. I am well aware of the limits on his clearances," Athena said primly. "But his view of the Iris is quite beautiful. None of my sensors can replicate that."

Ziv raised a brow. "Is that where you got the idea for the new shields?"
"Yes. One of his Omnicode passages offers a static meditation process that amplifies itself with each repetition. Like charging a weapon, though there is a minimal energy expended. I haven't quite worked out all the effects, but it holds a lot of potential as a latent shielding technique. One that would free up a great deal more of my processing power. Zheng has also inspired me to repurpose some of her less routine processes as defensive measures. I can go into detail about the parallels between Daoist philosophies and energy-saving slipstreaming, but I'm afraid I will just bore Lucky."

You and Ziv locked eyes for a long moment. He gave you a shrewd smile, eyes bright.

"Do you think...?" His voice wavered.

"It would fit," you said slowly, nodding to yourself.

"I will work under that assumption then," Ziv said, looking pleased.

"What did I miss?" Athena asked pleasantly, and you wondered just how intentional that speech had been.

"Nothing," you said. "We're just playing catch up."

"Yeah," Ziv said hesitantly. "I guess I'll have to be nicer to Feng. She did take Bayan in, and he actually seems to be doing pretty well, despite his three raptor babies. By the way, Athena, thanks for the assist."

"You're welcome," she said, sounding a little confused. "But that was ages ago."

"Human minds work in mysterious ways," you said, smiling at Ziv.

"OK, well I'll prepare a questionnaire with your favorite colors, activities, and foods. Think of it like summer camp, only without mosquitoes, stupid songs, and serial killers," Feng said brightly. "I've already sent Jack a list of romantic getaways that he can visit on a weekend!"

Just what kind of summer camps had Feng gone to? You know what? You were better off not asking.

Jack rubbed the back of his neck, cheeks pink. "Feng, I already told you that I can't be seen at the "Mother of All Love Hotels" or whatever its name is."

"Just dye your hair," she said with a shrug. "Or tell everyone you're a Jack Morrison cosplayer! There were other places on the list too, you know. Family-friendly places." The "you, sexual deviant, you" went unsaid, but you could see how badly Feng wanted to say it.

You snorted at Jack's disgruntled expression. He'd left off the iconic coat and just wore his black fatigues, holsters tight against his chest.

"Thanks Feng." You held Isha in your arms and she gave a surly squeak as Feng patted her face.

"Goodbye Raptor-Niece. I'm going home where the murderbirds actually like me!" She grinned. "But I'll still miss you!"

Isha grumbled and turned her head, burying her face in your chest.
"Why does she hate me so much?" Feng hissed at the Zheng drone.

"She's probably still scarred from the point where you tried to take her out of Lucky's arms," Genji said. "You were the very first person who tried to separate them. Isha has an impressive memory and holds grudges. She is not a meek forgiving creature."

"I was offering to hold her while Lucky cleaned up! I thought she'd be grateful! I was going to feed her while Lucky scrubbed raptor poop off her pants!"

"She doesn't see it that way," Genji said, sounding amused.

Feng muttered something under her breath. "Fine, I'll be extra nice and one day she might forgive me." She shot Isha a determined look. "Just you wait, murderbird. I will be the best damn Aunt Feng you could ever dream of!" She struck a pose, but Isha refused to look up, and you sighed, feeling just a little bad for your friend.

Genji and Hanzo lingered in the waiting room, actually showing up to bid Feng farewell. Jesse had come along with Bandit, and Feng spent more time on the dog than anyone else. To your surprise, Amélie was there too.

Feng leaned over to whisper something in Genji's ear. He actually laughed and patted her shoulder. Hanzo frowned as she made a very respectful bow, said something in Japanese with somber tones, and then he had to return the gesture. She added something else and his expression softened briefly, before his scowl returned and he made that familiar harrumphing noise.

Feng and Amélie did the triple cheek kiss gracefully and Feng giggled. "All right guys! Send me some free weekends. You're all invited! Hell, bring whoever you want. Like that sexy blonde guy," she said, grinning at you. "Or your kid sidekick. Mi casa es vuestra casa!"

"He's not my-"

"La la la can't hear you! I must go! Love you all bunches!" Feng sang as she walked away waving vigorously, the Zheng drone hovering beside her.

The Shimadas disappeared first, but Amélie lingered, fussing over Bandit while Jesse squirmed uncomfortably. You waved as you left, walking alongside Jack, a little surprised that he'd already asked Feng for vacation spots.

"I've got some cake and pizza in my quarters," Jack said. "Gabe's having dinner with Catriona, and I figured we should give them time to catch up."

"You're just scared of her."

"Yes," Jack nodded, face utterly stoic. "And so are you. Notice that I made excuses for you too, instead of abandoning you to her machinations. You should show some more gratitude, agent."

You put a hand over your mouth to stifle the laugh, because while Catriona was intimidating, she didn't seem quite as bad as Jane.

The two of you walked in companionable silence back to his quarters. Isha snuggled against your chest, yawning. There was a lot to say, but you needed privacy. Once you got back to the room, you could speak freely.

Jack got the door and immediately kicked off his boots and flopped over on the couch. Athena and some of the techs had already done a sweep. No one had left any unpleasant surprises
or surveillance devices. Not that you expected them too, but it would be negligent not to check.

"I'm relieved to have my room back. I mean, Feng was respectful and all, but it's weird sharing space with a Zheng drone," Jack said as you shut the door. He sighed and stretched out on his back, running his fingers through his hair. You set Isha down and she sauntered off to the bedroom, probably to sleep on her dog. Then you crawled onto his chest, sighing happily as he began to rub your shoulders.

"You OK?" Jack asked.

"Holding up," you said. You paused, meeting his worried eyes. "Got some questions, though I don't want to push too hard."

"Gérard already warned me," Jack said with a chuckle. "Ask. I'll tell you what I can: which is limited. But it's better to get this all out of the way."

"Why does Petras think you know where this thing is?"

Jack blinked, obviously expecting you to ask what the thing was. "I...huh." He reclined, hands behind his head, elbows akimbo. "I suppose it's because I wrote the post-mission report."

You raised your head, watching Jack's face.

"This was toward the end of the Omnic Crisis. Gabriel was still in charge, but we'd split up for this mission. Same location, different routes of egress. Gabriel, Ana, Torby, and Reinhardt had taken one objective. Liao, Gérard, Niang, and I were on the other." He sighed.

You blinked. You'd heard of Liao. Everyone had. But Niang? The name was on the wall. Aja Niang, if you remembered correctly. You hadn't heard this story, but then Gabriel didn't like retelling the bad ones. You didn't blame him.

"We were cleaning up one of the last big holdout omniums that was still manufacturing hostile troops." Jack's gaze was distant. "As you might have guessed, Niang and Liao didn't make it. Gérard and I almost didn't either. But...we found something, and it gave us the advantage. We wouldn't have survived otherwise. Hell, without it, I don't know if Gabe's team would have made it out of there either."

You lay there, eyes closed. "Petras thinks it's a weapon."

"I know. And I'm sure he's sent people to the wreckage of the omnium. But we destroyed it pretty thoroughly. Torby set the charges, extra special ones. But I...wrote the report referencing what we saw down there. I left things out, because not all of what happened needed to be in the official report. But something caught Petras' attention. I suspect he had some hint of what to look for."

"So the location was underwater?" You raised your head.

"Still is. At the bottom of the Indian Ocean," Jack said. "What's left of it anyway." He shrugged. "I handled it. Not Gérard. And not Niang or Liao. But they're long dead anyway." Jack stroked your hair, his voice wobbling slightly. "I wrote in the report that I destroyed all hostile weaponry. But he doesn't believe me. I suspect he was hoping Gabriel could tell him otherwise.

You sighed, not letting yourself wonder if Gabriel would have held onto forbidden tech.

"OK," you said. "I think that answers my question."
Jack nuzzled your cheek. "You going to stop hounding everyone about it now?"

"Maybe," you murmured as he folded your hands in his. "For now I'll just focus on being Feng's roommate. Isha will fucking hate it and she'll miss everyone terribly. And I'm afraid of what she's going to learn from Bayan's crew."

Jack squeezed your fingers. "It's not inevitable."

"Easier to brace for it," you said. "You're already looking into reasons to travel."

"Not really," Jack said. "I have the most important one right here. Unless Gabe decides to go AWOL with you. Then I'll have the two most important reasons over there." He gave you a gentle smile.

You bit your lip. "Jack-" You felt your face scrunch up, ugly and pinched. You buried it in his chest, refusing to look at him.

"Three, if we count Isha." His voice was soft, and he kissed the top of your head, hands rubbing comforting circles on your back. "I know it's hard. But if it comes to that, we'll make it work. I promise."

Nodding, you clung to him, memorizing the warmth of his body against yours.

Chapter End Notes

So, my repeated strain injury is not getting better. I do type 8+ hours a day at work, so that's not helping. I've cut back on writing because I need my arms to heal. I'm not sure what happened, but my right wrist, elbow, and forearm are all giving me sharp pains during/after typing, and my left wrist and elbow have a milder version. I'm guessing tendonitis, could be carpal tunnel, but the symptoms skew more toward tennis elbow injuries. For the next few weeks, I'm going to be bumping updates back, maybe once a week, and see how I'm doing. I technically don't have insurance right now, and since I just started the job, I can't exactly ask for a bunch of time off. Got to make sure I start healing.

I am taking the NSAID naproxen/Aleve and icing trouble spots. I'm doing PT exercises and stretches. I'm wearing an elbow stabilizing cuff and wrist brace when I type. I have an ergonomic keyboard and am working on my posture. Earlier in the week, doing all those things seemed to help. I didn't take any Aleve yesterday and I'm paying for it now. It's less about the pain reduction and more about reducing inflammation. So I'll try taking it on work days and resting on the weekend. Sorry, guys.

As for having a big Thanksgiving, I've lived in giant families. Twelve people isn't a lot for a family gathering. Twelve people is a lot if you're the only one in the house cooking and making sure everyone has food/drinks. I was cooking, getting the table set, making plates, getting cups and drinks, and making sure people had what they needed mostly on my own and kind of all at the same time. I did a lot of the cleaning up too, though one of my friends did half the dishes. So I figured I'd clarify that. :P

Need to go get ready for work. On second shift and still trying to figure out how to
better allot my time. (Sleeping all day and staying up all night probably isn't a good thing? IDK)
You groaned as someone giggled in your ear. Warm hands squeezed your breasts, and your eyes flew open. You were in Jack's bed, nestled between your lovers.

"Soft," Jack murmured sleepily, chuckled a few times, and then buried his face in your hair. He held you from behind, his hands kneading your chest insistently.

"Seriously?" You groaned.

He just made a sleepy humming noise.

"He does it to me too," Gabriel murmured, reaching out to stroke your cheek. "He probably is still asleep."

"Your pecs aren't soft," you yawned.

"No, he just says "tiddies" to me." Gabriel kissed your nose.

You snorted.

"Soft tiddies," Jack chuckled, nuzzling the back of your neck, still fondling you. He curled closer to your back, one leg thrown over your hips. "Mmmm."

You gave a tolerant sigh, rolling your eyes.

Gabriel scooted closer, one hand on Jack's thigh, the other resting on top of your hands.

"Want me to move him?"

"No," you said, as Jack snuggled even closer. "Going to have to pee soon, but I can lay here just a little while longer."

"Did you want to talk about...strategies?" Gabriel asked, fingers rubbing your knuckles. "I've got a couple ideas about-"

"Not right now," you said, raising his hand and kissing it. "Later. Right now I just want to lie here with the two of you."

Gabriel closed his eyes, smiling as you clasped his hand between yours. "All right, corazon. Whatever you want."

You lay there for a moment, listening to Jack's breathing. "So...in theory, if we had a house." You stopped, realizing that your idea might not go over well.
"I'm listening," Gabriel said, opening his eyes. "Go on."

You swallowed. "I kind of think we should have separate bedrooms on top of the master bedroom. For when we need our own space. That doesn't mean I don't like being with you, but--"

You looked down, feeling a little silly. That was four bedrooms total. And that kind of space was quite the luxury. Honestly, this was all a pipedream. You didn't have to ruin your morning in bed by bringing up your hang-ups.

"It's not a bad idea. If we can't manage that many bedrooms, then at least we could have separate personal spaces. Maybe have a foldout couch in my "sewing room." You could have your own bedroom to fill with your ill-gotten gains, and to give the rest of us plausible deniability. Jack can share with Isha. She's neater than he is anyway, though long-term she might get frustrated with him." Gabriel laughed.

You blinked.

"We're adults, corazon. And there are points when we all need time alone. I know how difficult I can be when I'm out of sorts, and the same goes for Jack. Having that option isn't rejection. It's taking into consideration our own shortcomings and trying to manage them. Don't look so worried." Gabriel kissed your forehead.

"I...yes," you said, blood rushing to your face. "Just not used to talking about it."

"You're doing fine. I'm glad you've thought about this. Jack would just barrel in full throttle and within a week we'd be clashing over all the dirty laundry he's strewn across the floor. I'd probably try to lay in bed to calm myself down, but then seeing all his ugly white socks would just make me angrier. And then you'd be hiding in the coat closet, trying to avoid both of us, while you made evil revenge plans, because the confined space would just make you meaner--"

You smiled.

"It's a good idea. We could invade Jack's home office, bend him over his desk, and really have some fun. We could have all kinds of sleepovers too, where we all cram into one small bedroom just for sexy visits. Keep things fresh." Gabriel rubbed your arms. "I like it."

"Me too," Jack murmured in your ear, his hands still cupping your breasts. "I don't mind sharing with Isha. She doesn't have a problem with my socks."

You swore, smacking his hands and he laughed in delight.

"Ow! Baby, stop that! What's gotten into you?"

"You were faking this whole time!" You scowled, turning your head, and finding yourself nose to nose with him.

Jack gave you a silly grin and kissed you then, completely unapologetic. "Not true sweetheart. I was waking up to soft tiddies, and listening to you talk about the future made it all the better. Want to have a house with you and Gabe. Want you both to be comfortable. And want to be able to throw my socks on the floor."

"Isha will steal them," you said.

Jack just kissed you again. "I can buy more."

"You can't wear them with sandals," you scowled. "I'm serious, Jack."
"Oh," you said, staring at Bakker's mugshot, now understanding exactly why that sly French bastard had assigned you this one. The former dispatcher was a mess, looking like he'd gotten into it with the wrong end of an industrial fan. He'd suffered numerous lacerations to his face, arms, and chest. And most tellingly, he'd lost an eye in the firefight.

Isha's name wasn't mentioned in the actual report. In fact, your murderbird had not received official credit for her...assistance. But you knew raptor slashes when you saw them. You'd bandaged enough of them, mostly on yourself. Taking in Bakker's ugly gouges and deep lacerations, you shook your head slowly. Isha had held back on you, and you never realized how much till now.

Your sweet little maiming-bird sat on the couch, playing with her tablet. Winston and Athena had put a combination of educational children's games, shows, and learning modules on the device. But Isha was playing Frogger, though she still seemed to prefer drawing her squiggly little pictures. At the moment, she was running the poor frog into the cars, just to watch it get smashed, and then chuffing loudly at the animation. You'd already shown her how to navigate the puzzle, dodging cars and staying on logs, but she currently seemed more interested in smashing frogs. You'd also restricted her movie access right now, because someone had loaded a bunch of wildlife videos full of extremely violent kills on there for her. The last thing you needed right now was for her to get more inspiration for maiming and ambushing.

Bakker was still undergoing medical treatment, and you'd run his DNA, prints, and other biometrics through a variety of databases. The prints and face hadn't gotten any matches, but searching through the newly-shared Numbani intel database got you a retinal scan and DNA link to a former NIA operative, presumed killed during the Omnic Crisis. Luuk Bakker was possibly Renier Van Wyck. Though, you couldn't just take the name on the sample and accept it. Confirming that Bakker really was Van Wyck would take more effort. The faces didn't quite match, though there were all kinds of cosmetic procedures that one could undergo to change their identity. And the DNA sample listed as Van Wyck's could have been falsified. You were going to have to send someone to acquire a control sample of Van Wyck's DNA. Still shaking your head, you leaned back in your chair.

"Isha, did you gouge this guy?"

Isha looked up from her tablet as you pointed at your screen, zooming in on Bakker's face.

Isha trilled, flapping her wings. She bobbed her head, flashing her teeth and flaunting her stabbing toe claws.

"...OK," you said. "Good job." You weren't sure if you sounded sincere, but Isha hopped off the couch and strutted over to you. You picked her up and set her on your lap. She chattered at you, making clawing motions with her delicate little hands. "Yeah, you sure showed him." Isha was about twenty five pounds and still growing, her tail making up half of her length. Velociraptor or not, Bakker got his face torn up by a little bird less than one fifth his size. You stroked her head, expression softening as she gripped your hands and rubbed her snout on you.

The door opened and Gabriel slammed the door shut behind himself, muttering under his
breath.

Isha stretched her neck out, watching him with curious eyes as he stomped to his desk, tossing a few folders to the side.

You zoomed in on the picture of Bakker.

"So...did she eat it?" You asked, pointing to Bakker's bandaged right eye.

Gabriel paused, looking up, his eyes narrowing in concentration. And then he snorted and began to chuckle. He gave you a wide, almost boyish grin. "What do you think?"

"I can't believe you let her eat it," you said, wrinkling your nose. "What if she develops a taste for them?"

"She prefers pizza," Gabriel said. "And for that I blame Jack." He paused. "She has a pretty good palate. She likes meat, which is to be expected, but she eats a healthy amount of fruit too. The figs were all Mihret, weren't they?"

"Yes, and you're not distracting me that easily," you said. "Is there footage?"

Gabriel chuckled. "No. But I witnessed it. She dropped out of the vents onto him; that's how he got all the defensive wounds on his forearms. He managed to grab her, and that's when she pulled her eye trick." He leaned over your desk and rubbed her snout. "There was a lot of screaming. She hit, yanked her claw and target out with a pop, and crushed it in front of him."

You blinked.

"She was going to eat it," Gabriel admitted with a smile and a shrug. "But I told her to drop it. Because we don't know what kind of places that scumbag has been, do we, *paloma*?" He chuckled her under the chin. "No, your mom would be so upset if you got sick from eating bad guys."

Isha climbed onto your desk and head butted Gabriel. He laughed, bad mood dissipated, as he petted her.

"Lacroix assigned Bakker to me and Amélie, but I think he was counting on her involvement." You shook your head. It made sense, but you'd really been expecting something...different.

"Sounds right. Bakker screamed a lot. He was pretty useless after she was done with him. You guys can play good cop, bad cop, and eyeball-smashing murderbird."

"That occurred to me," you sighed, still not entirely comfortable with the thought of involving your pet in Blackwatch business. "It's a relief to hear that she didn't actually eat his eye."

"She licked her talons afterward, but..."

"Goddamnit," you said, resting your face in your palm.

"But Feng, Zheng, and Angela have issued her a clean bill of health. Nothing to worry about," Gabriel said. "She's fine."

"She licks you with that mouth-"

"She licks Jack with that mouth," Gabriel corrected.
"And who kisses Jack?" You asked, rolling your eyes.

Gabriel just shrugged. "I've had worse things than human vitreous on my face, corazon. It didn't hurt us."

You almost asked what. But then you glanced at Isha, who'd cuddled up to Gabriel, nibbling on his hoodie. Shaking your head, you knew this was an argument no one would win. "Just...I don't want her getting cravings for human flesh or catching any weird diseases."

Gabriel chuckled, leaning over your desk to kiss you. "Understood, ma'am. We'll be more careful in the future, won't we?" He cooed to Isha, rubbing her belly, and she chirped happily, like this was all just a big game to her.

Amélie didn't pull any punches. She took one look at Bakker's mugshot and she laughed. She poured you a glass of wine and set out a box of chocolates. "Gérard told me we would be handling the traitor, but he left out that detail." She giggled, offering a piece to Isha.

Isha accepted the chocolate with both hands, sitting politely on the couch beside you. She moved carefully, very aware of her talons and the delicate upholstery. Jack and Gabriel's couches had several snags and tears in them from her claws. Most of your blankets had holes in them. But here she was, being extra considerate of Amélie's possessions. You wondered then what she had damaged and how Amélie had handled it.

"She is very clever," Amélie said, noticing your surprise. "Very early on we established that she must behave herself. Good children get treats. Bad children..." Amélie's smile widened into something technically polite, but showing too many pearly white teeth to be anything but intimidating.

Isha quickly popped the rest of the chocolate in her mouth, straightened up, and held very still.

"So well-behaved," Amélie purred and offered her another treat. "You must be so proud."

"I've had a lot of help training her," you said, because Gabriel had probably done the lion's share of the work. And you couldn't forget that Tataryn of all people made the litter box breakthrough. You took a drink of wine and sighed. "Have you seen my notes on Van Wyck?"

"Gérard has already put in an informal request for some of Van Wyck's belongings through a trustworthy mutual acquaintance," Amélie said. "Very thorough work, Chanceux."

"Kwento's serious about sharing data," you said with a shrug. "For whatever reason, the South Africans have disavowed him entirely. Even if he's "dead." But who knows? It might be another blind."

"So, may I be the "bad cop" this time? Please?" Amélie giggled.

You raised a brow. "I'd love to watch you in action, but Bakker has been in Overwatch for awhile. My reputation is more...checkered than yours. In this case, I'll be the more convincing one. Next time maybe?"
"I will hold you to that," Amélie said, staring down her nose at you with mock disapproval. "But you are right, Chanceux. I am simply Gérard's very attractive prima donna wife. You run around in bloodstained towels, massacring giant cyborgs."

You groaned and drained the rest of the wine glass. "Really? That's not what I was trying to say at all."

Amélie laughed, one hand on her chest, like tweaking you brought her great joy. "I know, I know. I am just having fun with you. Your analysis is entirely correct."

"Anyway, I'm going to be less of the bad cop and more of a prop. I think Isha will be the most effective one."

Amélie raised a brow and looked at Isha, who had politely extended her sticky hands for more candy. She offered her the box, and Isha very gingerly lifted a truffle out and nibbled on it, her wary blue eyes on Amélie's face.

"But she is so cute," Amélie said. "Not intimidating at all."

Isha hummed as she ate, her sharp white teeth flashing.

"She crushed his eye in front of him," you said. "Squished it, then licked her claws."

"Vraiment?" Amélie clapped her hands together. "Not our Isha! She knows how to use a napkin!"

You blinked a few times, and it took you a moment to realize that Amélie was totally fucking with you. Holding out your wineglass for a refill, you just shook your head at Amélie while she laughed at you so hard that she nearly spilled the wine.

"Feng has promised me first pick," Amélie said. "She has a few color options figured out, but I am willing to be surprised. I think Isha would like a little sister though, don't you?"

"You mean...cousin?"

Amélie waved her hand. "Don't be so technical. They are all related biologically. "Sister" sounds much more charming than "cousin." And Isha would make a wonderful older sibling. Look how she dotes on Bandit. I would even trust her with small human children."

You nearly choked on your wine. Coughing a few times, you pounded on your chest while Isha looked on in concern. Glaring at Amélie, you downed the rest of your wine. "I've heard enough about that from Catriona, thank you very much."

Amélie rolled her eyes. "Not my point at all. Think of how cute your murderbird and my murderbird will be together."

"Assuming Isha doesn't become territorial and insanely jealous," you said, even though the words didn't ring true.

"Nonsense," Amélie said. "She will adapt. She is resourceful creature and enjoys companionship." Amélie leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "So how are you doing then, Chanceux?"

"Fine," you said automatically.
"Just...fine?"

"Yup." You took a chocolate.

Amélie frowned at you. "Chanceux, do not fib to me. I am very serious. How are you holding up?"

"Fine," you repeated in a firmer tone. "Just focusing on the my work and making contingency plans in case of-

Amélie rolled her eyes upward. "Chanceux, please, we know each too well for this." She crossed her arms. "There is nothing tough or inherently brave about lying to the people who care about you. In fact, being unable to admit your feelings is nothing but cowardice."

You blinked. "I'm not scared, I just don't want to worry any-"

"We will worry about you no matter what you do," Amélie scowled. "Ziv has averaged three hours of sleep a night since Petras approached you. Gérard is making extra contingency plans for his already elaborate contingency plans. I have been refitting Chateau Guillard should you desire to spend some time in Annecy."

You stared. "I never asked anyone to-"

"Do not finish that sentence, Chanceux. Take a deep breath and think very carefully about your words instead."

You inhaled slowly, realizing how ungrateful you sounded. "I didn't mean it like that. I just don't like being a burden. I-"

"No one does," Amélie said. "But you are not a burden, a chore, or an obligation. You are our friend. And you are in trouble. This is what you do for people you care about. You look after Ziv much the same way. There are others, too, but I can only speak of Ziv." She patted your cheek. "Why is it so hard for you to accept help?"

"...Dunno," you muttered, staring at your empty wineglass.

"You are proud, that I understand," Amélie said with a sigh. "And you hate showing weakness. That too, I understand." She leaned back against the sofa, resting one arm around your shoulder. "And you are stubborn, silly, and so busy trying to take care of other people that you forget how to take care of yourself." She hugged you then. "I loathe the idea of you going into hiding alone. Even if you go to Shanghai, I will miss you and Isha terribly."

"I'd miss you too," you said, blinking rapidly.

Amélie blew out a breath. "I am so worried about you, and I know that is ridiculous, because you are strong, clever, and resourceful. But that doesn't matter. I still worry. And I'm not the only one."

"You shouldn't worry. It'll upset your stomach," you said, catching yourself before you made a joke about wrinkles. Amélie would not be amused by that.

"You will make my hair turn gray," she said, smacking your arm and proving you wrong yet again.

"I am...worried too," you said after a few deep breaths, Amélie was still hugging you,
possibly because she thought you'd try to escape this conversation otherwise. "I'm worried about something happening while I'm gone. I'm worried about Ziv, Tataryn, Vo, and Hanzo. I'm even worried about people who can take care of themselves like you and Jesse. And yes, I'm worried about what this is going to do to my relationships..." You hung your head. "I've talked to Jack and Gabriel. And I trust them. I just know it's going to be difficult, and I can't help but be worried. I'm making contingency plans, because that's a better use of my time. But deep down, yeah, I'm freaking out. This is my home. I don't want to leave."

You realized, only after the words had left your mouth, that Amélie had fucking finessed you by admitting weakness first. And you realized too, that she was absolutely right: you were being a coward. Amélie was just trying to be a good friend. She shouldn't have to make herself vulnerable just to coax your sad sack of feelings out. She was trying to help you out and you were resisting, because...because you were scared to admit the truth out loud.

To her credit, Amélie didn't act smug about her obvious victory. "I will look after them, Chanceux. Do not worry. I will make sure Gabriel eats in the office. I will keep Ziv, Tataryn, Hanzo, and the rest of your Blackwatch rogues in line. Gérard will have to handle Min; she prefers him, but I will take good care of them for you. I promise. And I will come visit you in Shanghai. Gérard is very excited about bringing home a raptor. He may not admit it, but he is enchanted by Isha."

You weren't so sure about that, but it seemed gauche to argue with Amélie about her own husband's preferences. "You're a good friend," you said, because you were too damn overwhelmed to come up with anything better. "You've always been really good to me and I don't really know why."

Amélie clapped her hands against your cheeks. "Truly? You have no idea?"

"I mean, I was on that rescue mission in the Alps, but that was work," you said awkwardly, recalling almost a year ago when you'd helped dig her out of an avalanche after a Talon ambush.

"That was a big part," Amélie said. "Gérard told me how much you hate the snow. Are you going to tell me that sharing such an experience with someone doesn't build a bond?"

You remembered Gabriel carrying you through the woods after Black Base Delta fell. You exhaled slowly, feeling a little dumb. "Yeah, OK. I didn't think about it like that. I was too cold and slightly insane."

"You'd been shot too," she said, shaking her head.

"Not a big deal. It didn't make it through my armor."

Amélie threw up her arms in mock exasperation. "You are impossible."

"It's part of my charm?"

"Yes," she agreed. "But to answer your question, then came Shanghai. You saw Gérard and Ziv were in trouble and rode to their rescue. It was very heroic. I know Gérard was unconscious for your part of the action, but Ziv wrote quite the report. I knew how it ended, and I was still on the edge of my seat."

Your lips quirked, because you weren't so sure she was cleared to read that report. "I only remember him bitching me out, partially because I was late, partially because I got shot again saving his ungrateful ass, and partially because he thought I was sleeping with Gabriel behind
Amélie threw her head back laughing. "How efficient of him."

You snorted.

"So before we were really friends, you had already saved Gérard twice, and that was impressive, because you had made it abundantly clear that you didn't like him, not after your entry interview."

"...I was traumatized!"

"I know," Amélie said, giving you a sad smile. "And for what it's worth, that was never his intention. But he had to do a thorough job." She rested her head on your shoulder. "But you saved him anyway, and I will be forever grateful."

You shook your head. "OK, when you put it like that, I feel silly." Because of course people liked it when you saved them and their loved ones. Duh.

"And you didn't even stop to consider you could collect the impressive bounty on his head or get him back for his cruelty."

"Of course not." You shook your head. "That's the bare minimum of decency. Though I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about some forms of...minor criminal revenge." And that you would have tried a few out, if you'd be sure you could get away with it.

Amélie laughed. "You cannot be convicted for mere thoughts, Chanceux. Gérard has driven me to drastic measures on more than one occasion."

"I bet," you said smugly. And your imagination had inflicted all kinds of...immoral things on certain people.

"There is one more thing as well," Amélie said, her expression thoughtful. "You know what it is like to have to constantly scrutinize someone's words and intentions. To gauge if you've said too much, if your words will be used against you, and how to contain the fallout. You know how exhausting that can be."

"...No, not at all," you said dryly.

"I am being serious!" Amélie said, pursing her lips, and jabbing a finger into your collarbone.

"Ow!"

"As I was saying," Amélie continued as if she hadn't just poked you with her own stabby finger. "Trust is a rare luxury in the both the worlds of espionage and ballet. You may like someone. You may want to help them. But it is another thing to give them your back, to let them see your vulnerabilities. Chanceux, my husband trusts you. And believe it or not, he respects you."

You snorted, but Amélie's expression was gentle and you swallowed all your arguments.

"Gérard can be incredibly difficult. I understand that all too well. But when it comes to a person's character, his instincts are unparalleled. He has never steered me wrong. "That one is untrustworthy. That one is weak. That one is loyal." He gave longer explanations, but that was the gist of it. She stared off into space for a moment. "So when he told me that I would like you, that
you could be trusted, that we would make good friends, I believed him. And as usual, he was absolutely right."

You sat back, speechless.

"I am very glad that we met," Amélie said. "You are always interesting, and I know we will continue to have grand adventures together."

"Yeah," you said, your voice thick in your throat. "Grand adventures."

"Together," she nodded happily. She glanced down at your raptor. "I like the name "Colette" for your little sister, don't you Isha? Or maybe "Ninon?"

Isha chirped happily, and you both looked down to see that the chocolate box was mysteriously empty.

Shaking her head, Amélie smiled, opened another box of chocolates, and another bottle of wine.

"Thank you for coming with me," Reinhardt said, as the two of you walked back to his office, carrying boxes of currywurst. Isha rode happily on his shoulder, nibbling on his hair.

"No problem, I needed something to keep my mind off things," you said, because today you'd been assigned to Reinhardt, since Gabriel and Jesse were out on an op, Tataryn still had Kseniya, and who knew what the Shimadas were up to? Something sneaky, that's what.

"Nothing better than a good meal and a lager," Reinhardt winked. "Except maybe some quality time with your lovers."

"Good food and good company are always welcome," you said as you set the bags down on his desk. You pulled up a chair, grateful for the Reinhardt's informality. He wasn't being obvious about the fact that he was babysitting you, and you tried to take it in stride. It was nice to just sit and talk with the older man. He was a real pleasure to be around.

Reinhardt opened a box for himself and then one for Isha. You rolled your eyes as he gave her the whole damn thing. Squealing with joy, Isha pulled the sausage out of its bun and chomped down on the spicy meat.

"You're spoiling her," you said, not actually making any move to stop him.

"You designated me Uncle Reinhardt," he said, beaming at her. "It is my sworn duty to spoil my little dragonling."

"I didn't realize that's how things worked between knights and dragons." You chuckled and ate your fries.

"Isha is a good niece," Reinhardt said solemnly. "She is not a monster who preys on the weak, or a force of nature that must be resisted."

"You say that, but you haven't lost all your socks to her yet."
Reinhardt's shoulders shook with laughter. "She is a thief, but she is just a baby and I hold her mother accountable."

You snorted. "I'm trying."

"I know," Reinhardt said, blowing a stray lock of hair out of his face. He grinned as he watched Isha tear off chunks of bread and dip them in the curry sauce. "A younger me would have had qualms about genetically engineered animals. Not just Isha, but Winston as well. And Athena? Mein gott..." He shook his head. "I was a brash youth."

You nearly choked at that. Was?

"I think the hardest thing I ever had to learn was how to be kind."

"What? You?" Your voice went high. "Reinhardt, hands down, you're like the most decent person in Overwatch."

He laughed awkwardly at that. "Come now, Lucky Lady, don't flatter an old man."

"It's true!" You insisted, mouth half full of food.

"I appreciate your kind words," Reinhardt muttered, clearly not comfortable with that designation. "I try to do the right thing. Though in this day and age, the "right thing" isn't always so clear."

"Now are you going to tell me that young Reinhardt beat up orphans and kicked puppies?"

You frowned.

"Never. No, I always tried to be law abiding, ignoring a...few drunken episodes," he laughed, cheeks turning pink as he rubbed the back of his neck. "And I hated bullies."

"So what did you mean by that then?" You sat back in your chair. "I can't picture you as anything less than upstanding, and I don't mean to dismiss the effort that takes. I just...I always picture you as a genuinely good guy."

"I did the responsible thing. I did what was expected of me. I excelled in those fields," Reinhardt mused, his gaze distant. "Society is very good at reminding you to be honest, upstanding, and decent, yes. It is not so good at teaching you to be kind. Oh, there is lip service. You are told that compassion is a virtue and that you should behave in such a fashion. But so much of it is rote. You are taught how to follow the law. You are taught to feel ashamed when you break the rules. You are not really taught how to be kind."

"...I'm sorry, it's a little beyond me to analyze this," you said, not entirely sure what he was trying to say. "I spent a good chunk of my life doing questionable things for survival. I don't quite have the same perspective."

"It is like...you see a homeless man. The "charitable" thing you may do is give him money, or you buy him a meal. Though you may also lecture him on his poor life decisions while you perform your "kind" act. You may say all manner of things, because you are offering him a tiny modicum of support. And then you may tell yourself that you are a good person afterward. But is all that judgment and posturing really kindness?" Reinhardt shook his head. "Do you see what I mean, Lucky? You either already understand true compassion, or maybe one day you learn the hard way."

"...OK, I get that," you said, sitting back in the chair.
"Do not lie. Do not steal. Do not kill. These are the bare minimum rules, yes? But
upholding them does not make one a good person." Reinhardt shook his head. "There are many
more. Do not kick dogs. Do not shout at children. Do not drunkenly throw rocks at windows at
three in the morning, even if you think you know who lives there."

"Why would you do that?"

"I was drunk and trying to get their attention! And I was only off by two houses." He
laughed.

You snorted.

"And for some people rules are enough. They don't have to be good. They can just tell
themselves that they are not bad." Reinhardt sighed. "When I was a Crusader, I almost let my team
die. Simply because they could not keep up with me. Yes, it was my job to shield them. But I
thought that they had to learn on their own. I thought that they were holding me back. I thought a
great many things with good intentions." He tapped his eye. "I was young, foolish, and terribly
wrong. It took the death of a good friend to show me the truth."

You blinked. "Reinhardt-"

"It is that tragedy that made me the man I am today. It is regret that taught me the most
important lesson of them all." He gave you a sad smile. "It was hard to forgive myself, Lucky. It
took years of trying to repay that blood debt, only to realize that there was no way to match his
sacrifice. That all I could do was live a better life, and learn from what he tried to teach me." He
patted your hand. "I had to learn that sometimes it is more important to be kind than to be right.
That it is easy to assign blame, to others, to oneself, and just how useless blame is. I think we are
very much alike, Lucky. We are our own harshest critics. And it is easy to forget that you must be
kind to yourself too. It is a strange balance. I think I had to learn to be kind to others and myself at
almost the same time." He stared off into space.

You nodded, still caught up in the fact that Reinhardt had gone through the same grief and
guilt as you, and he still came out...smiling? That wasn't the right word. It was that inner light he
had, that hadn't been lost or buried under disappointment and bitterness. That man was as strong as
he looked. You were more than a little envious.

"Do not repeat this. But I think you already know, Torby carries a great deal of guilt on his
shoulders."

"...I got that impression," you said. "But I know better than to pry."

"Early on there were points when I wanted to berate him for being too good of an
engineer." Reinhardt shook his head. "But what would that actually do? He would just feel worse.
I would have alienated an ally. I would not have been wrong to say such things, but ultimately,
what would I have accomplished? And as time passed, and we became friends, I understood that
such words would have wounded him deeply, and again, what kind of friend am I if I do that?
Perhaps if he were trying to reengineer some kind of omnic weapon, I would have to remind him of
his past mistakes, but that is not the case. He never had those aspirations again." He sighed. "There
is enough pain in the world. I do not need to add to it. And in being kind to Torby, I learned
to...forgive myself, at least a little."

"See, you're a damn good person," you said. "And I know it is weird to hear, but I believe it
about you. I'm not saying this out of hero worship or obligation. Yeah, you have flaws. But you are
kind, and you're absolutely right, we need more of that."
"It...makes me happy to hear you say that. I know Reyes thinks otherwise but..." He paused. "I am sorry. I do not mean to speak ill of your paramour."

You shook your head. "I know Gabriel can be terribly unreasonable at times. It's part of his charm."

Reinhardt shrugged. "It doesn't bother me any more. He is a complicated man. I do not resent him. At least he has always been honest about his feelings." He downed a beer, his expression morose. Like it hurt his feelings that after all they'd been through together, Gabriel still didn't like him.

It was exactly that, you realized. Reinhardt cared about Gabriel, even though he understood that the other man never liked him much. Any normal person would have come to resent that disparity, yourself included.

Guilt loosened your tongue. "...This stays between us, but even when he complains about you, it's never about anything serious. He can't speak ill of your skills, your virtue, or your hair. He just thinks you're annoying, and he knows that really isn't enough grounds to justify being a dick." You patted his hand. "He doesn't hate you."

Reinhardt gave you surprised smile. "Really?"

"Really," you said, trying to sound convincing. Because you didn't think that was the case. "You're more like a...work nemesis. Someone to grouse at. It keeps things interesting."

Reinhardt's wholesomeness sometimes made you uncomfortable, like maybe you shouldn't spend too much time around him, because you'd just bring him down. Maybe Gabriel was envious of Reinhardt's rose-tinted worldview, but on some level, you knew Gabriel compared himself to the Crusader, and a lot of the terrible things Gabriel had done in the name of "the greater good" still haunted him. Maybe he resented Reinhardt's relatively clean hands, but you suspected the problem lay with how Gabriel felt about himself, and not with anything Reinhardt had done.

"That's...that makes sense," Reinhardt said thoughtfully. "I always...well, I don't know what he thought. He is very good at conveying contempt. And there are things about myself that sometimes deserve it."

"...Not really," you said. "Maybe some teasing, but not contempt."

"I am sometimes a little too boastful," Reinhardt admitted, cheeks turning pink. "And perhaps I exaggerate the details on occasion. But only...a little," he said sheepishly, thumb and forefinger actually quite far apart.

"You have skills, and you're larger than life. Everyone enjoys a good story. Still not holding you in contempt."

Reinhardt flashed you a grateful smile. "I get too carried away and sometimes forget my own strength. I have broken several tablets already this year," he said, shaking his head. "Ziv has threatened to restrict my net access."

You snorted. "Ziv is a jerk."

"Ziv is a very helpful man," Reinhardt said, shaking his head. "I am just...clumsy."

"...Regrettable, but great strength is still not worthy of contempt. And I've broken a device or two out of sheer rage."
Reinhardt frowned at you, almost like this was some kind of competition, and you could picture a younger, brasher version constantly trying to one-up his comrades. Like Gabriel. Huh, some of Gabriel's hostility was starting to make sense. Well, that would get annoying; thankfully, he seemed to have mostly grown out of that. "...I am terrified of horror movies and stories," he whispered loudly. "I cannot watch them. If I do, I do not sleep for days. It is awful."

You smothered a laugh in your hand. "That's actually really cute, and again, not feeling the contempt." Though, if Gabriel knew that, that might have explained some of the attitude. Gabriel loved scary things, like Halloween, horror movies, and you in a blood-stained towel. If Jack, Ana, Torby, or the rest of the team made him cutback on that stuff because it gave Reinhardt nightmares, well, you could see where some of his resentment came from.

"So you don't think I've done anything to personally offend him?" Reinhardt asked. "What do you think I should do to...improve our relations? For the sake of team morale, of course," he added hastily.

"Of course." You blinked, not sure how to answer that question.

Gabriel thought Reinhardt was a buffoon. But if Reinhardt started smack talking Gabriel, you suspected that would backfire.

"I don't know if anything you do will have immediate results."

"I can be patient," Reinhardt said, a twinkle in his eye.

"...Uh huh," you said slowly. "Well, I guess you could just continue being nice to him. Not overly solicitous. He hates small talk. But I swear half his grumpiness comes from hunger. His tolerance for people crashes with his blood sugar. And he can't resist good Mexican food, spicy things, and deep fried meat." You paused. "I think he'd like currywurst." It wasn't quite as spicy as the food Gabriel cooked, but it was better than Jack's casseroles.

Reinhardt delicately held a pen and notepad in hand and was taking honest to God notes. "Desserts?"

"Nothing too sweet. Bittersweet chocolates, coffee flavors, alcoholic things like bourbon balls. He likes expensive scotch too." You paused. "You don't have to shower him with gifts, Rein. You're going to make me wonder if you're trying to woo my man."

Reinhardt threw his head back and laughed. "I have learned, from watching you, that bribery can be a good tool. And I like food. I will drop something off with him next time I go out for a bite. Just because I think he might like it. He may eat it. He may refuse it. He may dump in the garbage in front of me. But I will not be deterred. You are absolutely right, Lucky. I am not the kind of man who just gives up because things are difficult. Reyes may be a headstrong man, but I am even more stiff-necked. I befriended Torbjörn, after all. And we both know how fun he can be." Reinhardt winked at you. "Reyes doesn't stand a chance!"

You took a bite of your currywurst, half amused, half horrified by what you had just inspired.
Don't choke on the fluff. It gets everywhere!

I am remaining on tumblr till something better comes along or the situation gets even worse. Don't worry, I'll tell you guys what I'm doing when I know. As it stands, I'm barely on the computer right now because of my stupid wrists.

So, I am starting to recover, though I haven't done any writing this week, and am woefully behind. I'll probably have to change my home set up, but my wrists are starting to improve, I just have to wear the splints the entire time, improve my posture, stretch, and do some more resting.

Normally I'm 4 chapters ahead. I am only 1 chapter ahead. So hopefully I can catch up some next week. I've been outlining and plotting, but it doesn't do me any good if I can't actually write the scenes. The regular update schedule won't resume till I write more.

Hope everyone is doing well. Thank you for the good wishes.
Chapter 109

Chapter Summary

Interrogations with you on both sides of the table.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You were doing paperwork remotely. Reinhardt was supposed to be doing his own work, though he kept pausing to watch videos with Isha and chuckling as she cuddled against his chest. You were still eating your way through the food Reinhardt had purchased. He'd gotten "enough for two people," which was more accurately enough for twelve people.

There was a knock on the door and then Captain Amari entered Reinhardt's office, her face grim. You looked up from your food, Isha already on her second helping.

The captain tossed her hat on a chair and gave the wall a frustrated glare. "Petras has moved to have you suspended for your "carelessness" during Family Day. There will be an investigation, and he's already assigned one of his political flunkies from outside the agency to conduct it."

You raised a brow. Well, if he couldn't kill you off immediately, it looked like he was going to drag your reputation through the mud. The joke was on him, your reputation was already messy. "Can't say I'm surprised."

"You will still be working Shit Spiders operations and attending to Blackwatch office work, but formally, you have been put on leave," Captain Amari said. "We have a few workarounds, and Gérard has already initiated one of his schemes, so things will move fast."

Reinhardt swore in German, his booming voice doing nothing to mask his dejection. "Ana! We cannot let this travesty-" He paused. "I am sorry, Lucky. I should not be the one shouting and carrying on. You are the one this affects."

"He will move for your dismissal," Captain Amari said. "And once he thinks you're vulnerable..."

Reinhardt's nostrils flared. "We would not just cast her out to the wolves!"

"Maybe I should visit Feng," you said, not because you were in a hurry to leave, but because you'd just had an idea. "I need more bullet ant venom. And Captain Amari needs a day out of the office?"

Captain Amari gave you a crooked smile. "Perhaps. But I don't know if we'll have time for temporary solutions. We've hit critical mass. Things are going to start heating up on all sides." She glanced at Isha. "You will need to keep your friends close."

Isha blinked and gave Captain Amari a suspicious look before shoving the rest of the currywurst into her mouth.
Reinhardt slumped beside you. "You were right, Lucky. It is terribly difficult to fight politicians. To seek out direct confrontation when they come at you so dishonorably. I wish I had better solutions to offer you."

You blinked, then carefully patted his arm, remembering that discussion you'd had after Hoffman tried to forcibly retire him. "I'll be OK," you said. "Feng's a great hostess and it will only be temporary."

"Yes, yes, I know," Reinhardt managed a wobbly smile. "She is something else! She nearly beat me in arm-wrestling with her little noodle arms! It was quite the match!" He paused, frowning as he stared sideways at you. "You don't think she let me win?"

"...Feng doesn't have great impulse control," you said, honestly not sure. "If you noticed, she tends to go all out," you continued, knowing that wasn't the entire truth. Feng played up that image, sure, but she was a lot more cunning than she acted.

"Ah, you are right. She does get very enthusiastic. I too am guilty of that." Reinhardt nodded cheerfully. "She invited me to Shanghai, said there were all kinds of restaurants I might enjoy."

"Feng does know how to have a good time," you said. "You should visit."

Captain Amari cleared her throat, giving Reinhardt an impatient look.

"I am in no hurry to see you off to Shanghai, but if you do go what can we do to make it easier on you?" Reinhardt asked. "Visit often? Kidnap Jack and Gabriel and make them visit more? Bring you cake and currywurst?" He trailed off, biting his lip.

"Yes," you said, your smile wobbling. "Yes."

"So you maintain that the vehicle malfunctioned?"

The woman in front of you was slim, elegant, and wearing an ivory skirt suit that cost more than your annual salary. You knew that, because Amélie wore suits from that designer, and casually tried to buy you one once. Her haircut was short, blunt, and you supposed it was flattering, and she had striking dark hair. She looked bitchy and expensive. She was a lawyer by training, a shark by nature. You wondered, idly, if that was Petras' type.

"Yes," you repeated, saying the word nice and slow, in case she failed to understand it again.

She glared at you for half a second, her skepticism obvious. Ms. Elizabeth Beaumont wielded her disdain like a finely honed blade. She never actually said a word that could be used against her in the transcripts, but her attitude, her facial expressions, her body language screamed hostility, disdain, and a myriad of other snobby feelings.

Beaumont was part of the civilian body that handled Overwatch disciplinary inquiries. Things usually got solved in-house, but that wasn't always the case. Her office handled high profile and politically-charged cases. It was independent of the Director's authority and of course, looked totally objective on paper. But you knew going into the conference room that Beaumont's
"Are you saying that Overwatch property wasn't properly maintained? Are you making allegations against Dr. Winston? What kind of expertise do you have on the subject?"

"It stopped working properly," was all you said. Because Lacroix had reminded you to keep your answers short and to the point. No attitude. No smart remarks. Pure professionalism and nonchalance.

"I asked you a question, agent," she snapped.

"You asked me three questions," you said blandly, keeping your tone even. Lacroix would probably facepalm at that, but you had tried to keep it civil. There was only so much intentional stupidity that a person could tolerate.

"Do you think this is some kind of joke?" She leaned over the table.

Was that another question? You swallowed that answer, and stared at her. "I don't find any of this amusing, ma'am. I'm a field agent, not a mechanic. All I can tell you is that the vehicle stopped working properly. The reason why is above my pay grade." And outside your jurisdiction, but you were keeping your answers short and sweet. Using small words. Letting her think you were just some dumb gun jockey.

"Your lack of cooperation has been noted," she scowled at you, tapping something onto her tablet.

There was a knock at the door and Beaumont rolled her eyes. "This is a private in camera," she said, giving you a dirty look, like you'd invited the party crashers.

You didn't bother shrugging, you just sat there, because honestly, you'd survived being grilled by Lacroix, Amélie, and your angry lovers. This bitch wasn't anything in comparison. Except kind of irritating.

Getting up in a huff, she flounced over to the door, and you eyed her stiletto heels, kind of hoping she'd break an ankle.

"...Strike Commander," Beaumont's voice went high. "What an honor." And then it went low, too low, and you narrowed your eyes, glancing at your left hand, knowing it would not take much effort to break one of those skinny joints as a warning.

"Ms. Beaumont," Jack said politely. "I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Yes, this is highly irregular. But I suppose your conscientiousness is to be lauded. Are you always so...hands-on?" she asked, and even if she had her back to you, you could practically hear her batting her fake lashes at him.

There was a moment of silence as Jack glanced over her shoulder at your face. His jaw twitched, like he was fighting a grin.

You felt the emotion melt off your face, your eyes boring into the back of Beaumont's delicate skull.

"I would not have interrupted, except Undersecretary Adawe has found your initial report to be most...enlightening. She is very interested in what you have to say and has expanded the investigation into Agent Strike's...accident. I believe it has gone to committee."
"It is most curious," Beaumont said scornfully, mistaking Jack's emphasis for the wrong kind of disbelief.

"Yes, well," Jack cleared his throat. "This is Ademola Oladele, from the Undersecretary's office. He is her representative on this issue and I understand he will be working with you on resolving this matter."

"Ms. Beaumont," a familiar voice said.

"Oh," Beaumont said, her voice going flat and oddly nasal.

"Charmed," Oladele said, as he brushed past Beaumont, his shrewd gaze falling on you. "Well Agent Strike, it seems your infamous luck has struck again." He shook his head in mock disappointment. "Is it really that difficult for you to avoid large scale property destruction?" You were a little surprised by the warm amusement in his voice. He extended his hand and you rose and shook it firmly, before he sat down.

"It was that or human casualties," you said. "I would have preferred neither."

"Do you two know each other?" Beamont scowled. "Because we cannot have a conflict of interest or even the appearances of-"

Well that was rich coming from a Petras pawn. But you just sat there, affecting a disinterested air.

"Oh my, are good manners now indicative of a conflict of interest? I never meant to be politically incorrect," Oladele laughed. "Well, it is good to see that you've recovered from that terrible attack on DC. " Oladele's eyes darkened for a moment, and then he was all smiles again. "Are you still attached to Blackwatch, Agent Strike?"

"I am," you said.

"That's a pity. Madame Kwento still very much disapproves of wetworks operations," Oladele continued. "You really should have found another division, Strike. She is just looking for an excuse. I'm afraid your life is about to get very complicated." He smiled cheerfully at Beaumont. "And I'm sure you have uncovered quite a bit of information that will help with that endeavor."

You blinked, a little surprised by Oladele's good mood and not entirely sure how to take his declarations. It seemed he was putting all the personal connections on the record, though you weren't sure if that was a "cover my ass" move or if he was issuing a challenge to Beaumont. He was taller than the lawyer, and his wounds from DC seemed to have healed up nicely. He still had a distinct scar that cut through both of his eyebrows, but with some careful hair styling, he managed to keep it mostly concealed. You'd only seen him in armor and security uniform. Today he wore a navy blue suit with gold accents. He looked more like a politician than a soldier, and that surprised you.

"I...have just begun my investigation," Beaumont said, sweat beading on her upper lip.

Oladele shot you an amused look. "It sounded to me like you were very certain of Agent Strike's culpability."

"I am merely going by the facts of the case," Beaumont said, clearly unhappy about the additional scrutiny.
"Mmm, the facts that you haven't completely gathered yet?" Oladele gave another good natured laugh. "Come now, Counsellor, you must have some clever trick up your sleeve. I've seen your work before. You're too smart to make that kind of rookie mistake." He rested his chin on his hands.

"You seem to be very familiar with the parties involved and the situation," Beaumont said tautly.

"It is my job to know things," Oladele said, not losing his smarmy grin. "And I have my own sources." He folded his hands together, in a way that reminded you strongly of Zenyatta, and you had to cover your mouth.

"Well, I see," Beaumont cleared her throat. "You'll have to tell me all about them."

"I don't have to do any such thing," he said, still beaming at her. "But it is cute how you think you can order me around, Ms. Beaumont. I am here at the behest of the Overwatch Affairs Committee. The Undersecretary herself has personally tasked me to oversee this investigation while giving the Committee regular updates."

"Now listen here-" Beaumont was turning a blotchy shade of red.

Oladele gave you a smile that shouted, "can you believe this bitch?" You felt the corner of your mouth turn upward. "Must we do this with an audience? I thought your people were professional about maintaining the proper chain of command."

Beaumont glared at Oladele, then you. "You are dismissed, Strike. I will see to you later."

Oladele's grin widened. "Run along, Strike. It looks like we have a jurisdictional pissing match to settle."

"I'll take my leave," you said, unspeakably grateful to get away from Beaumont, but maybe a little disappointed that you didn't get to watch Oladele string her along.

You walked into Gabriel's room, in time to see Jack pinned on his back, against the couch, Gabriel's fingers laced in his hair. You didn't hear what he said, but Jack nodded vigorously, before both men looked up. Gabriel sighed and released Jack. Jack just grinned at you, his cheeks pink.

"How bad?" Gabriel asked.

"It wasn't fun, but now that Oladele's here and in full interference mode, I don't think Beaumont is going to have a good time."

"Didn't expect Kwento to intervene quite so directly, but she's supposedly looking for Blackwatch mishandlings. I'm hoping she is just using that as a cover and not planning to backstab us later, but-" Gabriel trailed off. "But maybe you'd rather talk about something else."

"Just fighting the urge to sabotage Beaumont's car," you said, taking off your shoes and dropping onto Gabriel's couch.

"She was giving you that hard of a time?" Gabriel frowned.
"No, the bitch was practically drooling on Jack," you said, rolling your fingers. "Oh Strike Commander, you're so hands-on. And I know what parts I want your hands on," you said, mimicking her breathy tone.

Jack just laughed, and leaned over, both hands cupping your cheeks as he kissed you. "That snaky bitch can keep her cold hands to herself. The only woman I want to put my hands all over is you."

"She better," you growled. "Or she'll lose them."

Gabriel laughed, and wrapped an arm around your waist. "You're so cute when you're murderously jealous."

"Adorable," Jack teased, pulling on your cheeks with both hands. He tugged the skin upward. "There's that deranged smile-"

You huffed, as he released your face.

Jack laughed resting his head in Gabriel's shoulder. "I didn't think your face was so stretchy, baby. I just want to squeeze-"

You launched yourself at him, smiling a more comfortably deranged smile. Jack swore as you tackled him off the couch and onto the floor. Gabriel was laughing too hard to interfere.

"I'll show you "stretchy," Francis!" You shouted, pulling on his face.

"Gabe! Help!" Jack laughed as you pulled on his face. "Ow!"

"I'll squeeze you!" You continued pinching his cheeks, and it was kind of addictive, almost therapeutic.

"OW! Gabe!" Jack raised his hips and flipped your off him, quickly pouncing on top of you before you had a chance to mount another assault. Still chuckling, he pinned you on your back, his hips to yours. Breathing hard, you grinned at him as he kissed you softly instead of pulling on your face.

"Feeling better, killer?"

"Yeah," you sighed, laying flat on the floor. "But that's not free license to go around tugging on my face when I'm in a bad mood."

Jack kissed your nose. "But it's so stupid, it works."

Gabriel snorted, and knelt by your head. He gazed at Jack fondly. "That is his tagline."

"Really?" Jack scowled with mock ferocity.

"Yeah," Gabriel murmured, cupping Jack's face. "That, and "so goddamn beautiful, I can't think straight."

"Oh. Copy. Understood. Words brain," Jack blinked a few times, suddenly bright red. "I...does that sentence even make sense?"

"Don't know," Gabriel said, leaning in for a kiss. "Can't think straight."
"You were right," Távio muttered as he walked beside you carrying a squirmy Isha who wore Torby's modified Blackwatch armor. She wasn't crazy about it, but she had stopped trying to wiggle out of it.

"I know," you said, absently, reviewing your notes.

Távio sighed. "Can you not sound so smug about it?"

You looked up, a little surprised by his dejected expression. "That was a blanket statement, Távio. The things I tell you are generally right. The things I do..." You shrugged. "What specifically was I right about?"

Távio squinted at you, not looking amused. "Ainsley."

Your arms dropped to your sides. "I've said a lot of shit about Overwatch Barbie," you said. "You're really going to have to be more specific."

"And I really thought she'd stepped up, and gotten over herself," Távio muttered. "She was so...open. I thought she was serious about changing." He glared at the floor.

"Wait a minute, were you and Ainsley...hanging out?" You asked, a little surprised. You almost asked if Riggs was with them, and then realized you did not need to open that can of worms.

Távio just patted Isha's head for a few seconds. "I mean, only a few times. We just got coffee and chatted. Nothing too private. I didn't violate any security clearances. And I damn well understand why you were so hesitant to trust her. She's a goddamn coward."

You blinked. "You didn't talk to her about her uncle, did you?"

"No, she came to me, to ask how to talk to you," Távio scowled. "She wouldn't explain anything, but kept asking me hypothetical questions about loyalty and whistle blowing. I didn't let anything slip, but she got real defensive when I told her that I didn't protect abusive family members. She's not the only one who had an uncle who couldn't keep his hands off younger girls," Távio snarled. "And even if I was a little kid, I sure as hell didn't stand for that!"

You stared at the ceiling. You'd been wrong to think of Távio "as just a kid." He was still very immature, in a lot of ways. But he'd had a hard childhood. He'd grown up too fast. And while he tolerated your fussing, he was an adult. You had to remind yourself of that. "You've developed a stronger sense of personal responsibility than Ainsley."

"And a backbone," Távio spat. "After her chat with you, she came whining to me about how hard things were and how everyone was mad at her-"

You snorted. "I was polite. A little mean," you said with a grin. "But in an underhanded way."

"That comes with the territory, ma'am. I would expect nothing less: Blackwatch pride, Blackwatch petty." He gave you a salute and you raised a brow, because you were pretty sure you hadn't shared that joke with any of the recruits.

"Agent McCree educated me. Ma'am," he said, apparently reading the look on your face.
"I see. So you and Ainsley talk a lot?"

"...She doesn't seem to have a lot of friends," he said awkwardly. "We'd just talk in passing. Sometimes get coffee or food together. Nothing serious."

You nodded, remembering that Távio was an attractive young man, and wondering what Ainsley's angle was.

"But she came to me about how you were mad at her and...I lost my temper. Shouldn't have done that. She ran off crying." Távio shrugged. "But I don't care. She had it coming." He gave you a serious look. "You were right about her. Sorry I tried to."

"You weren't wrong to ask me to be kind her," you said, thinking back on your conversation with Reinhardt. "It's easy to be indifferent and watch someone flounder. It's much harder to put yourself out there and help someone." You shook your head. "I'm not saying everyone deserves help or that any of it is your responsibility, but it was good of you to speak to me candidly about her. It was generous of you to go to bat for her. Whether or not she deserves it. I'm not sore at you for that."

Távio looked at the floor. "Oh. OK."

"I'm disappointed in her," you said. "If that's what friendship means to her, then you understand why she doesn't have many friends. But I'm not losing sleep over it. Ainsley has to live with herself. I've got more important things to deal with."

Távio nodded thoughtfully.

"That doesn't mean I don't screw with her mind from time to time," you said with a grin. "But it's all little stuff." Because not even Reinhardt could stop you from being petty. You were vindictive by nature.

He laughed at that. "No bullet ant venom?"

"Not this time." You quirked your lips. "Now stop making me smile, agent. I have to look mean and intimidating for this interrogation."

"Ma'am," Távio said, getting the door for you. Amélie was already in the observation room, dressed in full uniform and looking quite debonair. "I look forward to watching you and Agent Lacroix work."

"I'll be back for you," you said, setting Isha down in a chair and patting her head. "Remember what we practiced."

Isha narrowed her eyes at you, flashing her teeth, a low threatening growl emanating from the back of her throat. She raised her little hands like she was going to strike.

"Perfect," you said. "Now don't scare Távio, OK?"

Your murderbird just regarded the younger man with flat cold eyes.

Távio flashed you a panicked look. "Good...Isha." He slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the lamb jerky treats you'd given him. He made no sudden movements, so as not to startle the vicious predator, and carefully offered her a pieces as you went over to Amélie to review strategy.
"That looks terribly uncomfortable," Amélie said, wincing in "sympathy as she stared at Bakker's scratched up face. His eye socket remained bandaged, and you sat back in your chair, unable to get the nasty smug grin off your face. That part wasn't acting, it was real as could be.

"Come on, Lacroix," you said, with a hint of scorn, though it seemed weird to call Amélie that. "If you're going to be in Overwatch, you have to get used to all kinds of gruesome things, Bakker's face included. Personally, I think it's an improvement."

Amélie wrinkled her nose at you, but said nothing.

Bakker's functional eye darted between the two of you, his hands cuffed to close together. His gaze lingered on you too long, like he was surprised to see that you were still alive. So he knew about Sakai's little bout of sabotage. That wasn't surprising. What else did he know?

"Well come on, we don't have all day," you said, crossing your arms. You gave Amélie a disdainful glare. "You can try chatting his ear off all you like, Lacroix. Reyes trusts me, and my tools, to get answers out of them much faster."

Bakker's already pale face whitened and he bit his lip, because he was in Overwatch, and there'd been all kinds of rumors about your unsavory actions. This was one of the few times you got to benefit from your undeserved reputation.

Amélie stiffened, her posture excellent, and she only gave the faintest hint of irritation, but Bakker was watching her, wondering how "good" the good cop was.

"His name isn't Luuk Bakker," Amélie told you primly. "He is actually Renier Van Wyck, a former NIA operative out of Johannesburg."

You blinked, feigning surprise. "No wonder you changed your name," you muttered, giving Amélie a dirty look. " Didn't think to share that with the class, Lacroix?"

"I am here to demonstrate my methods," Amélie said coolly, looking down her nose at you. "Which are more refined than just cutting pieces off of people."

You shrugged. "It works. Here, let me show you-

Bakker scooted back in his chair, breathing heavily as he stared at you. "She's right. My real name is Renier Van Wyck. And there's nothing wrong with my name, it's a family name!" He glanced wildly between the two of you.

"See? Van Wyck has a background in intelligence. He understands how this works," Amélie inclined her head at him.

"Spies lie," you said, sounding bored. "But sometimes if you break them, you'll get enough truth to make it worth your while. It's just extra hard work, but that's OK. I'm real motivated after what went down this weekend. I don't mind going into overtime."

Van Wyck began to hyperventilate.

"It's unnecessary," Amélie said coolly. "Spies understand deals. And a man who has been "dead" as long as Monsieur Van Wyck, might be interested in coming in from the cold."
"I'll tell you everything," he said, beady eyes focusing hopefully on Amélie. He licked his lips. "My name is Renier Van Wyck. I was approached by a UN representative about...monitoring internal communications within Overwatch. It was supposed to be a watchdog position. I-"

"Liar," you breathed with a nasty smile, as you leaned over the table. "Look at his weasel face. Lacroix. You can't trust him to tell the truth."

"It's the truth!" He protested, sweat beading on his forehead as he glanced hopefully at Amélie. "You haven't even heard-"

"She is right," Amélie said, shaking her head sadly. "We know you were recruited by a PMC, possibly representing a UN representative, but not as a watchdog. No, Monsieur Van Wyck, you were planted as a spy."

"Told you," you muttered, giving Amélie a smirk. "Maybe you should just pick up your tutu on the way out."

"While Agent Strike has uncanny instincts, rather like a wild animal," Amélie said, not deigning to look at you. "This situation requires more finesse."

You snorted.

"Please try again," Amélie said. "Before Agent Strike thinks she can take over this case."

Van Wyck shuddered and looked away. "I was asked to spy for a UN representative. The money was very good, and the job seemed...easy. I let the computer do most of the work. I just filtered through the comms channels, keeping an ear out for anything relevant to my employer's interests. I never hurt anyone."

"And who was your employer?" Amélie asked.

Van Wyck stared at the table. "I...I'm afraid I need some guarantees, Agent Lacroix."

"Oh, I can guarantee you something," you said cheerfully, both palms slapping the table. "I have all kinds of guarantees I can make-"

Van Wyck winced. "You can't just give me to Lucky Strike when you're done. I've heard how she keeps Reyes' pressganged psychopaths in line, and you can't do that to me. Please-"

You raised a brow, wondering what rumors Tataryn had been spreading now. Well, to be fair, it didn't have to be Tataryn, but he did have a history of it.

"She doesn't have the clearance-" You sneered.

"But my husband does," Amélie said, crossing her arms. "I can put a good word in with him. Despite the rumors, I still have more influence with him, than she does."

You made a face, a very scrunched unhappy face, at her implications.

"All right," Van Wyck inhaled, his eyes on Amélie's face, searching for any signs of deception. "It was through a shell corporation, and several blinds, but it was Ambassador Anh Nguyen behind it all."

Amélie narrowed her eyes. "Have you any proof?"

"...I kept some leverage," Van Wyck said, licking his lips. "I'll deal. But I want to walk
away from thi-

"Fuck this," you snarled, jumping to your feet. "We don't have to give this bastard a goddamn thing! I'll pry the answers out of him with a fucking crowbar!" You walked around the side of the table, one hand gripping Van Wyck's collar.

Amélie was suddenly on her feet. "Agent Strike! That is enough!" She shouted, one hand on your arm. "You're out of line! Stand down!"

You glared at her. "You're too soft for this, Lacroix."

"You're too hotheaded," she scowled. "Maybe you need to step outside for a moment."

Glowering at her, you released Van Wyck. "Oh, you going to charm the answers out of him, ballerina? Fine. But when you fail, he's mine," you grinned, rolling your shoulders and flexing your prosthetic fingers. "And you can see how a professional gets the job done."

Amélie swallowed audibly. "I don't think your skills will be necessary, Agent Strike. Monsieur Van Wyck is a reasonable man who wishes to cut a deal. I'm sure he is coming to understand that it is in his very best interest to be cooperative."

"Uh huh," you said, looking between them. "Fine. I'll take a walk." You stormed out of the interrogation room, slamming the door behind you.

Távio sat there, giving you a slightly concerned look. Isha was on the chair beside him, eating more jerky.

"Hey, don't eat too much," you scolded with a grin. "You're up next."

She cocked her head to the side, baring her teeth. She curled her claws menacingly at you.

"Yeah, like that. Intimidating." You grinned, watching Amélie hesitantly apologize for your "unprofessional behavior." Van Wyck wore an earnest look, but all of you knew better than to buy into his act. He was obviously latching on to Amélie as his potential savior, but he still thought he could manipulate her. You were going to change that power balance here in a moment. But you would have to wait for Amélie's cue.

So you sat down, put your feet up, and watched the show.

Amélie was good. The conversation occasionally derailed into more personal territory. Van Wyck liked whale-watching, coincidentally Amélie had seen the noble creatures on her last vacation to Greece. It was a spiritual experience. She then caught herself, embarrassed by her "honesty," and looked away. Van Wyck's expression softened momentarily, and you weren't missing the admiring looks he kept sending her way.

They talked about the NIA, about the stresses of deep cover, and about why he took the job. There were holes in his story, but Amélie didn't pounce on them. Instead she asked more questions, forcing him to elaborate. He could tell a long convoluted story that would collapse on itself upon repeated examination, or he could try to backpedal and "reveal" the truth. He seemed to be doing the latter, a possible result of you calling him out on his lie earlier, but mostly because he
had taken the hook and now he didn't want to disappoint Amélie.

Ziv had decrypted some of Sakai's devices, and Van Wyck had been revealed as another Petras pawn. It was clever to try to shift the blame on Nguyen, but watching him lie gave you a good hint on his tells: his micro-expressions, body language, and attempts to convey sincerity. He was a solid actor, any spy working deep cover had to be. But he was playing against your team of you and Amélie. He didn't stand a chance.

"Espionage is a very lonely field," Amélie said, her expression poignant. A different tone and it could have taken another subtext, but she kept words thoughtful and bordering sympathetic. "It must have difficult assuming another identity. I have had to live undercover for months at a time, but years? That is quite the sacrifice."

Van Wyck gave her a sheepish smile. "There was a lot about my old life that...well, I didn't miss it. I was actually pretty happy here. The pay was good, the work was exciting, and I wasn't doing anything reprehensible, not really."

"Until last weekend," Amélie said, frowning.

Van Wyck bit his lip and looked away.

"Strike was guarding children, ages four and eight. And while I question the wisdom of allowing her near impressionable young minds, they were nearly killed by Sakai's sabotage."

Van Wyck inhaled sharply. As he had probably been the one to report your registration to Sakai, the presence of children should not have surprised him. Was he feigning shock? Or did he not realize that you knew about Sakai?

"I didn't know," he said, voice oddly flat.

Amélie gave him a disappointed look. "Renier, I thought we were going to be honest with each other. You help me. I help you. But I cannot do that if you are going to try to deceive me and throw my efforts back in my face."

"Amélie, I-

"You are lying to me," she said, watching him with wounded eyes. And it was absolutely cutting. You could see the cords in his neck tightening and his fingers clenching.

"No, of course not!"

Amélie's frown deepened. "And now you attempt to lie to me more? What kind of fool do you think I am? I was married to a spy for years! You don't think I know when I'm being lied to?" She stood abruptly.

"No, that's not it. I was just-

"They were children, Renier," she said, shaking her head. "I think I need some fresh air," she said, opening the interrogation room door and stepping out without looking back.

Van Wyck stared dumbly at her and then the door, regret clear on his face.

You grinned as Amélie sauntered over. "You're too good at baiting these traps," you told her.
"You understand now why my family motto is "chasseurs toujours"?"

"Definitely, and wow, you didn't even need to throw the big guns of sexiness at him," you said, shaking your head.

"Too obvious," she said, winking at you. "And I don't try to enchant just anyone, Chanceux. I must say, I am impressed and slightly worried by how convincing you are at playing a psychopath."

"It's a Blackwatch thing," you said, amused by Távio's obvious relief. "We practice our scary faces and try to see who comes off as the most deranged. Genji's been winning for the past few months, but Tataryn is pretty good at it when he actually tries." Though you weren't so sure that Tataryn and Genji were play-acting. Everyone in Blackwatch had...baggage.

"All right. Did you want to let him stew for a few, or should I go in there?"

"Let him sit," Amélie said, her expression thoughtful. "You cannot just burst in there with Isha. I know you planned to rile him up. Perhaps you should bring up his parents who died during his absence. They were estranged, but such reminders do throw people off balance."

"I'll get him riled up, get pissed off at him for coping an attitude, and bring in the murderbird," you said. "That should really upset him."

"All right," Amélie said. "I will sit back and enjoy the show with Távio. Are you finding this to be educational?" She gave him a bright smile.

"I...yes?" He rubbed the back of his neck.

"You've done some hustling," you said. "What are your thoughts?"

"Umm," Távio stared straight ahead, watching the anxious man rapidly glancing between the door and the two-way mirror, trying to figure out if Amélie was really upset or just watching him freak out. "When Agent Lacroix goes back inside, maybe she can commiserate with him about having dead but estranged parents, and how the unfinished business weighs on one's mind. Maybe prime him for confessions."

"Oh, someone has been doing their reading," you said with a laugh.

Távio shrugged, a little embarrassed.

Amélie clapped her hands together. "Very dramatic," she said, nodding in approval. "All right, Chanceux, you're up."

Grinning you stood, took a deep breath, and pasted Gabriel's pettiest, most vicious smile on your face. This was going to be fun.

You swaggered into the interrogation room, and Van Wyck's head snapped back in surprise. You left the door slightly ajar, and Van Wyck's rapid eye movement picked that up too.

"Looks like Lacroix failed," you said, shaking your head with mock regret. "Big surprise. Now we do things my way."

Van Wyck swallowed audibly. "I'd rather talk to Am- Agent Lacroix."

"I bet you would," you said. "She's too soft. A goddamn ballerina of all things. But you
know that already. You're a smart man. And a liar. I don't think you actually worked for Nguyen. It's a good cover, but it doesn't feel right." You tapped your nose. "Nguyen's people never give her up that easily." You shook your head with mock sorrow, like you knew this from very personal experience. "It usually takes some blood flowing to get the tongues wagging."

Van Wyck shivered as you took off your left glove. "That's not necessary, Strike. Really."

"You made it necessary," you sneered. "A lying piece of shit like you doesn't have any real loyalty. So I have to remind you that it's in your best interest to cooperate. Unfortunately, you seem to think I'm as dumb as Lacroix. And that just won't fly." You patted his cheek roughly. "You see, Van Wyck, I knew you were treacherous scum. Your own parents died of broken hearts after you faked your death and took this mission. How fucking heartless is that?" You laughed.

"Shut up," Van Wyck snarled. "You don't know anything." He was on his feet, hands still cuffed in front of him. "You don't know a goddamn thing!"

"Sit down," you said coldly. "Or I will make you."

Van Wyck glared at you, but dropped back into his chair.

"Now, as I was saying, you're a lying sack of shit, who's been trying to string poor Lacroix along. But your sad story doesn't mean a thing to me. Just like Sakai's story didn't mean a goddamn thing to me." You gave him a cruel smile, because he had no idea what had happened to Sakai. Sure, Richard Prince had killed her, but he didn't need to know that.

Van Wyck flinched.

"I got a lot of answers out of her," you said, flexing your blade fingers. "But there are still gaps. And perhaps I broke her a little too quickly. That's the only reason you're still alive, pissant."

The sweat was really dripping down his face now.

"It was Nguyen!" He shouted at you. "She's got a base in Hanoi! I swear to you!"

"Not good enough. But don't worry. I have an old friend of yours." You opened the door and Isha strutted in. She screeched when she saw him, flashing teeth and talons. She leapt onto the chair and the table, shrieking the entire time.

"No! No! No! Keep it away from me!" He screamed, trying to scoot backward in the chair, though it was bolted to the ground.

"Oh, but she liked that bite of you so much, she wants more. I think you can start from the feet," you told her, and Isha hopped off the table. "And you certainly don't need both eyes to tell me about your so-called leverage."

Van Wyck let out a bloodcurdling scream and kicked frantically. "Stop! Stop! I'll talk! Please!"

The door slammed open and Amélie was there, hair flying behind her as she charged in. "What do you think you are doing, Agent Strike? And why have you brought that rabid beast in here?" She shouted, cheeks flushed.

"She's hungry, and if he's not going to tell the truth-"

"I'll talk! I'll talk! It wasn't Nguyen! I was Director Petras I swear! I'll tell you everything,
"Strike, remove that beast immediately, or I will report you to the Strike Commander."

You snorted, and picked up the hissing and spitting Isha as she clacked her teeth at Van Wyck, slavering viciously. She kicked and fluttered, making quite the show, and you had a hard time holding on to her.

"Oh, but she likes him," you purred.

"Out, now," Amélie said, steel in her voice.

Laughing, you carried your maiming bird out of the interrogation room as Van Wyck began to spill the beans, alternating between thanking Amélie for the rescue, and telling her as much as he could about the Director's involvement.

"Who's my big intimidating baby?" You teased, giving Isha more jerky and a fig. She happily took one in each hand and shoved both into her mouth. Távio sat beside you, shaking his head. Lacroix, the mustached one, had shown up, while you were in there, and brought more treats for Isha.

Van Wyck was still talking, and Lacroix had a faintly amused smile in place. "She is very good at this," he mused.

"Amélie? Or Isha?"

"Isha performed very well, but Amélie already has him eating out of her hand," Lacroix said with a wistful sigh. "I am grateful you were here to keep her in check, Chanceux. If she used any more charm, Van Wyck would be declaring his love and begging her for absolution. As it stands, he's just telling her as much as he can in the hopes that she will protect him from you. " Lacroix laughed into his cuff.

"Amélie wants to be the bad cop next time," you said, not rising to his bait.

To your surprise, Lacroix's smile only widened, his expression almost dreamy. "Oh Chanceux, I would not miss that for the world. I think you would enjoy it too. Maybe a little too much." He winked at you.

You rested your face in your palm, unable to formulate a response to that.

Wrists are getting better. Trying to catch up, but fdkjlfadlkjfadkljfdkljdf. Winter is always stressful for me. Not just because I was in retail for so long. Some of it is the lack of sunlight, but there's a good deal of personal shit. Anyway, hope everyone else has their holiday shopping done and is having a lovely time.
...I bought some presents for people from Russia last month and am really hoping they make it in time.
Chapter 110

Chapter Summary

Plans within plans.

Chapter Notes

We have officially broken 800k.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sitting in Gabriel's office, you glanced between Tataryn and Gabriel. Both men wore grim expressions, and you sighed, not liking it when they matched.

"What?"

"Someone sabotaged the brakeline to one of our motorpool vehicles," Gabriel said.

You raised a brow. "Cameras?"

"Painted over. But an Athena drone caught the perpetrator on her camera. I have Jesse handling it."

"OK," you said, looking at Tataryn. "Then why do you both look like someone drank the last mug of coffee?"

"I took the liberty of reserving that vehicle in your name. Just to see what would happen," Tataryn said. "Had it been safe, I would have driven Kseniya back to campus in it."

"...Oh," you said, sitting back in your chair. A penal investigation and another murder attempt in one week. Things were escalating too fast. "So...I shouldn't be renting cars any time soon. Got it."

"I'll be meeting with Prince later today," Gabriel said, shaking his head. "Unless he has anything groundbreaking, we'll proceed with Hanoi as planned."

"...And my status?" You asked, voice soft, because you already knew the answer.

Gabriel sighed, shaking his head. "We'll talk about that later. After I've dealt with Prince, all right?" He jammed his hands in his pockets, beanie hanging low over his eyes.

"I'll start packing then," you said, trying to sound light-hearted, and failing.

Tataryn sighed, crossing his arms. "I am going to take Kseniya back to school. Things are getting too hot here. But I will be back, to help you solve your problems. Do not worry, boss, Lucky. Your Fedya is on the case." He gave an elaborate bow, before sliding out of the office.
You massaged your temples. "Isn't Jesse already-?"

"Yeah," Gabriel pulled his hat off and rubbed his forehead. "He keeps offering to call in some of his "friends" from the "bad old days" as a favor. If I hadn't already spent years busting my ass to keep his identity under wraps, I'd let him." Gabriel came over to your desk. "Do you want to take a trip to New York? That's where Petras is right now."

Your lips curved upward and you pulled Gabriel down for a kiss. He gripped the edge of your desk, mouth gentle against yours.

"So, New York?" He murmured, dark eyes soft as he studied your face.

"I want to." You exhaled slowly. "But it's not enough. I don't just want to kill him, I want to ruin him. I want the entire world to know exactly what kind of scum he is. I want to expose all his bullshit and scheming to the light of day. I want everyone to see him and his allies fucking burn for their sins and I want to show everyone this is what happens when you betray us."

Gabriel chuckled, a predatory light in his eyes. "Keep talking dirty, hermosa. You're going to make me late for my appointment."

"I was sad, Gabriel," you said, reaching for his hand. "I was goddamn heartbroken at the thought of having to leave." Your voice shook and he squeezed your fingers gently. "For the first few days, that was all I could think of. How terrible it was. How much it would hurt. How worried I would be."

"I know," he said. "And I'm sorry."

"And somewhere between rage and overactive scheming, I hit zen. Not the omnic, the state of mind," you added quickly. "Knowing that everyone was willing to step up and cover for me, knowing that I didn't have to run away, well, that helped a lot. But it also reminded me that Petras needs to be brought down. That we need to make a fucking example of him. And if we're going to do that properly, we can't just kill him and make it look like an accident." You kissed Gabriel's knuckles. "I can disappear for a little while. Let him get comfortable again. Let him think he's won. Because it'll be worth it in the end. Because you'll be waiting for me when I get home, and you're going to cook me a fantastic welcome home meal and Jack's going to be there to pour drinks, then we'll try to make it to the bedroom, and we won't leave for days."

Gabriel exhaled slowly. "Of course, corazon. He kissed your knuckles. "But give us another week to get everything prepared. Then you can take your Shanghai vacation."

"I've already got a few projects prepped. Feng keeps good intel on the Shimada. But we need more on Lucheng and Vishkar, mostly Vishkar, because they're fronting too many Talon ploys. And of course, I can do Hanoi groundwork, if I go there beforehand."

Gabriel gave you a wry smile. "I'm glad you're feeling better about it. Because I'm still feeling guilty about letting you go."

"...You and Jack can come too. Maybe Feng will give you baby raptors and-"

"Now you're just being ridiculous," Gabriel said, kissing your nose. "We can talk more about this later. I need to go."

"I'll be here, doing paperwork," you said.

"Genji will be by soon. He's watching your back till I'm done."
"...OK," you said, with a heavy sigh. Because having Genji in the office wasn't your favorite thing.

"He has work to do too. He won't be bothering you," Gabriel said, putting his hat back on.

"That's what you think," you muttered.

"Would you rather I sent Hanzo?" Gabriel asked, raising a brow. "Because that can also be arranged."

"Nope, I'm good. Genji's great. Everything's fine. Save all your pent-up meanness for Prince, OK?"

"I have to be civil with Prince," Gabriel said dryly. "We've made a connection, you see."

Rolling your eyes, you went back to your paperwork.

"Huh, wasn't expecting you to visit again," Prince said, leaning back in his seat. "In fact, was expecting a little more static for how things went down last weekend."

Gabriel smiled thinly. "Why?"

"Killed that agent, didn't I? Sakai was it? Knocked around some of your medics. Tried to kill Bái Shé, but that one agent...Lucky Something or Other, got in the way."

"That the second time she's come after me. Does she have personal beef or something?"

"She was in DC during the attacks. Had some encounters with your people. You know how women can be. Overly emotional."

"That explains it then," Prince said with a nod. "Some people take things too personally."

"I'll keep that in mind," Gabriel said, the words coming out smoothly, despite the dull roar blood pounding in his ears. Prince had just signed his death warrant, though Gabriel would have to work out a more...comprehensive plan. Couldn't have the "Most Valuable Prisoner" turning up dead in Blackwatch care. It would have to be after they transferred custody. Tataryn or the Shimadas were the best choice if he wanted to make it look like an accident...

"Oh, she's one of your agents. I forgot how Mama Bear you get when they're threatened. It's an admirable trait in a CO."

"I think your problems started a lot earlier than that."

Prince gave that armless shrug again. "Probably. Now, I have to admit, I'm a little disappointed. Are you going soft, Reyes? After that jailbreak last weekend, I thought you'd be more upset. You aren't growing fond of me, are you?"

"I have to be civil with Prince," Gabriel said dryly. "We've made a connection, you see."

"I have to be civil with Prince," Gabriel said dryly. "We've made a connection, you see."

Rolling your eyes, you went back to your paperwork.
"Such a masochist," Gabriel said, shaking his head. "You talk like I should be upset. You killed Sakai. So what? Good riddance. She was a traitor working with Petras to get you out of the picture before we could question you further. Sure, Morrison isn't happy, but I think you did us a favor. If we took her into custody, we'd have to go to trial, make a big circus of it. As it stands, she's dead, and the problem is gone. Leak plugged. Thanks, Dick."

Prince blinked a few times. "So you know about Petras. Huh."

Gabriel leaned back. He could see the gears grinding in Prince's head. "I know that you weren't getting to go spend your money on a retirement in paradise," Gabriel said. "Not that it matters. You went to Bái Shé to confirm the existence of the conditioning, instead of trying to escape."

"...Have to say, Reyes. It's kind of impressive how right you've been so far. Makes me wonder what else you know." Prince stared at him, those shark eyes flat. "Makes me wonder why you're keeping me around."

"Oh, plenty of people want to take you out back and hook you up with a nine millimeter pension plan. Believe it or not, I think that's shortsighted. Because in Blackwatch, we recruit useful people. Waste not, want not."

Prince threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, I'd heard. I just didn't think you'd apply that to me."

Gabriel shrugged.

Prince held his chin up at a cocky angle. "So what do you want from me?"

Gabriel rolled his eyes. "If you have to ask, you aren't nearly as smart as we've given you credit for."

"You want information on Nguyen's properties in Hanoi," he said, flatly.

Gabriel leaned forward. "That would be a good start."

"And what do I get out of it?"

"If you managed to escape, do you think Petras or Nguyen would just let you live?" Gabriel asked. "Would they believe that we hadn't let you go, because you gave us some interesting intel? How about the conditioning? Know you weren't a fan of that, and even if we're enemies, I haven't lied to you at all. And right there we've been better than your former employer. You killed Sakai? Thanks. I think you've demonstrated some good behavior, which earns you some lenience."

Prince blinked a few times. "You must think I'm some kind of fool-"

"No, Prince. I'm a practical man. You have a use, I have a need. You make a lot of assumptions based on society's hypocritical moralistic norms. I'm a fucking black ops commander. I don't care what people think. I get the job done, and if it violates some snowflake's empty morals, so what? I'd like to see them do better."

Prince smiled. "Huh. Well, that's refreshing." He looked around. "Remind me of the date again."
Frowning, Gabriel told him.

"Hmm, well, if you're going into Hanoi with your cyborg friends, you might want to do it sooner rather than later. Nguyen was installing a new defensive AI seed in a few weeks. Fries unauthorized omnics and cyborgs. She would have done it sooner, but getting the parts upgrades was trickier than we expected. She had to call in some special favors, and there aren't a lot of places producing that kind of tech."

"Omnic make?" Gabriel asked on a whim.

Prince smirked. "You have done your homework. Yeah, we had to go Russia to source some things. Numbani suddenly stopped dealing with us."

Gabriel nodded, brain making too many connections too quickly. "Not the Mediterranean?"

"Petras is the one dealing with them, by proxy of a proxy, of course. Fuckers have a hair trigger. Won't talk to anything organic. You have to pay the right kind of omnic to go underwater."

Gabriel felt the world grind to a standstill. He blinked very slowly.

"They've been giving you trouble in that region, haven't they?" Prince chuckled. "Don't know much about his plans, but I've got my theories. He and Nguyen don't care for each other much. Just worked together on DC because of Kwento and because the rest of the Talon bigwigs wanted to make the city burn. Nguyen has her own crusade. Has a real bleeding heart for the tin cans. But Petras? He just another politician. Scum scrabbling for power." Prince shook his head. "It's fucking disheartening to see how one blowhard draft-dodging coward could climb so high."

"Yeah," Gabriel said. "Imagine working for him."

Prince laughed. "Why do you think I quit the Army, Reyes? You were smart to get out. Maybe not to end up on the back shelf in Overwatch, but we can't all be perfect. I'm starting to see the light, Reyes. Maybe I want to help out. My poor underdeveloped conscience is starting to twinge." Prince smirked. "And maybe I miss real sunlight. None of that filtered UV shit."

"You know," Gabriel said. "Originally, I was just going to cut you till you begged me to let you die." He laughed. "But that was considered inhumane."

Prince smiled thinly. "And now?"

"And now I'm dying to see just how much trouble you can stir up."

Prince leaned forward in his seat. "For the right price? A whole damn lot."

"I'm listening," Gabriel said, knowing then that he had won this round.

Sprawled out across Jack's couch, you petted Isha's head, half-dozing as she snuggled against your chest. The door clicked shut, and you slowly opened your eyes.

Jack leaned over the back of the couch, still in uniform, grinning at you. "Hey, sleepyhead."

"What time is it?"

"Just after 1800 hours." He bent over and kissed you, and mouth insistent against yours.
"Gabe's finished up with Prince and out grabbing dinner."

Isha chirped as he leaned over to give her a kiss on the snout.

Yawning, you stretched out your arms and set your murderbird on your lap, before sitting up. Jack shed his coat and boots, and plunked down beside you, one hand already massaging the back of your neck.

"Heard about the motorpool. McCree's got the guy. One of our own damn mechanics. He and Torby are grilling-"

"Torby?" You blinked.

"After last weekend, you better believe he's interested in any mechanical sabotage on the premises. He's not doing anything...unethical," Jack said, hesitantly. "He's just there as a technical advisor, in case some of the engineering is lost on McCree."

Jesse could be pretty handy when he wanted to be. And you seriously doubted that Torby was just sitting there quietly giving mechanical advice. In fact, you could see Jesse and Torby teaming up like you and Amélie, and no matter whom he was paired with you had a hard time seeing Torby as the *good* cop.

Jack exhaled slowly. "Thoughts?"

"I think we know where this is going," you said softly.

"...I don't want you to go anywhere," Jack said, hunching over beside you. He rested his elbows on his knees, and turned his head sideways to watch you.

"I don't want to go anywhere, but-" You took a deep breath. "I already told Gabriel. Yes, I'd love to hop a transport to New York and shove Petras out a window. But I'm taking the long view: I'd rather tear him down in front of everyone, and expose his network of corruption. And killing him right now doesn't get us that."

"Yeah," Jack said. "That's true. And I bet he'd look great in an orange jumpsuit heading off to prison. Where he'll suffer a mysterious accident."

You grinned. "Yeah, that's the other part of the plan."

"I figured," Jack said, shaking his head. He sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I don't mean to make this harder on you. I just...I want you to know that I don't like this idea at all. That I'm not just trying to shut you down because I'm afraid. I know this is the wisest course of action." He gave you a wry grin.

"I don't know, Jack," you teased. "Maybe you're just looking for an excuse to take a Shanghai vacation."

Jack frowned then. "As fun as that might be, I need you here, with me and Gabe." He straightened up, turning those wide blue eyes on you. "Maybe I don't say it enough, but I don't take you for granted. We both know I'm a mediocre cook on the best of days, and that sometimes if left on my own, I can overlook some very important things. You've probably figured out that I don't like sleeping alone, and that coming home to find you and Gabe here is just...it makes me forget how stressful my day was." He nuzzled your throat.

"How stressful was your day?" You asked, fluffing his hair.
"Don't remember," he said. "Except for the part about the sabotage. That's got me pretty pissed off." He combed his fingers through his hair, pushing it out of his face. "And I know I'm not the only one who needs you. I feel better knowing you're working closely with Gabe. I know I get too damn caught up in shit to remember things myself, and then I don't end up taking good care of him, but you're there and while that's not an excuse to neglect him, I know that he's got you and you're making sure he eats, sleeps, and doesn't murder anyone right off the bat." Jack shot you a guilty look. "Not that that's solely your responsibility, but--" He sighed. "Gabe is long overdue for some pampering, isn't he?"

"Yeah," you said, lips quirking at Jack's guilty face.

"Hey, quit letting me get distracted," Jack murmured. "That's not what I'm trying to focus on right now." Isha squawked as he set her on the coffee table, one hand resting on your knee. "Both of us like having you close. If I were poetic like Gabe, I'd spout some quote about how you soothe our battered souls or something. But I'm not. I just know that having you here with us makes me happy, and the idea of not having you here fucking aches." Jack cupped your face. "My feelings don't change a thing. We're going to do what we have to do. But I just wanted you to know. I don't want you to misunderstand and get any weird ideas about leaving to make things easier for us. Because it won't." He shut his eyes, but that did nothing to diminish the raw emotion on his face or the pain in his voice. For a moment, you forgot to breathe.

"I love you too," you said, kissing him gently, your voice hoarse. "I know exactly where you're coming from. You're a jerk who wants to make me cry." You rested your head against his chest. "Saying all those things and looking at me like that. Goddamnit, Jack."

"Sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. He stroked your hair, before hugging you too tightly against his chest. "Sorry," he said again, lips brushing your ear. "I'm sorry I let it get this far and--"

"Not your fault, Jack," you said, even as he pushed you back onto the couch, his hands gentle. "Not even your responsibility. That slimy bastard is technically your CO after all."

"...Baby, if I'm the goddamn Strike Commander, a fucking hero of the Omnic Crisis, I should at least be able to protect my girl-"

"You're Jack. You tell me terrible jokes, you kiss my scars, and you hold me when I'm sad."
Your fingers traced his cheekbones. "You're just Jack and I know you've got my back. We're supposed to have realistic expectations only." You paused, suddenly realizing the flaw in your argument. "And it is very realistic to expect you not to go on some rogue solo mission to off Petras."

Jack grumbled something under his breath as he gave you a sharp look.

"What was that?"

"I said, "No, you really do have some fucking unrealistic expectations," he growled, nipping your bottom lip. "I didn't get to where I was by just sitting back and letting things go wrong." He kissed you again. "I certainly didn't win over you and Gabe by playing it safe."

"I can't speak for Gabriel," you said, running your thumbs along his jawline. "But you didn't win me over with your heroism and aggressive combat skills. I mean, those are some sexy traits, but this is Overwatch, a lot of people here happen to be good in a fight. Some of them are even as shockingly good looking as you."
Jack narrowed his eyes at you and then you could practically hear him wondering whom you were referring to.

"But Jack, you were patient. You respected my limits. You saw my scars, and you just held me tighter." You exhaled, slowly, squeezing your left hand into a fist. "Gabriel saw them, and felt guilt, like he had to do a better job protecting me. I'm not upset with him for it, not at all, but that wasn't good for either of us. You just...accepted it all. You acknowledged them, and moved on, to sparring, cuddling, sex, the important things. And I needed that more than pity or coddling."

Jack's expression softened, and he smiled almost shyly. "You get caught up in your head, sweetheart. We all do it, but you and Gabe are kind of similar in that regard."

You shook your head, not really seeing the parallel. "Sometimes, you were alarmingly clever. You set traps, like a manipulative bastard, and you were so damn good at it, you coaxed me into love with you before I even realized it."

"You make it sound like I had some kind of grandiose plan." You weren't fooled by Jack's sheepish expression; underneath it he practically glowed with pleasure. "I knew you were...recovering from some heavy shit. I didn't want to do anything to make you uncomfortable or hurt you."

"And I appreciate that. But do you know what else you showed me?" You asked, both hands on his face, tilting his face so he was looking at you. Jack's mouth opened and shut, and you could see him wracking his brain for a good answer.

"A good time?" He winked, laughing at his weak joke.

"You showed me that maybe I could have a life beyond revenge." You swallowed roughly. "That maybe I could be happy again, even after everything that went wrong. I'd forgotten what that felt like."

Jack's eyes widened, and he wrapped both arms around you, crushing you against him. "That's what I'm know for, being the great hope of our age," Jack muttered, his voice husky in your ear. "Or at least that's the role I've played on occasion," he said in your ear. "It means a lot more coming from you."

"It's practically your middle name," you said with a laugh. "Except not, because your middle name is Francis."

Jack growled and pinned you against the couch. "Really, sweetheart?"

"You're right, I'm getting distracted," you said. "This is like my third chance at life, Jack. I don't know if I'll get any more. I'm not letting impulsive revenge ruin it for us." You poked Jack in the chest. "Do you understand me, Francis?"

You expected a smart ass remark. Maybe, "more like your thirteenth chance Miss UnLucky!" But Jack drew a shaky breath and kissed you then, all his frustration, hunger, and grief stealing your breath away.

When he let you up for air, you blinked a few times, your vision blurring.

"I understand," he said, peeling off his gloves. "And even if I hate your motivation and am suspicious of your timing, I'm really glad to hear you say all that. I...well, I know both you and Gabe are understandably focused on avenging everyone we lost at Black Base Delta. Just...was worried about how obsessed you were. Gabe too." Jack pulled you onto his lap, and you sat facing
"I still am," you admitted. "But...it's not the only thing that's important to me. I want a future." You sighed softly, wishing you were a better speaker. You wanted something intangible that you couldn't quite put into words, but you knew that whatever it was, it included Jack and Gabriel.

Jack stroked your hair. "Been looking at houses. Here, back in Indiana, California, Hell, Amélie's got some recommendations in French wine country..."

"Your French is terrible," you said, when you could make words.


You nodded. "Yeah. Cheese is good."

"Is this...too much?" He asked, unable to hide the raw longing on his face.

"Maybe," you said, kissing him. "But I think my heart can take it now. You've done a good job of putting it back together. And anyway, why are you even asking such a silly question? You like "too much."

"La politique, quand elle est un art et un service, non point une exploitation, c'est une action pour un idéal à travers des réalités," was the quote Lacroix greeted you with, and you rolled your eyes.

"You know, idealism just sounds ridiculous coming out your mouth," you told him. "Like it's not even just plain sarcasm any more, it's layers of mockery smothered in contempt with a sprinkling of old-fashioned snobbery to top it off."

"Delicious," Lacroix said, still sounding amused. "But I was actually referring to the series of maneuvers Madame Kwento has taken to counteract our beloved Director. That includes her "investigation" into "Blackwatch mismanagement."

"Is Kwento looking to kill two birds with one stone or-?"

"I had a lovely meeting with Monsieur Oladele. Madame Kwento is not looking to oust Gabriel," Lacroix laughed. "Though I'm certain it amuses her to make him squirm a little; turnabout is fair play after all. And of course, their viewpoints are very different. She is pushing several omnic non-aggression pacts through the General Assembly. Most are symbolic, but they certainly signal a change in the climate. It's ironic, really. Once upon a time, Nguyen would have been delighted by this progress. Just like she would have been amused by the fact her enemy was bringing this about. Now, I doubt she has the presence of mind to appreciate this."

You crossed your arms. "Are you ever going to just tell me what happened between the two of you? Or are you just going to needle me with insinuations?"

Lacroix laughed heartily at that. "Such a hunger for illicit gossip, Chanceux. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were curious about my personal life..."

"Fine, don't tell me. I'll just sit here and listen to you monologue like a senile supervillain."
Lacroix just sent you a file, and you picked up your tablet, a little surprised to find another transcript of Ainsley and her mother talking about Overwatch affairs. It was fifty pages long and started out with a conversation about artisanal flax seed oil.

"Skip to the last three pages," Lacroix said, eyes gleaming. "The conversation becomes tense halfway through, but it truly comes to a head in the end."

You skimmed, then you went back a few pages, and a few more, before rereading the last three pages.

Ainsley kept trying to bring up your "accident." And her mother kept changing the subject. But Ainsley kept steering the topic back on track, along with mentioning her uncle's unrepentant attitude. Which her mother didn't like one bit, and kept trying to browbeat her into dropping it.

But to your surprise, Ainsley kept at it. She didn't drop it. She didn't condemn her mother, but Valerie Petras ended the call in a huff, calling Ainsley "a selfish and naive brat." And while you didn't disagree with that assessment, it wasn't this behavior you based that claim on.

"You are becoming better at turning people," Lacroix said, with an approving nod. "I thought it would take at least another few years."

"...I wasn't trying to," you muttered. "I was just being strategically decent, and under protest, let me remind you."

"Take the compliment, Chanceux," Lacroix said, offering you a cigarette. "Part of influencing people is being strategically decent. You can have multiple reasons to win someone over. In fact, it is more efficient and convincing if that is the case."

"Spoke like a true amoral psychopath." You still took the cigarette.

"If they are on my side, I have one less enemy to kill," Lacroix said, offering you a light. "And one less death on my hands."

You blinked.

"It certainly isn't my fault if their old allies kill them for turning," he continued, ruining the moment.

You smoked the cigarette in silence. When it was gone, you spoke. "Her family won't kill her. Maybe cut her off, but Ainsley won't push them that far."

"The Petras dynasty isn't known for capitulating in the face of adversity," Lacroix said, shaking his head. "I believe the American colloquialism is, "mama didn't raise no quitter."

"You know the other part of that quote, right?" You asked, rolling your eyes.

Lacroix laughed. "Go on."

"But mama did raise a fool, and that's a terrible combination."

Lacroix simply shrugged that Gallic shrug. "You don't even like Ainsley Petras, so what does it matter? She is causing disarray in the Petras camp. No matter how small, that is to our benefit." Lacroix smirked at you. "Have you heard how Zenyatta is getting along?"

"No," you lied, because you'd had to loudly remind a few Blackwatch agents that Zenyatta
was a friend of yours, and that you'd be really fucking disappointed if they were inhospitable to your friend. And Genji had made a point to be seen walking with Zenyatta, Hanzo reluctantly in tow. You hadn't asked him to do that, but then, the Shimada brothers had been spending more time with Zenyatta than you expected. The omnic monk had taken a shine to Genji, but you'd overheard him badgering Hanzo quite a bit with weird philosophical bits and what you suspected were the omnic-equivalent of ko-ans, and honestly? Those two deserved each other.

"Really? Then you weren't behind Agent Moore's rather humiliating beating?" Lacroix asked, feigning surprise. "He certainly took issue with Zenyatta's presence, made quite the scene, I hear. Fortunately, young Maeda Vargas stepped up and now Gabriel is reviewing disciplinary actions-"

"What?" You were on your feet. "When? He was on duty this morning and escorted me to the damn gym. How the hell is he in trouble already? I just fucking saw him!"

"Mmm," Lacroix stroked his chin, his eyes bright with amusement. "Tell me, Chanceux, is the irony in your life ever so strong that you can taste it?"

Gabriel took a deep breath as Wilhelm tried to get comfortable in the chair in front of his desk. The oaf was too damn big for the guest chairs with their spindly arms and lack of lumbar support. That was partially why he chose them, so unwanted people wouldn't get comfortable in his office.

"Reyes," Wilhelm shook his head. "I need your help."

Gabriel sat back in his chair, only just biting back a comment on how he wasn't nearly patient or qualified enough to help Wilhelm.

"Young Távio seems to have gotten in a dust up with another Overwatch agent."

"Maeda Vargas is still part of Overwatch and under your command. I don't know why you think I need to be involved," Gabriel scowled, teeth tightly clenched. He glared at the older man, fully expecting a stuttered apology and a quick retreat.

Wilhelm just leaned forward, his smile uncharacteristically sly. "We both know that boy is Blackwatch material, and while I can shield him from the consequences of his actions, I suspect you would do a better job turning this into a teachable moment. I have already expressed my "disappointment" in his lack of self control, but I fear I have established myself as more of a...kindly paternal figure. I am actually quite proud of him for standing up to that bully. So I am afraid I am not qualified to lecture him on the wiser choices he could have made."

"You can do your own dirty work," Gabriel growled. "Just because I'm the bad cop with Jack-"

Wilhelm shook his head slowly. "You misunderstand. I know he will not follow in my footsteps. He has a good heart, but like Lucky, he is a rogue. I am not the best teacher in those techniques. I have forwarded you the recordings of the confrontation, courtesy of Athena, and thought you might be interested in teaching him how better to...not get caught," the older man said, looking embarrassed.

"What?" Gabriel asked, his jaw slipping for a moment.
"Reyes, I do not know how I can simplify this any more!" Wilhelm shrugged. "I have done the hard part. I have told the boy that I am disappointed in him, and have reprimanded him officially. I have already administered a very flexible punishment. I need you to come in and show him the way black ops would have handled the situation. I did not want to just leave it half done, especially since the boy is on Lucky's bodyguard rotation."

"You want me to...tell Maeda Vargas how he could have gotten away with it?"

Wilhelm nodded vigorously. "Exactly! Obviously, you cannot tell him that I requested this. But yes. I thought about going to Ana, but I think you have a better rapport with him. She will just terrify him into good behavior, and after a great deal of soul-searching I am not so certain that is what we need."

Gabriel took off his hat, running his fingers through his curls, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that Wilhelm of all people wanted him to teach a damn rookie how to better break the rules. He stared at the incident report, reading it all but sideways to get another angle. But in the face of all the contradictions and everything he thought he knew about Wilhelm, the facts of the event lined up.

"I'll take a look at the details," Gabriel said, begrudgingly.

"Ah, danke schoen," Wilhelm beamed, his elation clear on his broad open face. "I'll owe you one."

For some reason, despite the man's heartfelt declarations of gratitude Gabriel really didn't trust that smile.

Initially, things didn't look so good for young Maeda Vargas. There was security camera footage of him calmly walking up to Moore, followed by a short exchange of barbs, and then Maeda Vargas slapped Moore in the solar plexus, and followed it up with a carotid slap. It was elegantly done and Gabriel recognized that move, recognized the way the blade of Maeda Vargas' hand struck. Your little protégée might not have metal fingers or a tanto, but he was mimicking your fighting patterns.

If only he could mimic your discretion. At least you only got caught some of the time. Gabriel knew Wilhelm would bend a rule or three if he were so inclined, but he doubted Wilhelm could singlehandedly defend the little idiot from the consequences of his own impulsive actions.

And he was right.

It started with Agent Daniels, the pilot from your Greek escapade. She came forward and stated, on the record, that Moore had been harassing both Maeda Vargas and Zenyatta, and after some questioning from Ana, the omnic reluctantly admitting that this was the case, and perhaps it was his fault that the promising young agent had stepped out of line? Would his CO consider the extenuating circumstances? Then Tataryn, Mihret, and Agent Shoal actually wrote up letters of recommendation, asking for leniency for the boy. Gabriel recognized that Tataryn's was a template he'd cribbed years ago, but Gabriel included it for posterity. Mihret wrote something that actually said "Moore was asking for it, and the brass should be grateful that someone stepped up to prevent a class action harassment lawsuit." Gabriel rolled his eyes, not necessarily disagreeing with Mihret's assessment, but wondering how the hell Mihret thought this would be helpful.
And, the cherry on top? Fucking Ainsley Petras declared herself a character witness and tearfully claimed that "that sweet young man would never attack someone unprovoked." Gabriel was tempted to count that against the boy, but he added to the pile of "things that would prevent Maeda Vargas from facing the serious consequences of his own shortsightedness."

Not that he had to worry about that. Wilhelm was actually disturbingly good at navigating the disciplinary system. He had already sentenced the boy to several months of "hard labor" which Gabriel took to meaning "Lucky Bodyguard Duty," and had apparently provided the transcripts of his severe reprimand. The speech, which Gabriel suspected Gérard helped him write, expressed more disappointment in Maeda Vargas' impulse control, than displeasure in the fact he'd punched another agent, specifically Moore.

Not to mention there were the recordings that Athena "helpfully" provided after he'd asked her, on a whim, if she had any input. It was a video of Moore accosting Maeda Vargas and you during Kseniya's day visit. In fact, there were a few shots of you looking directly into Athena's camera, your hands suspiciously not in the line of sight, your angles perfectly blocked. He'd have to remind you that you shouldn't stare so knowingly at the camera, not if you wanted the footage to appear "natural."

Then there was a suspiciously clear video of you, Jesse, and Tataryn speaking very diplomatically to Moore about his behavior toward Maeda Vargas. The three of you had been smiling the entire time, keeping it friendly and professional, before clearly walking away leaving Moore obviously shaken, but unharmed. In fact, Gabriel was pretty sure there was a part two that Athena didn't record. But that was dated a few months ago, about the time you got back from Oasis with Gérard.

Gabriel shook his head. This was actually nowhere near as difficult as he'd expected. The work had all been done for him. And though he knew you helped run things behind the scenes, and didn't always bother him with every little detail, he was slightly concerned about the fact that he'd had no idea about Moore. Just like the fact you'd recruited Jesse and Tataryn to help you wrangle misbehaving agents. It didn't actually surprise him, but he figured one of them would have let it slip by now.

There was a knock on the door.

"Enter," Gabriel said, turning off his view screen.

Maeda Vargas slunk in, shoulders drooping, Wilhelm flanking him, his normally jovial face, grim and severe. For a moment, Wilhelm actually looked like he meant business. Gabriel blinked once, and Wilhelm winked at him, his frown dissipating for a half second, before he got his disapproving mask back in place.

"Agent," Wilhelm's voice was low and harsh. "While Commander Reyes may not be as personally disappointed in your actions as I am, he is most assuredly not impressed by your lack of self control."

Maeda Vargas shrunk down smaller, staring at his boots, actually keeping his mouth shut.

Gabriel raised a brow. You were right. Maeda Vargas was much easier to handle than Mihret. "I'll handle things from here, Wilhelm."

Wilhelm managed a curt nod, that ridiculous grin threatening to spread across his face, but remembered himself and pursed his lips. He lumbered out of the office, shutting the door loudly behind him.
Maeda Vargas actually flinched.

Gabriel reluctantly found himself impressed. He didn't think Wilhelm had it in him to utter a harsh word to anyone, let alone one of his obvious favorites like Maeda Vargas.

"Well then, let's have it. Why'd you do it?" Gabriel leaned back in his chair, giving Maeda Vargas a sardonic grin. "Revenge? Your sudden overwhelming love of omnis? Did Lucky put you up to this?" He threw the last question out there on a whim, just to see what the boy would do.

"No, sir," he said shaking his head frantically. "She has no idea-"

"Oh, she does now," Gabriel said, with a mean smile, having seen your "WTF" message a few minutes ago. "And she is not happy."

Maeda Vargas buried his face in both hands. "Merda." The young man took a series of deep breaths.

The boy looked so upset, Gabriel almost told him to go into town and buy you a fancy cake as an apology. Maybe he'd give him leave later, after he finished chewing him out. "So, if Lucky wasn't the bad influence behind your reckless behavior, want to explain yourself?" Gabriel didn't try to hide his amusement.

"I got carried away. Yes, Agent Strike tasked us all to smooth things over for Agent Zenyatta, but I know she didn't mean for us to do it like that. I have had some...issues with Moore in the past, but that doesn't excuse my behavior and I shouldn't have let him get to me. I can't offer any excuses, sir."

"Good, because I don't want to hear any," Gabriel said, filing away the fact that you'd been handling Zenyatta's transition as well. Did he not keep you busy enough? Or was that one of Gérard's directives? He felt a pang of pride at how damn competent you were. Hell, if you were going to be in Shanghai, he'd better come up with a more comprehensive plan of action, otherwise you might just join On Sing out of boredom and the idea of you and Feng teaming up long-term slightly worried him. He'd either have to task you with taking down Vishkar, establishing an East Asian outpost, or some other massive project to keep you busy.

Realizing he was getting distracted, Gabriel returned his focus to Maeda Vargas, who seemed to have withered even more in the silence.

"Do you know what your biggest failure was?" Gabriel asked, after letting him stew a few more minutes.

"I struck another agent in anger," the young man said with a wince.

"I'm not going to say that bastard didn't have it coming, but you can't always give everyone their instant dose of karma. Forget what Wilhelm's said. Why do you think Lucky will be disappointed in you?"

"My lack of self control," Maeda Vargas said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Sure," Gabriel drawled, rather enjoying using you as the disciplinarian. "But I'll tell you what will upset her even more: you got caught, boy. That's a big no-no in Blackwatch. We all expected better from you."

Maeda Vargas raised his head, still looking lost. "We?"
"Wilhelm is obviously fond of you and has high hopes for your future," Gabriel said, telling himself it was because it would be salt in the wound, and certainly not because he felt any inclination to speak well of the older man. "I thought someone on Lucky's bodyguard rotation would be more adept at subterfuge. And I'll let you guess what Lucky is going to say about Blackwatch agents who can't keep a lid on their extracurricular activities, hmm?" Gabriel purred.

Maeda Vargas stiffened, the blood draining from his face.

"Exactly," Gabriel said with a smirk. "Where did you go wrong?"

"I-" Maeda Vargas looked around, like he expected this to be a trick. "I shouldn't have reacted immediately, sir. I should have either saved my confrontation for a time and place away from witnesses and cameras, or I should have avoided confrontation and come up with a way to handle him discretely."

"And if you couldn't come up with a good plan, you could always go to Lucky or Wilhelm and they would advise you accordingly. Do you think you're the first agent to be goaded by a bully?"

"I..." Maeda Vargas rubbed the back of his neck. "I wasn't thinking."

"Clearly." Gabriel shook his head. "In Blackwatch, thinking is a requirement. I realize not all my agents exemplify that trait at home, but in the field, most of them are pretty sharp. None of them would have made such a rookie mistake." Actually, Mihret might, but Mihret was Gérard's problem. And yours.

The boy winced.

"But then, it's fortunate that you are still a rookie," Gabriel continued. "You have a lot of potential, boy. It would be a shame to waste it."

Maeda Vargas stared, poleaxed by the compliment.

"In some ways, you remind me a lot of Lucky. Yes, you're unpolished, impulsive, and think you know better than everyone else..." Gabriel trailed off, realizing some of those things hadn't changed. You'd gained some finesse, at least. "But you're resilient, clever, and clearly loyal. That counts for something."

"Sir." Maeda Vargas saluted, his eyes bright. "Thank you, sir."

"So I have higher expectations for you," Gabriel continued sternly. "And more severe consequences. Because you can't afford to fuck things up."

Maeda Vargas exhaled slowly. "Yes, sir."

Gabriel considered some of the penal exercises he'd seen Chang dish out. Those would wear the boy down, sure, but he needed to be in good condition if he was watching your back. There was, of course, that clever little tactic you'd used to make him rethink his "live fire during a training exercise" plan and it had been effective. Of course, Gabriel would take it a step further. He was going to put the eager little shit to work.

"Sit down," Gabriel said. "This might take a moment."

Maeda Vargas planted his butt on a chair, and leaned forward. "Sir."
And Gabriel told him precisely what he was going to be doing. Because even if Feng had your back, Gabriel didn't mind taking extra precautions. To his credit, Maeda Vargas didn't seem daunted by the prospect at all.

"What about Agent Strike, sir? Are you going to explain things to her?" He asked, almost timidly, because apparently your regard meant that much to him.

Gabriel laughed. "Oh no, boy. That's part of your punishment."

Maeda Vargas stared at him, stricken, and Gabriel felt maybe just teeniest bit of pity for him.

"That French bakery she likes closes in an hour," Gabriel added. "If you're quick, maybe you can buy a modicum of mercy."

Maeda Vargas was out of his chair and running from the office in seconds. Gabriel debated sending the boy a list of things he wanted as well.

Chapter End Notes

Hands were doing better last week, till I started writing. Then was in minor pain Thursday and major pain Friday. Did some writing Sunday and really paid for it Monday. Have now rearranged my home desk in a standing configuration. I tried it last night and it might help? Am still sore from Sunday, don't know if last night contributed to it. Hoping this helps, but not sure. Not writing is stressing me out on top of work, adulting, and whatever else life is throwing at me that I am currently ducking.

Hope everyone had a good holiday!
You sat there in Lacroix’s office, listening to Reinhardt recount everything. From his stern paternal "disappointment" to making Gabriel his ally in the scheming. Lacroix chuckled throughout the entire explanation. You only relaxed when Reinhardt told you that Távio's "hard labor" punishment was at his (and Gabriel's) discretion, and he had not forgotten that the boy was on your bodyguard rotation.

"Though, I'm not certain how effective he will be," Reinhardt said in low tones. "He is so small-"

"Everyone is small beside you," Lacroix laughed. "Maeda Vargas can fight, as we've all seen. And when he actually stops to think about his actions, he is actually refreshingly sharp. Rather like someone else we know."

Rolling your eyes, you scowled at Lacroix.

"It took a few rehearsals," Reinhardt said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I knew that Távio immediately regretted his haste, and that my words would just be vinegar in the eyes, but Gérard edited my speech. I was not entirely comfortable with everything, but Gérard has more expertise on this sort of thing. Overall, I think it went as it should have." Reinhardt gave a small nod. "Thank you."

"I have some experience handling impulsive young men," Lacroix smirked.

You rolled your eyes, not wanting to know anything about what he got up to with Ziv. Ugh.

"It was cutting," Lacroix said brightly. "Appropriately so. Do not look so concerned. Agents McCree, Tataryn, Shoal, and Daniels have already stepped up, and Zenyatta has also put a word in with Kwento. Everything on that front is under control."

You sat back taking a deep breath. "So what do I have to do?"

"Whatever you want," Reinhardt said cheerfully. "I have already done all the dirty work."

You blinked, having never expected to hear Reinhardt tell you that.

Having wrapped up one of the weirder personnel meetings you'd attended, and you'd sat through several given the kind of shit Tataryn, Vo, and the Shimadas got up to, you headed back to
the office, curious about what Gabriel had said to Távio.

And there, in front of the office door, stood Távio, well, maybe not standing. He slumped against the door, panting loudly, his hair in disarray, sweat soaking his uniform, and a cloth bag clutched to his chest as he tried to straighten up and salute you.

"Ma'am," he croaked. "I'm really sorry, I let you down. It won't happen again. I swear." He tugged at his collar, face scrunched up.

"...Are you all right?" You asked, trying to figure out why he was so out of breath. Had Gabriel taken a page from Chang's book and decided to make him do modified suicide runs, or something worse? You thought Reinhardt had handled all the punishment. Gabriel was just supposed to build the boy back up.

"I'm just really penitent," he mumbled, handing you the bag. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, ma'am. Commander Reyes said it might be wise to go into town and get you this. I'm not cleared for motor pool privileges so I took the bus one way...but then there was an accident on the return trip, so I ran the rest of the way back."

You glanced down, recognizing a box from your favorite bakery. You raised a brow. "Such blatant bribery, agent?"

Távio gave a laugh that could have been a sob. He wiped his forehead. "A gift?" He said, in a voice laced with hysteria.

You opened the box and peered in to see a whole chocolate cake. It was one of the twelve-layer, ganache-filled wonders, with slightly melted artisan chocolate shapes on top. It was wonderfully large, and smelled of bittersweet chocolate and pure decadence. Your lips quirked upward.

"Well, Moore had it coming," you said with a grin. "Next time, don't get caught. Or come to me instead. We'll figure something out; it might even be within the rules."

Távio blinked, like he was expecting you to tear another chunk of him. Nope, Gabriel and Reinhardt had handled all that. You got to be the good guy this time. After all, he had brought you cake. Plus you would have had to rough up Moore again anyway, and honestly, with the "investigation" going on, you didn't need that kind of scrutiny. Távio could have done a better job, sure, but you weren't sore at him, not since you knew what was going on behind the scenes.

"Ma'am," he managed a weak smile.

"Seriously, stop getting caught," you said, patting him on the back. "If you'd managed to handle Moore without attracting attention, I'd be buying you the cake right now." Shaking your head with mock sorrow, you opened the office door.

Távio's eyes widened in disappointment.

You just took your cake and shut the door behind you. Because in Blackwatch, you could never reward getting caught.

You cut the cake, rolling your eyes at just how damn amused Gabriel was. He had finished his slice with a cup of coffee, and was eyeing the remnants.
"No," you said.

"I'm the one who told him to get it for you," Gabriel said with a frown.

"Jesse, Shoal, Tataryn, Daniels, Ziv, and Reinhardt all get slices too," you said, having already sent out the message. "That's only fair." Sure, you'd cut yourself an extra large slice, because it was your cake after all, but you were being responsible.

Daniels declined politely, probably wrongly assuming that "cake with Blackwatch" was codeword for some kind of scary operation. You decided not to disabuse her of that notion. Hell, if you could get Tataryn to popularize that phrase...

"This is how you maintain ironclad control of our agents, isn't it?" Gabriel sighed, sipping his coffee.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," you said, sitting back in your chair and sipping your coffee. "Goddamnit, Ziv wants me to bring him his slice. For fuck's sake, he can walk over here."

"No, he's banned from my office, for all eternity," Gabriel said, scowling.

You massaged your temples. "Really?"

"Yeah. So you might as well give me his piece."

Shaking your head, you decided to just focus on eating your own share of the cake.

"Then Marc- I mean, Lucy," Jack shook his head. "It's been five years, but I'm still not used to calling her that. I spent much longer calling her another name..." Jack paused. "That sounds wrong. I just knew her longer under her old name."

"I know what you mean," you said, laughing softly as he began to turn pink.

"I just called her "Freeman, you goddamn punk," all the time," Gabriel said with a snort.

"Lucy was in my class," Jack said to you. "She's pleasant and responsible, kind of the unit "mom friend." She'd get really fussy if you interfered with her domestic ways. But she could finesse all the difficult people too: Andre, Ray, and even Gabriel at points."

"She's a busybody," Gabriel muttered, though there was no real malice in his voice. "Been sending me messages about visiting Tía Elena, and trying to mend things with Mr. Roberts, and why haven't I sent Blue a congratulations on his new cat? For fuck's sake, I'm running a black ops division, not a book club."

"Oh, remember that time she tried to get Ray and Munoz to put their differences aside and-"

"And they both put her on full blast? Yeah. I thought Chang was going to murder two people that night."

"Or the time she got after Yuan about not unloading the dishwasher? And Yuan just stared at her blankly and began breaking the dishes instead."

Gabriel laughed. "Or that time she starting haranguing Immerman about her dating habits?
"True, but she shouldn't have done it in the mess hall in front of everyone," Jack chuckled.

You curled up on the couch, eating tacos while Jack and Gabriel talked about people you didn't know and might possibly never meet. You were pretty sure some of them hadn't survived the Omnic Crisis, but you didn't want to ask. Because both men were enjoying their conversation, and Gabriel had a hard enough time talking about the past. You didn't want to shut him down.

It was a past you'd had no part of, and that made your chest clench. You weren't jealous, not really. But when you went to Shanghai, they'd be here without you. Just like before. And you'd be on your own, wondering if they really needed you after all. Wondering if they'd realize that too. You took a deep breath, recognizing your insecurity for the irrationality that it was. You hugged the throw pillow tighter, not listening to the words, but the cadence, the tone of Jack and Gabriel's voices, the easy flow of their words. You took deep slow breaths, feeling Jack's hand on your knee, though he and Gabriel continued chatting happily.

You let yourself drift, eyes dropping shut.

And then someone's hand was on your back, and you were moving up, up, upward. Grumbling, you reached out to brace yourself, your hand flailing in empty air.

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's get to bed. You should have said something if you were tired," Jack murmured, his breath warm in your ear. He gently set you on the bed, one hand rubbing your shoulder.

"I was just resting my eyes," you said with a yawn. "I can stay up-"

Gabriel laughed softly. "Raise your arms, corazon."

You complied and he helped you get your shirt off. You wiggled out of your pants, giggling as Jack tossed them into the laundry hamper. Crawling under the covers, you let them push you into the middle of the bed, two sets of hands stroking your skin.

"Love you," Jack said first, nuzzling the back of your neck. "Love you both."

"Les amo." Gabriel kissed your forehead.

"Yeah, I love you too," you said, nestled between them, trying to remember why you'd been feeling so anxious. Sometimes your mind was like that. Sometimes your feelings were entirely irrational. It was normal though, you knew, to have unpleasant, unreasonable thoughts. You just had to make sure not to act on them. And maybe take some time to yourself to get your head on straight.

"You doing all right?" Gabriel asked, his voice soft and sleepy. "You were really quiet tonight."

"Was too caught up in my head," you sighed, kissing his shoulder. "Better now."

"Anything me or Gabe can do?" Jack asked, sounding much more awake.

"Can't think of anything," you said, squeezing his hand. "Too comfortable right now."

Jack chuckled in your ear, arms wrapped around you. Gabriel kissed the top of your head, arm slung over you and Jack. You held them close, and resolved to savor this for as long as you
You awoke to gentle kisses on your inner thighs, the blankets rustling, and someone laughing softly. Eyes fluttering open, your breath caught as Gabriel pressed a hot open mouthed kiss to the side of your neck.

"Ngh?" Was the sound that escaped the back of your throat. The blankets shifted and Jack's hands spread your legs, his tongue slipping inside you.

"That was a cute noise," Gabriel purred in your ear. "See if you can get her to do it again, Jack."

You dug your hands into the sheets, eyes widening as Jack sucked on your clit, his fingers tracing the edges of your slit. He pushed one, then two inside you and you arched, whining as he stretched you.

"Love waking you up like this," Gabriel said, his large hands cupping your breasts, lightly pinching your nipples. "Would've been me down there, lapping at that sweet pussy, but Jack owes you one, doesn't he?"

"I-" You stuttered, brain bleary as you squirmed between them. Gabriel lay on his side, still in his pajama pants. Your tired mind tried to remember what he was referencing. It was difficult to think with Jack's fingers slowly pumping in and out of you, his tongue pressing hard against your nub.

"I'm sorry I missed it," Gabriel continued, his voice low and rough. "But he told me all about how he woke up the other morning with you stretched out between his legs, sucking his cock between your pretty lips. How you drank him down like a champ. And while he was catching his breath, getting ready for round two, you just gave him a cheeky wink and walked out."

You groaned as Jack's fingers began to move faster, the pressure between your legs growing.

"I was going to be late for work," you panted, remembering how you'd had to speed-dress after that. "Would have gotten you too, but you were already gone." Gabriel tended to wake up before everyone else.

"You can do that for me anytime," Gabriel murmured, laughing softly. "Of course, I'm just as likely to flip you over and pound you into the mattress in retaliation. You wouldn't be walking straight after that, and you'd be very late to work, which is a shame because I hear your boss is a real hardass."

You gave a choked laugh as Gabriel nipped your shoulder.

Jack didn't tease any more, his fingers and tongue working you in tandem while you squirmed against the bed.

"That's it, hermosa." Gabriel kneaded your breasts, nipping and sucking on your neck. "Love having you between us. Love seeing you spread out like this. I'm not going to have time to fuck you like you deserve, but tonight, I'll make it up to you, promise. Going to fill every one of your sweet holes-"
Arching, you came with a soft cry as Jack moaned against you, his tongue firmly wiggling against your clit. His fingers gradually slowed, and he raised his head, the blankets falling off his shoulders, cool air a shock against your skin. Grinning at you, he wiped his mouth off on the back of his hand and kissed Gabriel hard.

Gabriel dug his fingers into Jack's shoulders, groaning.

"You're going to be late soon," Jack teased as he broke the kiss. "And I know for a fact that your boss is a real hardass."

You giggled as Gabriel gave him a dry look. "Round fuckable ass maybe."

Jack just leaned over to kiss you and you sighed as he nuzzled your neck. "Good morning, sweetheart."

"Morning."

Jack just grinned at you, looking quite pleased with himself. He kissed you again. "Gabe has to go in the earliest, so why don't you take care of him first? Then we'll have part two."

You raised a brow at Gabriel, because you didn't normally stay in bed for sex while he worked.

"You don't need to be in the office this morning, not while Beaumont is lurking on site," Gabriel said, his expression tightening. "And Jack's morning is open."

"Oh," you said, realizing then that both men were trying to cheer you up. Because officially, you were suspended. You would just have to work remotely, because you weren't out of the game. This was just for show, you reminded yourself. Subterfuge done right.

Gabriel gave you a rueful smile. "Sorry."

"For what?" You leaned over and kissed his nose. You reached down with your left hand, carefully rubbing his erection through his pants. He gave a soft groan. "We have to make it quick, right?" Your metal fingers trailed along his thighs, up to his waistband, under the fabric, and back down. You could feel his heat in the palm of your hand, and you began to stroke slowly, his tip already slick with precum.

"Thought you'd use your mouth on him," Jack said, his cock pressed against your ass. But then Jack loved watching you choke on them.

"He's in a hurry," you said, arching a brow at him. "Because his boss is unreasonable."

Gabriel snorted. "You two are hilarious."

That wasn't how you wanted your sexual performance rated, so you flexed your fingers. The humming started up and Gabriel swore, inhaling sharply as you squeezed his shaft.

"Oh sweetheart," Jack groaned. "You should use those inside him..."

"Later. Going to be late. Have a meeting with Ana. In a hurry," Gabriel gasped through gritted teeth, more like he was trying to remind himself, not you or Jack.

"So you aren't tempted to stay in bed with us?" Jack teased, because he was a little shit.

"Shut up, Jack," Gabriel groaned, eyes falling shut. "You know I am. You know I'm going
to spend the morning thinking about what you two are doing in bed and wishing I was here with you."

Jack just chuckled. "Maybe we'll send you pictures."

You were pumping his cock hard now, your fingers pulsing while he jerked his hips, his skin hot against yours. "Don't worry," you told him. "We'll both be thinking about you too. I know I'll be fantasizing about how hard you're going to fuck me tonight. You say a little anticipation is good for Jack, and that's true, but the same goes for you too."

Gabriel's eyes flashed. "You little cocktease-"

"Oh papi, I'll be missing you so much," you purred, nipping his throat. "I think Jack and I can both agree that it's best when you're here too, whether you're holding one of us down, wrecking us with this massive cock." Your hand sped up. "Or sitting there watching Jack and me play, or on your knees taking it from Jack..." You exhaled slowly, turning up the vibrations.

Gabriel growled, arms wrapping tightly around you while he thrust into your hand. He bit down on your shoulder as he came, and you squealed.

"Fuck," Gabriel rasped, fingers digging into your back.

"She made you come in your pants again," Jack teased, reaching over you to kiss Gabriel. "What is this? High school?"

"You're going to get it tonight," Gabriel said, tilting his head back. The smile he gave you was absolutely wicked and a frisson of pleasure fluttered in your belly. "Going to spend all day thinking about what I'm going to do to you."

You kissed him then, laughing as you wiped your hands off on his pants.

You made the coffee while Gabriel got ready for work, and Jack packed him the leftover tacos. You were naked and Jack was still just in pajama pants. Gabriel was out the door in minutes, his smile holding a sharp edge. You did not envy anyone who had to sit in on meetings with him today.

The door clicked shut, and suddenly you were upside down over Jack's shoulder as he carried you back to the bedroom.

You laughed as he dropped you onto the bed, and plunked down beside you, stretching out on his side. He gave you an easy smile, hands resting on your hips.

"Feeling better this morning?" Jack asked.

"With that kind of wakeup call? Of course," you said, kissing his hands.

"Still feeling playful, huh?" Jack nuzzled your neck. "Taking a half day, so I have to be in the office at noon," he said. "But we still have time." He took a deep breath. "It's been a rough week. Do you want to be in control, or do you mind if I take the reins? If you're not feeling power play, we don't need to do-"

"Despite all the teasing, I'm not quite up for the hard stuff just yet. Still kind of fuzzy," you
said, muffling a yawn.

"I can very be sweet," Jack murmured, running his thumb over your bottom lip. "We can go slow. I like taking my time with you. I don't do that enough." A calloused palm stroked your hip.

"You can be in charge, if that's what you're feeling," you said.

Jack studied your face, his expression thoughtful. "Nothing rough though, got it."

He nodded to himself. "Are toys all right?"

"Sure," you said, stretching out your limbs. You paused, suddenly remembering the "dildo bat" picture he'd sent you during a meeting. You'd made a smarmy reply about commissioning Torby to weaponize it further, but stopped short of actually forwarding the picture. Despite the jokes, you did have a faint sense of self preservation. "Toys are fine, within reason."

Jack chuckled, possibly thinking of the same incident. "You just get comfortable, baby. You've been so tense lately. I'll take care of everything else." He rose, whistling softly as he knelt beside the nightstand.

You craned your neck to see what he was looking for.

"That can't be comfortable," Jack said, not looking up. "Pile some pillows up and relax."

Rolling your eyes, you stacked the pillows to an acceptable elevation, and sunk backward. You pulled the blankets up to your chin, because you were naked and it was getting chilly.

The mattress sunk as Jack climbed back into bed with a box. He chuckled. "Got cold, did you?"

"Was that what you meant by "taking your time?" You laughed, no actual sharpness in your words. You half expected Jack to bite you in retaliation, but he just gave you a sheepish grin.

"Sorry, sweetheart." He pulled the blanket aside and took a moment to study your body, an appreciative smile on his lips. He kissed you hungrily, skin wonderfully warm against yours. "I guess I'll speed things along then." You squirmed, legs closing as you felt something cool pressed against your inner thighs. "Nuh-uh," he chided, nipping your shoulder. "Hold still."

Your breath quickened, as he pressed the soft silicone egg to your clit, the motor pulsing hard, already making your muscles clench. You bit your lip.

Jack smiled down at you. "You always liked this one," he said. "Do you want the rabbit too? I know how much you like being filled..."

"Please," you inhaled sharply.

Jack just shook his head. "So spoiled. Is that how you ask nicely?"

"Please, sir." Your voice wobbled. It was hard to concentrate with the vibrations constantly thrumming against your core.

"Good girl." Jack patted your head, and you would have bitten his hand, but he looked genuinely pleased. He reached into the box and brought out a familiar blue rabbit vibrator. "You're wet enough to take it." With one hand he rubbed the tip against your slit, the other hand setting the egg aside.
You gave a whine of disappointment.

"You want both?" He asked, feigning surprise. "What a greedy little pussy." He took your hand in his. "All right. Hold this one in place," he said, handing the egg to you.

You didn't miss how his eyes lit up as you rubbed the egg against your clit, your hips shaking as you panted softly.

Jack knelt between your thighs, focusing on slowly pushing the shaft of the toy inside you. You threw your head back, breathing heavy as he guided in to the hilt. Already the egg had you close to edge, the constant friction just what you needed to finish.

Jack began to pump the toy in and out of you. "You're so wet already," he groaned. "And I'm wishing it was my cock inside you right now, dragging those sweet little noises out of your throat." He watched you, pupils wide, tongue flicking out to moisten his lips. "I love watching you play with yourself, sweetheart. Love seeing you like this. Can we send Gabe a picture later? I'll put it in the vault."

"Yeah." At first you'd been hesitant to leave evidence, but one of the privileges of power was the heavily encrypted data vault that the Strike Commander shared with the Blackwatch Commander. Nothing was guaranteed unbreakable, but by the time someone managed to bypass those security protocols, they'd also have access to all kinds of compartmentalized Top Secret files, including Shit Spiders and honestly, that would be worse than all the naked photos.

"You're getting distracted," Jack said, ruefully. He licked his fingers, and one began to stroke the edge of your back entrance.

You jerked upward in surprise, the egg vibrator flush against your clit. Jack chuckled, and fingers circling the other sensitive cluster of nerves while he began to move faster with the dildo. The beads in the rabbit began to rotate inside you, and you swore, not quite expecting that.

"Nothing rough right now," Jack murmured, kissing your thighs. "But tonight, Gabe's going to fuck you silly. Best to get you nice and stretched out for him-"

You moaned as you came, the vibrator just too efficient. You set the egg aside, taking a few shaky breaths.

Jack grinned at you a mischievous light in his eyes. "Sweetheart, I neither gave you permission to come or to move that toy. If you can't be trusted to behave, I'm going to have to use firmer methods."

You squinted at him. "Jack, you know-"

"Shh," he said, shaking his head with mock sorrow. "Hands above your head."

You gave him a dirty look.

"I'm being very patient," he said, with a smug look. "I haven't forgotten the rules, unlike a certain difficult woman."

You blinked, and very slowly raised your arms.

Jack retrieved a pair of padded cuffs, the chain long enough so your arms wouldn't get stuck too long in one position. You held still as he looped it through the headboard and secured each wrist.
He also got out the lube, a blue jeweled anal plug, and a few other things. You raised a brow. The boy scout was really prepared.

"When you mentioned "toys" I didn't realize you were going to go all out..."

"I'll be gentle, sweetheart," he said, his boyish grin completely at odds with the array of sex toys lined up on the bed. "You just relax. I'll take good care of you, I promise."

The plug had gone in first, and true to his word, Jack had been careful and had taken his time, making sure you could accommodate it comfortably.

"It looks so cute in you," he said flicking the base. You jerked upward. "How's it feel?"

"Snug," you said.

Jack chuckled and cleaned off his hands, before picking up a long thin chain. There were little adjustable clips on each end and you stiffened as he carefully lined one up with your left nipple.

"Too hard?" He asked as he tested a few settings.

"No, no...yes!" Your voice went high and he loosened it. He did the same with the second clip, putting light pressure on each sensitive nub. Cheeks pink, he tugged on the chain, and you arched, eyes rolling back in your head.

"That was adorable. Let me know if it starts to get uncomfortable," he said, kissing your forehead.

You nodded, eyes squeezed shut.

Jack gently stroked your hair. "Too much?"

"Didn't expect my day to go like this," you said.

"We'll do this more often then," Jack purred. He picked up the egg, and a roll of medical tape. You shuddered as he secured the toy to your clit. "Relax, the adhesive comes off nicely. It won't hurt your sensitive skin, honest." He kissed your pussy.

"That's not the only thing that's worrying me-" You muttered.

"I haven't forgotten about filling you up," Jack said, with a cheeky laugh. "Are you afraid I'm going to get you all wound up and leave you like this while I go off to work?"

"...That wouldn't be funny," you growled.

"No," Jack agreed. "It wouldn't." He kissed your nose. "I wouldn't do that. Unless you wanted me to and we planned it out first. But that's not something to do on impulse."

You exhaled slowly. "Yeah, I know you wouldn't do that."

Jack just shook his head, like he didn't quite believe you. "I have a blindfold too. I always found it makes the experience more intense. May I put it on you, or will that be too much?"
You blinked a few times.

Jack kissed you again. "Don't worry about it. You can use it on me later and see if you're-"

"I'll try it," you blurted out.

Jack sat back on his heels, his eyes soft as he watched you. "If you're sure." He held what looked like a black sleep mask, and put it over your face.

The world went dark, and you decided that this would make a good sleep mask as well. Hmm...

There was another tug upward and sleeping was suddenly the furthest thing from your mind. You squeaked as you arched off the bed, nipples hypersensitive as Jack played with the chain. He pulled it again, and it was a like a bolt of lighting coursing from your breasts straight to down your spine and between you legs.

"Liked that, did you?" Jack asked, voice husky.

"Oh god," you moaned, because the plug in your ass started to wiggle. This too came as a shock, not because you didn't expect it, but because in the dark every touch was just more acute. And then the egg turned on, the setting low but insistent, igniting your already sensitized nerves.

"Relax sweetheart, I have everything under control," Jack said, sighing happily. You felt the bed shift as he knelt between your legs, and resumed slowly fucking you with the dildo.

You swore and writhed, the stimulation almost overwhelming. Your entire body was too sensitive. But Jack didn't escalate. He kept it controlled, and while you'd half-expected him to just throw the rabbit vibrator aside and fuck you into the mattress till you were screaming your safe words, he kept a languid pace, kissing your thighs and stomach. Changing the patterns of his strokes and the motions toys, keeping you guessing.

"You look so pretty like this," Jack sighed. "I could do this all day, you know. Just keep you on edge, till you're a squirming mewling wreck."

"Jack-" you whined.

"I could do the opposite," he continued, ignoring your protests. "I could do this-" The egg began to vibrate harder and you cried out, bucking your hips. "And see how long we could go before you're begging for mercy." The vibrator suddenly slowed down, and you gave a sigh of relief. "But that's not what you asked for." He tweaked your nipples before pressing a hungry kiss to your mouth.

"May I send Gabe a picture of you like this? Tied to my bed, filled with toys, those pretty lips parted just like that? I bet he'll come back here for lunch, if I do."

"You can take the picture." You shuddered and the shaft of the dildo bottomed out inside you. "But Gabriel's got work to do."

Jack laughed. "So responsible." Jack kissed your cheek, his touches light, but your skin was extra sensitive right now. "God, I love you sweetheart. And I'm so fucking hard it hurts. But I can't stop touching you. Would rather watch you fall apart right now than jerk myself off."

The bed creaked as Jack rose. There was a click. And then he was back in bed beside you. The egg began to pulse harder. And Jack fucked you nice and slow with the toy, its texture
enjoyable, but not as thick or warm as your lovers' cocks.

"Please-" You were surprised by how hoarse your voice was. "The toys are nice, but I want you, sir."

Jack groaned, and you could hear him fist his cock while he sped up with the dildo. "Sweetheart, we're going slow."

You gave a cry of frustration. "Please sir-"

"Going to make you come from this at least once," he said. "Because once I'm balls deep in that juicy little cunt, I'm not going to last, all right?" He kissed you again. "But I'll be damned if I can deny you anything when you're being so good."

"Thank you, sir," you panted.

You could hear the toy slipping in and out of your sopping wet slit. Every so often Jack reached up to pluck at your nipples and each time it affected you more, your composure unraveling. You weren't quiet at all now, and in the back of your mind you wondered if maybe Jack should have gotten the gag...

You could feel your face heat up, along with a few other spots, your body tensing in pleasure. Maybe next time you could use it on Jack... You shivered, eagerly moving your hips in time with his motions.

"Look at you, so damn needy-" Jack's voice grew rough. "A toy in almost every hole and it still isn't enough. I should fuck your sweet ass while you buck and cry against that vibrator. I wonder how long you'd last."

You wouldn't. You wished you could see Jack's face, but you could hear the need in his voice, the way his breath caught, his control slipping. You could picture him hunched over you, gnawing on his bottom lip, cheeks flushed as he watched you with those hungry eyes and that open lust that always made your stomach clench. You could practically see his long pretty cock bobbing there, already leaking all over.

"Jack, I'm close-"

Jack's breathing grew louder and he kissed your hard, lips bruising yours. "Not yet, sweetheart. You have to hold out a little longer."

Whining, you drew several hiccupping breaths. He sped up and you dug your heels into the mattress, teeth clenched as you strained against your bonds. You couldn't get away from him, and you couldn't escape the persistent buzzing on your clit. Each stroke of the dildo went deep, the slick sounds of it echoing obscenely in your ears.

"Please-" you sobbed. "I need-"

"I see you trying to hold out," Jack exhaled in your ear, his bare chest brushing against yours. "Just a little more."

You thrashed against the bed, muscles locked up as you tried your hardest not to come. You were wound tight, but the constant stimulation wore away at your resistance. And despite his orders otherwise, you knew Jack was doing his damnedest to drive you over the edge. "Sir, I can't," you wailed.
Jack growled. "All right, go on then, sweetheart. Come for me."

Thrashing from side to side, you dug your fingers into the pillows and let go, the constant rhythm of the toys fraying your nerves. They had a different quality than the warmth of your lovers' bare skin. Your orgasm was hard, efficient, and over quickly. But before you could catch your breath, the pleasure grew again, rubbing your nerves raw, because Jack had left everything in place.

"Jack it's too much..." Your voice was shakier than you expected.

"You can take a little more," he said, kissing your throat.

You shrieked as the vibration power spiked, and threw your head back into the pillows, trying to get away from it. "Goddamnit!"

"Shh," Jack chuckled. "Just a little more. Promise. Won't try to set any records for how many times you can come."

You gritted your teeth, already feeling another orgasm building on the tail of the last one. And then the power shut off, and Jack pulled the toy out of you. The egg and the plug remained on, but dropping down to a low, almost ignorable setting. Then Jack yanked the blindfold off, breathing hard, his wild blue eyes locked on yours.

"You OK?" He asked, cheeks flushed as he ran a calloused palm along your forehead.

"I'm going to bite you," you said, petulantly.

"I don't mind," Jack said, voice low. He kissed your nose. "Do you need a break or..."

"Let me catch my breath," you sighed.

Jack chuckled, uncuffing your wrists and kissing each one gently. You patted his cheek.

"Going to do this to you too, you know," you said, giving him a smug look. "Only I'm going to get you a ball gag and-" Jack groaned. "Baby, I'm dying here."

You raised a brow. "You haven't come yet this morning, have you? Poor thing..." You kissed his chin. "I like the toys, but I like you better. But I don't need as much time to recover from the toys-" Jack was on you immediately, rubbing the head of his cock against your pussy. "Going to leave everything else on, if you don't mind," he said, tugging the chain on your breasts while slowly pushing inside and your vision went white. "Oh sweetheart," Jack groaned as you wrapped your legs around his waist. He reached down and grabbed the remotes. Suddenly the anal plug and the egg vibrator whirred back to life.

"Damnit-"

"It feels good, the vibrations, the way you twitch around me, seeing that look on your face-" Jack pressed his forehead to yours. "Thank you, baby for letting me do this."

You shuddered, hands gripping his arms while he began to move faster, his hips jerking at an unsteady rhythm. Jack's cock was noticeably bigger than the rabbit and you loved the way he
felt inside you, the friction, the heat, the way he filled you up.

Jack set a fast pace, kissing you hard as he thrust into you. He was chasing his own release now, but it would be a lie to say you didn't enjoy watching him move with such desperation. Grinning, you bit him then, teeth sinking into his shoulder and he cried out. But he didn't stop.

You rolled your hips, and Jack just smiled at you, his eyes hazy with lust. He kissed you hungrily. Hands gripping yours, Jack murmured your name as he began twitch and shake. Your breath caught as you felt him pour inside you, vibrations shaking your core the entire time. You weren't far behind him, clinging to him while he coaxed another orgasm out of you, his hips still moving at a languid pace, his mouth on your throat.

It was another minute or so before he shut off the toys. Jack was soft inside you, but he just lay there, holding you against him, basking in the afterglow.

You snuggled against him, knowing you were going to be uncomfortable soon, but there was something addictive about seeing Jack in this cuddly sated state.

"Thank you," you told him, kissing his nose. "I enjoyed that."

"I'm glad," he said. He brushed his damp hair out of his eyes. "Did you mean the part about the gag?" He asked, almost sounding embarrassed.

"Did you want me to?" You asked, raising a brow as you felt him harden inside you. "Like that idea then?"

"Yeah," Jack murmured, cheeks turning red. "I like it a lot."

"I'll keep that in mind," you said, running your fingers along his lips. "Do you want to tell me more about the things you like?"

"Oh yes," Jack exhaled. "I want to do that very much."

The door slammed open, then slammed shut, and the familiar stomping of metal boots on Jack's cheap carpet made you raise a brow. There was a pause and you heard them clang as they were kicked carelessly across the floor. Jack stretched out beside you, grinning as a barefoot Gabriel stalked into the room, already stripping off his hoodie. Eyes wild, he glared at Jack, pulling his shirt off and tossing his hat onto the dresser.

"Morrison, you fucking cocktease-"

"You know Reyes, stripteases are supposed to be done a little slower, not that I'm complaining," Jack smirked, petting your hip. "Anyway, aren't you supposed to be working?"

"Fuck you, I'm on lunch," Gabriel snarled. "Some of us don't have the luxury of lazing about in bed all day, Commander." The belt hit the ground and Gabriel peeled his pants off, still glowering at Jack.

"Should I give you two some privacy?" You asked, archly, maybe a little put out that Gabriel hadn't acknowledged you yet. Because Jack had left the plug, nipple clips, and egg in place, anticipating that your other lover would like them.
"You stay right where you are, hermosa," Gabriel growled, turning that hungry stare on you, his expression fierce. "Who do you think is the reason I've been hard for the last two hours?"

"Jack, by the sound of it," you drawled.

"Pretty Boy is a goddamn instigator and he'll get his," Gabriel snapped. "But that's not why I'm here." Naked, his heavy erection slick with precum, Gabriel climbed into the bed, hands on both sides of your hips, his body radiating heat.

You shivered as Gabriel gripped your hair and kissed you hard. "Oh, did you miss me?" You murmured, your voice shaky and he nipped your bottom lip, hands stroking your sides.

"Like a drowning man misses air," Gabriel rumbled in your ear, mouth already traveling down your neck. There would be marks later. You didn't mind. "I have less than an hour. Tell me to stop and I'll take care of myself right now. Otherwise, papi is going to use that time to wreck his filthy little slut, because obviously Morrison isn't keeping her busy enough."

Jack had the audacity to chuckle.

You moaned as Gabriel gave the chain on your nipples a light yank. He sat back on his haunches, breathing hard as he waited for you to give him an answer, one fist already closed around his shaft.

Licking your lips, you took a moment to appreciate the strained look on Gabriel's face, the sweat beading on his forehead, the way his muscles tensed and flexed, especially in his thighs and forearms. Gabriel was on edge, and it sent a delicious thrill through your belly to know that it was all because of how much he wanted you. He wasn't going to be gentle, and he wasn't waiting for tonight. It was really bad that you'd distracted him from work, but on the other hand, you appreciated the compliment.

"Please papi." You smiled, holding eye contact. "I want you to use me hard. Jack got me all prepared for you..." Before you got another teasing line out, you were flat on your back, one leg over Gabriel's shoulder. He gave you a savage grin, before slamming into you, his thickness always a shock to your system. And even though you expected it, you still screamed. Because he filled you so thoroughly, already all the way in to the hilt. He gave you a second to adjust, his eyes bright as he kissed you roughly.

"You're going to regret teasing me, baby," he growled.

"Not...teasing," you panted, grinning up at Gabriel's face. "Want you. All of you." You cupped his face kissing him again.

"Going to give you exactly what you asked for," Gabriel said through clenched teeth. "Going to remind you exactly who's in charge." He brushed your hair out of your face, one hand cupping your cheek. "Going to make damn sure you remember whom you belong to."

"So possessive," Jack laughed, and suddenly you arched, the plug in your ass humming away.

Gabriel gritted his teeth, not looking at Jack. "Going to wreck you both, don't worry. But you'll get yours tonight, Morrison. Anticipation and all that." Gabriel began to move again, burying himself deep inside you, each stroke leaving you breathless as the toy inside you vibrated. Gabriel's expression remained positively feral, his fingers digging into your skin, his cock battering against your inner walls.
Clawing at his back, you moved with him. Gabriel grunted and pushed you flat against the bed. Those dark eyes stayed on your face, though one hand moved to squeeze and pinch your breasts, and you clenched around him, sobbing his name as he pounded you into the mattress, fully intent on tearing you apart. It was a good thing he'd done this on the bed, and not bent over a desk or on the floor, because he wasn't holding back and you needed some cushioning.

You accepted what he had to give, metal fingers splayed at your side as you gripped his forearm with your right hand. You wouldn't be the only one with marks.

The vibrations in your ass spiked and you thrashed from side to side, squealing as Gabriel sped up. Each thrust bottomed out, and the intensity of it verged on pain. But seeing Gabriel like this had your blood up. You'd be sore later, but right now you wouldn't dream of stopping.

"Please-" You couldn't focus on much besides your own pleasure and watching Gabriel, the look on his face more akin to something you'd see on the battlefield.

"Begging for mercy already?" He rumbled, not letting up.

"No," you choked out. "Need you, papi. Want you to wreck me."

"You're just saying that because I have a time limit," Gabriel laughed harshly. "Maybe I'll take a half day too, and give my cock-starved girlfriend the ride of her life."

You grinned up at him, not quite as intimidated by that prospect as he expected. Partially because you loved rough sex with Gabriel, partially because most of that ire was directed at Jack.

"Hey, I took good care of her," Jack protested, not actually sounding offended.

"There's my cocktease boyfriend who needs a thorough pounding too," Gabriel said, shooting Jack a dirty look. "Though I might start with that smart mouth of his, since he doesn't know when to shut up."

"I love tasting her on your cock," Jack murmured, suddenly at your side. He leaned in to kiss Gabriel.

"You'll get your turn, mi cielito," Gabriel said, biting Jack's throat and Jack groaned, the need in his voice obscene. He turned those dark eyes back on you. "This one has gotten too cocky for her own good."

"I can help with that," Jack said, and suddenly the egg vibrator whirred to life. You swore loudly, and Gabriel stiffened. He gave Jack another sharp look before resuming his hard thrusts, his eyes on yours.

"You're not going to last, hermosa. Leaving those toys in place was a tactical mistake."

"You like how that sopping little cunt of yours squeezes me harder. Still going to wear you down before it affects m-Fuck!" Gabriel snarled as you clenched your inner muscles. With a growl, he shifted angles, pushing your knees over your head.

Your breath hitched and you wailed as he hit a vicious pace. Already you were drowning in sensations, your blood pounding in your ears. Gabriel's cock pushed you higher and higher and while you were pinned in place, your toes curled and your cries grew louder as you teetered on the edge.
"Papi," you moaned, voice raw. "Want you to claim my ass next-"

Cursing in profane Spanish, Gabriel's thrust grew wild and your inner muscles clamped down tight on him, before a ripple of pleasure spread outward, your orgasm dragging Gabriel deeper inside. You shrieked, not giving a damn how loud you were, because neither of you were holding back now.

"Goddamnit, baby girl-" Gabriel growled hoarsely. And he wasn't far behind you at all. With a roar, he hilted himself inside you, a flood of hot cum coating your inner walls. He released your legs, and you lay there, taking shaking breaths while he kissed your face, still muttering in Spanish. The toys shut off and you gave a sigh of relief.

"Fuck, that was hot," Jack groaned.

"Time," Gabriel said, voice raw.

"Eleven thirty," Jack said, a little breathless. "You know, that's a pretty early lun-"

"Can it, Morrison," Gabriel said, stroking your forehead. "Baby, do you really want me to-?" He studied your face, eyes still bright with excitement.

"Maybe not as rough as the last round," you said, when you could speak.

Suddenly you were on your stomach, and Gabriel was carefully pulling the plug out. Jack moved to your side, handing him more lube, and you inhaled shakily as Gabriel poured it inside you, before positioning his head at your back entrance.

"It's always so hot watching your ass take his massive cock," Jack said, patting your head. "Part of me is always a little apprehensive, like he's going to break you. Part of me can't wait to see it."

You buried your face in the pillow, whining as Gabriel slowly pushed inside you, his strokes more languid, one hand rubbing circles on your low back.

"Papi-" You whined, as he continued to stretch you out.

"Just breathe," he said, his voice a low rumble. "You're almost there."

"Thank you," you moaned. "Didn't really expect you to come by during the day. You really do spoil me-"

Gabriel groaned. "When did you get so fucking cute?" He growled in your ear. One arm circled around your waist and he pulled you into his lap, ass pressed against his thighs. He spread your knees over his.

Panting, you grinned at Jack, who might have conspired with you over this approach. After all, being difficult was fun, but maybe Gabriel had come to expect that, and being a Blackwatch agent, you had to be...flexible in your tactics.

You squealed as two fingers slid into your slick pussy. Gabriel began to bounce you on his lap, thick fingers pumping in and out of you while he stretched you out. You could feel him in your belly, and you whimpered softly as he began to rock his hips, beard brushing the nape of your neck. He was so warm, and you could feel yourself melting against his chest.

"Is this what you wanted, baby girl?" He murmured, no longer sounding quite so on edge.
You exhaled slowly, eyes half shut. "Yup." You tilted your head back, grinning up at Gabriel. "Thank you."

Gabriel's nostrils flared and he cupped your chin, kissing you again, fingers making lewd sounds inside your pussy. "Been thinking about you all day. And then Jack sent me that picture and I couldn't concentrate on another goddamn thing." You moaned as he fucked you slow and hard, his cock so deep you would swear you could feel him in the back of your throat.

"Going to do the same to Jack," you said cheerfully. "Only with a ballgag."

You could feel Gabriel twitch inside you at that statement. "Sounds good to me." He kissed the side of your neck. "Seeing you like this...corazon, I think you're playing with me."

"You're the one who's balls deep in my ass and pushing his cum back inside my pussy," you moaned.

Gabriel groaned. "Now I know you're fucking with me. Taking power bottom lessons from Jack, then?"

"Learning the art of being "cooperative," you said, giving Jack a smile. "Don't get too used to it."

Gabriel just laughed.

"Got room for one more?" Jack asked as he stroked himself, giving you and Gabriel a hopeful smile.

"Always," you said.

"I'm still sore at you," Gabriel said without any heat in his voice. "But you'll get yours tonight."

Beaming, Jack kissed Gabriel over your shoulders, and slowly pushed inside you.

"You're late now," Jack said as you lay curled between them, Gabriel stroking your hair and kissing your bruised shoulders. He'd left a large bite mark that was already starting to purple. The toys were cleaned up and you yawned, sleepy once more and rather disliking the thought of them both leaving so soon. You took a deep breath, reminding yourself that you were a competent, capable adult, and could function perfectly fine on your own.

"I'm taking a page from the Strike Commander's book and only putting in a half day," Gabriel said. "But now you're one who's going to be late."

You sighed happily as Jack kissed your forehead. He winked at you. "Guess I better get dressed." He made a hilariously pouty face, and mimed wiping away a tear. "If Gabe's staying behind, I had definitely better go in." He gave you both a wistful smile. "I'll see you both tonight?"

"Oh you can count on it," Gabriel said, giving Jack a vicious smile.
Hope everyone had a good New Year (celebration? night?) and that 2019 is better than 2017 & 2018 combined.

Hands are unpredictable. Trying to type gentler. That seems to help.
Chapter 112

Chapter Summary

The First Annual Blackwatch Tea Social

Chapter Notes

Annie Drew made some more In Alio Loco themed doodles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"There you are," Jesse said, rolling his eyes as he caught you coming out of Gabriel's quarters with Isha. "Don't you check your messages, sugarpie? Also, I asked Athena to tell you-"

"I am not permitted in Commander Reyes' quarters," Athena said primly from the overhead speaker. "You should have knocked when I gave you her location."

"I ain't interrupting their private time," Jesse muttered, turning a red.

"Well, neither am I," Athena sniffed. "Don't ask me to do the jobs you're to chicken for, Jesse."

Jesse rolled his eyes and shook his head, giving the ceiling a fondly exasperated look. "Whatever you say, partner."

"Everything all right?" You asked, and Isha cocked her head to the side, chirping inquisitively at Jesse. You suspected she was looking for Bandit.

"Except for the fact you're late, yeah, everything is coming up daisies," Jesse said, grabbing your hand. "We have to move. Now."

"Wait, what?" You raised a brow. "Jesse, slow down. What's going on?"

"Ain't got time for explanations. Come on, hustle! We both need to get changed."

"Into what?" You narrowed your eyes in suspicion.

"Fancy suit things," Jesse laughed, dragging you back toward the Blackwatch dorms. "Come on. We're going to be late!"

You and Jesse both emerged at the same time, you in a variant of your Assassin Butler suit, a black and red waistcoat with gold accents, gold pocket square, and that slim gold tie you'd "borrowed" from Jack. Your gloves, however, stayed black. Isha wore her cute little black and blue vest, reluctantly, and you hugged her to your chest, careful to keep her claws from snagging on
Jesse emerged in a black three piece suit with that damn silver bolo tie and his hair combed back like he was kid being sent off to church. You blinked, a little surprised that he'd actually used product on his hair.

"So what exactly are we doing?"

"Walk and talk," Jesse said, beckoning you to follow as he speed-walked down the hall. "Amélie got impatient. She spoke with Ziv. And bam! Things happened, because no one wants to keep her waiting," Jesse said with a nervous laugh. "Sorry, sugarpie. Would have tried to keep you in the loop, but it's been so busy and Amélie singlehandedly..." He trailed off, scratching the back of his head.

"Where's Bandit?" You asked, suddenly concerned.

"With Amélie," Jesse sighed. "She bought him a new outfit."

"I know someone who was supposed to be smart once said, "beware of ventures that require new clothes," you muttered.

"Ain't that the truth," Jesse nodded as you both emerged in the mess hall. To your surprise, three long tables had been put together into one large table, and covered in crisp white tablecloths. More shockingly, there were real live floral arrangements, as well as covered dishes, place settings with real porcelain plates, and several tea services on carts. The seats were not empty either, about a third of Blackwatch was there. And the kicker? You weren't the only one in formalwear.

Hanzo and Genji both wore their suits from the Shanghai trip, and you were grateful that you'd chosen the red and gold ensemble so you didn't match Hanzo's blue waistcoat. Bandit sat on Hanzo's lap, wearing a little doggie tuxedo, his bowtie silver, a top hat set on his head with an elastic strap. He didn't look pleased about the hat, but Genji was in the process of slipping him one of those red bean filled pancakes.

Riggs was setting cookies on the table, wearing a dove gray suit and white gloves, chatting happily with Ziv. Ziv was rocking a teal suit with lemon yellow gloves and a matching bowtie. He reminded you of a spring confection, maybe one of those sugar-coated marshmallow animals, only much surlier. But the outfit still looked shockingly good on him considering you'd never really pictured him as a pastels kind of guy.

At the center of things, Tataryn and Amélie seemed to be directing everyone.

Amélie had worn a suit, a slim cut number in indigo, no shirt underneath the jacket, gold necklaces layered along her collarbone. Her hair was up in an effortless chignon, and narrow-legged pants and gold heels rounded off the outfit. Amélie always looked amazing and graceful in dresses. It came as no surprise that she could absolutely slay in a suit.

Tataryn wore a white suit, with actual tails, gleaming buttons, and his hair flowed in golden waves down his back. A full-blossomed red rose graced his boutonnière, and he had topped the outfit off with white gloves. He smiled graciously at everyone, looking like a goddamn fairytale prince, and you glanced at Diallo, who was rolling her eyes good naturedly.

She wore an elaborately patterned dress, all geometric shapes and full layered skirts in bold primary colors. There was a platinum tiara on her head, a simple upside-down triangle, but her hair was out of its knots in a lion's mane of natural curls. She winked at Jesse and then tugged on
something. You recognized that tiny gloved hand, clenched in an angry fist.

Glaring, Vo sat there beside her, expression vicious as she yanked her hand free and crossed her arms. Cleaned up, hair combed, and wearing a too-large and obviously borrowed blazer, Vo gave Amélie and Tataryn the dirtiest look you’d ever seen, and promptly crammed a handful of petit fours in her mouth. Her cheeks bulged comically as she turned that glare on you, and you nearly choked on your tongue.

"There you are, Chanceux," Amélie beamed at you. "You're just in time."

"For what?" You blurted out as Tataryn pulled out a chair for you beside Amélie.

"The First Annual Blackwatch Tea Social," Amélie laughed, like you said something especially silly. "Come now, Chanceux, you organized most of it."

"Huh," was all that you could say. Because getting most everyone in one place was like herding cats. But you had at least gotten everyone to agree on what they were going to bring...

You glanced at the very fancy teapot in front of Tataryn, and he smirked as he poured something obviously not hot into his dainty teacup. This close, and you could definitely smell the bourbon. Shaking your head, you debated pouring yourself a glass. You weren't on duty after all.

"We got it!" Shoal shouted as she stumbled into the gathering. She wore the same pretty green dress she’d had in Cologne, and was carrying a familiar cake box from your favorite bakery. Jemison was with her, also in same slick white suit she’d worn when she escorted Jack to Cologne; she had three covered pies and no packaging, so maybe they were homemade? You did recall that she’d promised Shoal "all the pie she could eat" for taking the trainer position in her stead. Távio was right behind her with more bags and he wore a deep green suit, black shirt, and white tie that all looked much more...stylish than he usually dressed. You glanced at Amélie who just beamed at you.

"Ziv helped him," she said. "He is learning to be a good mentor."

And you would bet your left thumb that Amélie helped Ziv, but there was no reason to point that out. "Very nice," you said with a nod.

"Make sure you tell him that," Amélie said.

All this formalwear and hubbub had not gone unnoticed. Passing Overwatch agents were openly staring, maybe with a little bit of envy, as Jesse and Tataryn began pouring tea and distributing desserts and little trays of sandwiches around the table. You started to stand up so you could help, but Amélie placed a hand on your shoulder.

"Relax, Chanceux. Enjoy yourself. We have the rest of it taken care of." She smiled brightly at you, eyes twinkling with delight. "Isha looks absolutely darling. Was that handmade?" The curve of her smile revealed that she knew exactly who’d been sewing outfits for your raptor.

"Yeah, another exclusive," you said, stroking Isha's feathered head.

"He will have to make me some as well," Amélie said, with the cheerful confidence of someone who had no doubt that she would get what she wanted.

Other Blackwatch agents stopped by to chat, but only the ones in full formal attire sat down at the table. In fact, you noticed little handwritten cards mapping out all the seating arrangements. Had she actually managed to get Blackwatch agents to RSVP? How? Holy shit, Amélie was going
to be amazing at handling agents.

Isha gave an impatient trill and you looked to your right, where Tataryn had set a little box on the chair for her sit on. Shaking your head, you set her on the box and grabbed a little ham and watercress sandwich to put on her plate.

"Remember to use good manners," you said, wondering if she would just cram the sandwich in her mouth, but she gave Amélie a wary look and picked up the sandwich, taking delicate bites.

Jesse grinned at your murderbird, as he lifted the fraisier from its box and set it on the table. You didn't miss how Hanzo's head snapped to the side, his focus on the strawberry cake. Hell, the intensity of his gaze had probably started melting the whipped cream already. Rolling his eyes, Jesse left the cake within Hanzo's reach and came to pour you some tea. He didn't ask what you wanted, he just gave you a cup of earl grey, with a touch of cream, sugar, and lemon. You might have chosen something else, if you'd had the chance, but it was good, and you inclined your head in thanks.

Then he poured Isha a cup of cream with a straight face and you sighed as she dunked her snout in it.

Shoal and Jemison sat down near you, Shoal helping Jemison lay out the fruit pies: apple, cherry, and coconut cream by the look of it. You grinned at Jemison.

"Jesse invited us. Hope it's OK that we're crashing your Blackwatch party. We brought desserts! Jemmy made all those pies herself," Shoal stage-whispered. "And they're scrummy."

"...I'm still not sure that's a real word, let alone a compliment," Jemison said, one arm draped over the back of her chair. "Thanks for the invitation. It has occurred to me that we could all come down with food poisoning, because that's just the kind of luck you have, but I'm willing to risk it."

You snorted. "Your valor is unmatched."

"I have served in many dangerous places," Jemison said with an agreeable nod. "The tundras of Siberia, the salt flats of Bolivia, the Great Basin desert, but I have yet to attend a tea party with the infamous Lucky Strike."

"It's a good thing we're at headquarters," Shoal giggled. "At least if a dragon attacks or omnics start flooding the toilets, we'll have backup and plenty of guns."

"Always a possibility when Lucky Strike is involved," Jemison said solemnly.

"You guys are jerks," you said, rolling your eyes.

Isha just reached over and took two more sandwiches.

"Hey, we're here, aren't we? And not just because we like to party. Also, Jemmy really wants to pet your dinosaur," Shoal said, cutting herself a generous slice of cherry pie.

Jemison bit her lower lip, fingers coiling around her braids. It was the first time you'd actually seen her look nervous. "Bridget."

"Come on, we both know that's what it is," Shoal continued casually. "Jemmy's embarrassed to admit it, but I still have my plastic dinosaur sets from when I was eight, and..."
absolutely no shame over it." She winked at you.

You rolled your eyes. "Keep it down."

"Was it Zhai? Because that would make sense..."

You nearly facepalmed, before reminding yourself that Shoal was Epsilon Squad's hacker, and a very competent agent, no matter how friendly and silly she acted with you. Jack's elite team wouldn't be made up of fools.

"Isha, Shoal is the one with red hair, Jemison is the one with dark hair." You pointed at them. "They're friendly."

Isha nodded, not looking up from her sandwich, though by now you knew she heard and processed everything you said.

Shoal extended a forkful of pie. "Can she have some?"

Isha looked up then, blue eyes narrowed. Obviously, she recognized offers of treats, the gluttonous beast.

"Sure," you said. "Though I wouldn't share forks with her-"

Shoal didn't listen, her fork hovering in Isha's face. Isha took a bite, teeth scraping against the fork as she bit down.

"-for that reason."

Shoal withdrew a slightly bent fork, her grin widening. Isha chewed happily and glanced at Shoal's plate.

"It's my turn," Jemison said, lightly shoving Shoal back. She offered a spoonful of coconut cream, which Isha happily took, smearing the filling on her chin. You offered her a napkin, and she blotted at her face, chirping excitedly.

"Yes, you may have some pie," you said, already standing to cut her small bites of each one. "Jemison made these, so if you're good-"

Isha turned those clever eyes on Jemison, cocked her head to the side, and chirped approvingly. You'd never seen the lieutenant smile so wide.

"I still can't believe Morrison let you keep her," Shoal said, shaking her head. "I'm starting to believe the blackmail angle."

"You'd blackmail your own mother for a velociraptor," Jemison said, reaching for the ngalakh. Diallo made hers with a mix of baobab and guava juices, strong vanilla, and extra fluffy couscous.

You shrugged. "He likes animals."

Jemison snorted, and you had the sneaking feeling that even if Shoal had no idea what was going on between you and Jack, Jemison suspected. Surprisingly, after all this, that didn't bother you now. Epsilon Squad might not be your unit, but they were good people. So you just had a cucumber sandwich and smiled serenely at them both.

"Blackmail," Shoal repeated, eyes wide as she offered Isha another bite of pie.
Ziv sidled up to you, carrying a bowl of hummus. Without asking, he spooned a large dollop onto your plate, then Isha's. "Savta's recipe," he said briskly, before carrying his bowl off, not offering any to Shoal or Jemison.

Jemison gave him a dirty look, but Shoal scrunched her face up, running one hand through her short curls as she watched Isha begin to lick the plate.

"Is it safe for her to eat hummus?" Shoal asked.

"Yeah," you said. "He's given it to her before. It's really good hummus."

"I want hummus," Jemison said, elbowing Shoal lightly. "You brought pie. It's a good exchange."

"Oh I will," Jemison scowled, standing up and stalking off to catch up to Ziv.

"Ah Bridget, I have you all to myself now." Tataryn said, slipping into Jemison's chair. "Well, I guess I can share you with Lucky. She's collecting quite the harem-

You nearly choked on your earl grey.

"God, you're ridiculous, Tataryn," Shoal said, turning beet red.

"Ridiculously good looking," he sighed, giving her a slow, sexy smile, those light blue eyes promising all kinds of wickedness. You briefly felt your own pulse speed up. Goddamn Tataryn, messing with everyone.

You looked up, a little surprised to see Riggs watching Tataryn with an equally red face. So that was his type. To be fair, Tataryn could transform into anyone and everyone's type. He was disturbingly good at playing a role. Shaking your head, you smiled down at Isha, who was happily drinking her cream and eating her pie. An Athena drone hovered nearby, and you hoped she was getting pictures that she would share with you.

"Oh, I'm just in time!" Boomed a familiar voice, and you nearly fell out of your chair. Reinhardt pulled up an entire table, and set a large box down. "I had to get some help with the setup, but it is working fine now!"

Amélie's eyes widened as he lifted an object out of the box. It was a five tier chocolate fountain, at least a meter high, and with the press of a button, the melted chocolate began to circulate. Beaming, Reinhardt unpacked a tray of fruit and cookies to dip in it.

Vo's eyes got big and round and she poked Diallo rapidly, before getting up, her gaze never leaving the fountain. Isha also eyed the display with undisguised enthusiasm, and you had brief visions of both Vo and Isha sticking their heads into the fountain and just drinking straight from it.

"I'll get you some. You stay where you're at. I mean it," you told your murderbird.

She gave you a dirty look.

You weren't sure if a chocolate fountain was appropriate at a tea party, but you weren't going to complain.

"Távio asked to invite him," Amélie leaned over, her smile sly. "I suspect his feelings would have been hurt otherwise." And it was a good idea for Reinhardt to get to know some of the
Blackwatch operatives. He wasn't in their direct chain of command, so a little fraternization wouldn't hurt anything. "Though I did have to tell him that currywurst was not appropriate for the occasion."

"Someone would have eaten it," you said with a shrug as you rose to get Isha some chocolate and fruit.

Reinhardt stood beside Riggs, chatting happily with him and Ziv. Riggs watched the older man with a familiar reverence that you recognized as hero worship.

You grabbed several strawberries, a banana on a stick, and some small cookies, and dipped them in the upper tier, not missing how Vo was just hanging out there helping herself to the platter. Fortunately, she was still using the foods and not her bare hands. She moved with a mechanical efficiency, dunking, eating, and repeating. You left her there and hovered behind Hanzo and Genji with an apple slice to offer Bandit.

"Your approach could use some work," Hanzo said, not looking up.

"Did you want an apple slice too?" You asked, not taking the bait.

Genji chuckled. "Mihret came through with the wagashi. Did you help him acquire them?"

"...I showed him where to get them awhile ago," you said. "I'm as shocked as you are that he was actually listening."

"Yes, well, you occasionally do say useful things," Hanzo said, without intonation. "Unlike Feng."

"Oh, is there trouble in paradise?" You grinned at Genji who looked even more amused.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Hanzo scowled at you, brows heavy. "If you have something to say, state it plainly."

HA! Your smile widened. Like you would make it that easy for him, especially after all the guessing games he put you through. "I figured you'd be a good team is all," you said smoothly. "You know, bonding over desserts, video games, and dealing with the difficulties that come from having lots of family members who are firmly entrenched in the world of organized crime..."

"We have more in common than I first imagined," Hanzo said begrudgingly. "But she refuses to have a serious conversation with me."

"...I thought all your conversations were serious," you said, and Genji snorted.

"Yes, well she's absolutely maddening," Hanzo said, real heat in his voice. "Maybe you can talk some sense into her."

Ha! You nearly choked to death on your chocolate-coated strawberry. You weren't sure where Hanzo got this overinflated view of your abilities, considering how often he belittled you, but you played along. "Is she threatening to make engineer fire-breathing unicorns again? Because if she is..."

"That's not what I'm referring to," Hanzo scowled.

"I have no idea what you're referring to," you admitted, and Hanzo glared at the table.
"We can talk about it later," Genji said, oddly calm. "Privately." He took a mooncake, and placed it on his already full plate. Who brought those? He drank that bitter green tea, no sugar, no milk, and chose teeth-achingly sweet desserts to complement it. You watched Hanzo feed Bandit a small roast beef sandwich and shook your head.

"Sure, I'd be...interested in continuing this conversation later." Like when Hanzo learned how to use less cryptic sentences.

Hanzo gave curt nod, clearly dismissing you and you waved, returning to your spot where Tataryn and Shoal were now discussing electronic surveillance techniques. You set a chocolate-covered banana on Isha's plate and sat down.

"Where's mine?" Amélie teased, elbowing you lightly.

You silently offered her your plate, and she haughtily plucked a chocolate-covered strawberry off it.

"I wanted the banana," she said sotto voce.

"I bet you did," you said out of the corner of your mouth. "But this is a public gathering."

Amélie laughed one hand pressed to her chest. "Chanceux! You are outrageous!"

"Your charms are simply too much to foist on unsuspecting agents," you said, shaking your head with mock regret. "You must learn to be more responsible with your powers."

"You sound just like Gérard," Amélie said with a sniff and you wrinkled your nose. She smirked at you, like she knew that comparison would get your goat.

"Hey, if even your own husband fears your prowess..." You shrugged. "Well, who am I to argue?"

Amélie rewarded you with one her delighted smiles as she took another strawberry off your plate.

"He has been making a great deal of progress too," she said, watching as Jesse offered both Ziv and Jemison tea. It looked like Jemison had a generous portion of hummus on her plate, and Ziv wasn't frothing and spitting, so you assumed the interaction had gone well.

"I have to credit your influence," you said, with a wry smile. "I probably let him get away with too much."

"Mmm, perhaps," Amélie said diplomatically. "But you were there when he needed a friend or a sister. You have helped him through hard times. That is so much more important."

You blinked a few times. "I suppose you're right."

"He does have a long way to go," Amélie said smiling fondly. "But I think he will do well in leadership, don't you?"

You inhaled tea down the wrong passage and nearly spat it out. Patting your chest, you coughed discretely into your napkin. "What?"

"Agent McCree has been stepping up more and more," Amélie continued giving you a slightly concerned look. "He may not be ready yet, but I think he will make a fine commanding
officer."

You realized then that she hadn't been talking about Ziv at all, and you coughed a few more times, laughing softly to yourself. "Yeah, Jesse's great. You're absolutely right. He just needs room to grow."

"Gérard was concerned in the beginning. Gabriel brought home this scrawny, filthy, almost unintelligible stray, and press ganged him into service. We weren't so sure what he saw in him, but now we know. Gabriel has always had an eye for quality." She gave you a sly look.

"Yeah," you said, smiling as Jesse grinned back at you, raising his teacup as a salute. "I guess he has."

Jesse said something and Jemison actually laughed, Ziv rolling his eyes and flouncing off to talk to Reinhardt.

"Agent Strike, how unsurprising that I should find you in the center of this...disturbance on a work day."

You looked over your shoulder, raising a brow at Oladele as he stood there in his suit, a faint smile on his face.

"I'm suspended," you said with a shrug. "But I was still invited to the tea social. I hope that isn't a problem."

Oladele surveyed the table, and you glanced over his shoulder, looking for Beaumont.

"Oh, she's off filing some kind of complaint with Petras," Oladele said with a sharp smile. "I think that's what we're calling it anyway."

You bit back a grin.

"Oi, Oladele!" You blinked and Shoal was on her feet. "You must have brass balls." She stood there, hands on her hips as she glared at Oladele, teeth bared.

"Bridget, it's very good to see you again. I will admit that I understand the idiom, but not the context," Oladele said, smiling weakly.

"Don't you "Bridget" me!" Shoal scowled and you caught sight of Tataryn's razor sharp smile as he leaned back in his chair. "And don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about!"

You wondered, briefly, if he'd failed to call her after...

"We all know that Lucky saved your ungrateful ass in DC, here you are repaying her with a goddamn political crucifixion. Is it just you or is your boss in on it too? Because we're going to have some words with her tomorrow night!"

You blinked, and Oladele had the grace to wince. That's right, Epsilon Squad was providing Kwento with additional security. "Bridget, I-"

"That's "Agent Shoal" to you," she snapped. "Epsilon Squad doesn't associate with ungrateful backstabbers! And let me tell you, everyone at this table will agree with me too: Yeah, Lucky Strike's a shit magnet, but that's not her fault, she can't seem to help it. And despite it all, she's still a damn good agent!"
"I'll drink to that!" Jesse called from across the way.

"Prost!" Reinhardt boomed.

"A la tienne!" Amélie cheered.

"Sláinte!"

"Будьмо!" Tataryn laughed.

There were more shouts, applause, and raised glasses and Shoal turned a little pink in the cheeks. You could feel heat rising in yours as most of the party called out their toasts. Genji raising his cup silently, Hanzo slamming his empty cup against the table, his expression even more severe than usual.

Oladele winced, rubbing the back of his neck, not quite shriveling under the unfriendly attention of Blackwatch, but definitely aware of the tension in the situation. "I am well aware of the complexities of Agent Strike's situation and am taking this very seriously, my friend." He gave Shoal a reassuring smile. "Though I had not realized she was quite this well-regarded."

Neither were you, to be honest, but sharing food and drink with your peers did wonders for morale and solidarity. You smiled wryly at Shoal.

"Well, that's good," Shoal said tightly, now looking a little self conscious. "Glad to hear it."

"I wouldn't dream of upsetting you or Isabella," Oladele said with a surprisingly honest smile. "You are too good with computers and she can shoot the eye off a fish. Besides, who else would offer me such good games mancala and go?"

Shoal squinted at him. "I'll trounce your ass at go."

"I look forward to it," Oladele said with genuine pleasure. "Enjoy your party, Agent Strike," he said a little more formally with you. "It is good to see that you are keeping your spirits up, and that you have the support of your comrades."

"Thanks," you said, not entirely sure how to respond without giving the game away. Even though you weren't as convinced as Lacroix that Kwento wasn't out to dig up dirt on Blackwatch.

He inclined his head politely, and walked away at a steady pace. A lesser man would have run.

"Well then," you said, grinning at Shoal. "It looks like I owe you a drink."

Laughing, Shoal slapped you on the back and cut herself another piece of pie. "I like whiskey too. But I like dessert even more."

"A woman after my own heart," Tataryn said, his tone outrageously flirtatious as he leaned over to pat Shoal's arm.

"Is this troublemaker getting too rowdy?" Jesse said, leaning over Shoal's other shoulder and refilling her tea. "Because just say the word, darlin' and I'll kick his fancy pants across the room. Just for you." Jesse gave her a cheeky wink.

"You would try," Tataryn said, his smile still good-natured.

"Lucky, how do you deal with these two clowns all day?" Shoal laughed, shoving them
both out of her space.

You just shrugged, grinning at stupidly at your friends. Blackwatch Tea Social, huh? You were going to make damn sure that this became a tradition. And you were going to have to pack Jack and Gabriel some goodies, but that was a problem for later. For now you would enjoy the food, the atmosphere, and the company of your friends.

"We are going to have to move sooner than I like," Gérard said, looking over the data Gabriel had compiled. The spy had his own sources in Hanoi that verified some of Prince's stories of omnic-built security upgrades.

"Hanoi is long over due," Gabriel said, dryly. "We were already planning for it last year."

"If we'd rushed in last year, it would have been catastrophic," Gérard said, shaking his head. "If we rush in now, it still could be. The defenses are formidable."

"And Nguyen has had a lot of time to prepare for us," Gabriel said. "They've only gotten worse."

Gérard shook his head. "Perhaps, but we are better-equipped than before. I understand what we are getting into, and how we are getting out intact. That is no small feat."

"Yeah, your operation is pretty solid. Though you modified a lot of Lucky and Jesse's work."

"They did well," Gérard nodded. "But there were some nuances they missed. I have already made certain that they understand where they erred. For example, the abandoned subway tunnels would have been poor choices to use during the rainy season. But since we're going in during winter, we should be fine."

Gabriel nodded, because Gérard was a meticulous strategist. Gabriel understood terrain, combat, and even people very well. He had backup plans, escape routes, and assaults already mapped out. But Gérard made situational contingencies, and those were invaluable as well. Despite the verbal sniping and occasional petty tensions, the two men worked very well together, Gabriel providing an overarching strategy, and Gérard filling in the gaps, amending oversights, and generally providing tiny nuggets of insight on things Gabriel might have otherwise overlooked.

"Also I want to make sure we have On Sing on standby should we need support: medical, transport, cyber, noncombatant roles only. Ms. Zhai would come to our aid, should we require reinforcements, but I know that we would all prefer to not directly involve the Triads."

"...Support roles only," Gabriel said, grudgingly, because he did not want to owe that maniac anything. It wasn't that he actually disliked her, but someone had to keep an objective eye on your new friend. And it certainly wasn't Jack. Just the other day he'd walked in on Jack and her chatting on the phone about more vacations. Not that Gabriel minded that. Hell, he appreciated Jack putting more effort into the relationships. It was refreshing. But Zhai Feng wasn't Maggie. Zhai Feng was On Sing's Dragonhead, the caretaker of a mad AI, and playing god with her genetic designs. She might be friendly, but she was dangerous, and someone had to remember that.

"Dinner tomorrow then?" Gérard asked as he scanned the screen, overlaying entry trajectories on a courtyard, and running turret simulations while he spoke. He adjusted the course multiple times till he found an approach that suited him.
"You've already made reservations, haven't you?" Gabriel sighed, not at all fooled by Gérard's casual delivery.

"I checked your schedules. They were open," Gérard said, a small smile on his face. "Amélie will make sure Chanceux is aware of the event. I've already spoken to Jack. He is game."

Gabriel laughed, shaking his head. "You leave nothing to chance, do you?"

"Not the serious matters," Gérard said as he began running another simulation, this time it was a firefight in a lab. "And what is more serious than dinner?"

Gabriel narrowed his eyes as Gérard adjusted the parameters of the assault, a light two-man team storming an adjacent panic room. "That plan," Gabriel said, not taken in by the spy's flippancy.

"Ah," Gérard said, giving Gabriel a wry look, like he had hoped the other man wouldn't notice what he was up to. "Yes, I suppose we can discuss that one now."

Frowning, Gabriel leaned back in his chair, waiting for Lacroix to talk his way out of this one.

"Really?" You sighed as you packed up a box of desserts for your lovers. Surprisingly, there had been some left over, though you hadn't missed Vo cramming a whole slice of cake into the pocket of her borrowed blazer. You had just turned your head, pretending not to see, because it wasn't your coat and you had learned to choose your battles. Távio packed her a large box of chocolate-dipped fruit, and you gave him an approving nod. You would start coating Brussels sprouts in chocolate, if it meant she would eat more fresh produce.

"It's just dinner," Amélie said, shaking her head. "We dress up, we go out, we eat. Nothing difficult about it."

"Uh-huh," you said, not buying that explanation for a second. That was a gross and misleading oversimplification of the situation. Jack and Gabriel dining out at a fancy restaurant would attract attention, and that was attention you, personally, didn't need. None of you did. Jack and Gabriel were very public figures. Lacroix and Amélie had massive target signs on their backs. "And your security?"

"You, Jack, and Gabriel will be there. We will have the best backup in the world," she said cheerfully. "Chanceux, you of all people understand how difficult it is to sacrifice happiness in the name of safety procedures."

You flinched. "Yeah, you're right." Of course Amélie just wanted to do something she found normal. That wasn't actually unreasonable.

"And I would like a night with just friends. No business. We don't do that nearly enough," she said, eyes downcast.

"...Don't you still talk to your...other friends?" You asked, because Amélie traveled in many social circles during her time as a ballerina.

"Some. It is too risky in regular contact with any of them now, for their own safety," she said, shaking her head. "There are not many with whom I can discuss personal business."
"What about Odile?" You asked, remembering the photographs of Amélie's childhood friend. "Doesn't she ever visit?"

"After a fashion," Amélie said, eyes losing their mournfulness, her smile strangely pleased. "But Gérard might have something to say about that-"

"Seriously?" You scowled. "He'd give you crap about your one of your oldest friendsh-

"Never," Amélie said, her smile even brighter and you had long given up trying to figure out exactly what you did to garner that look from her. "Do not worry. It was just a little joke. Gérard would never dream of forbidding me from seeing anyone."

"Yeah, OK," you said, mollified by her sheer amusement at the suggestion.

"But it is rare to have friends with whom we can enjoy good food, and scintillating conversation, and occasionally a vicious fight. And I must admit, I am dying to talk about Paris Fashion Week with Gabriel. I have some early previews and-"

"Oh boy," you muttered under your breath.

"Quoi?"

"Nothing," you said quickly. "That uh... sounds like fun. He'd like that."

"And Gérard does enjoy talking about basketball with him."

You blinked. You hadn't realized Lacroix had any interest in team sports.

"When we were young it was so easy to just go out with friends on a whim. We'd meet up over coffee with no notice, then end up spending all night out, drinking, dancing, gossiping by the fire on a beach...That has changed." Amélie gave you a mournful look and you winced.

Sighing, you resigned yourself to the fact that this was a battle you couldn't win. Instead, you focused on bargaining Amélie down. Maybe you could all eat in or choose a more secure location. All you had to do was persuade her to see things from your perspective and appeal to her better nature. Easy...right? "I'm just concerned about the publicity and the fallout if certain people are seen with me in public right now. It could complicate things even-"

"Oh, we rented out a private room. Gérard has an understanding with the owner. Do not fret. We know how to be discrete," Amélie said cheerfully.

"It is difficult to dress up in fine evening wear and be discrete: I'd say those two actions have opposing goals," you said, trying another approach.

"You are not incorrect, but in this particular situation, we are not seeking attention from the rest world, just our nearest and dearest," Amélie winked. "I completely understand your worries, Chanceux, but Gérard and I have been planning this for quite some time. We are not just treating it like a night out, but a full-fledged operation."

You almost said, "when don't you treat socializing like a full-fledged operation?" but realized that wouldn't help your case at all. "There are spies all over Zurich-"

"And none better than my husband," Amélie beamed at you. "More importantly, the food is exquisite, the wine list has already been specially-arranged by yours truly, and I know for a fact that a certain world famous pâtissier will be making his infamous Tiramisu Bomboloni Tower,
chestnut and salted caramel panna cotta, and of course, his signature apricot amaretto meringue cake—"

You groaned, staring balefully at Amélie. Neither Lacroix played fair, and you were running out of ideas. Mostly because half of your own treacherous brain was now focused on rare and heavenly desserts.

"Jack—"

"Was the first to RSVP, last week I believe," Amélie said, her smile sly, as if she could already sense her impending checkmate. "Agent McCree has agreed to look after Isha. And Gérard is confirming with Gabriel as we speak. I do believe your schedule is currently open, and who knows when we will get a chance to do this again?" Amélie continued wistfully, deftly hammering the final nails of guilt into the coffin of your resistance. "We want this to be special—"

Groaning, you leaned back in your chair, knowing that you had been outmatched, outplayed, and outnumbered. You might be learning to think five steps ahead of the opposition, but you still had a long way to go before you could expect to match wits with a Lacroix and come out the definitive winner.

"Yeah, all right. I'll put on a dress, and makeup, and fancy clothes, and try not to bring the party down." Goddamn, she had you trained.

Amélie laughed pleasantly, with the smooth confidence of a graceful winner. "You are too hard on yourself," she said. "It is Jack's wardrobe that I am most concerned over..."

"Oh, yeah, he did make himself a prom suit out of duct tape," you said, recalling the photos Maggie sent. "And not just plain silver duct tape. It was the yellow duck patterned one." Apparently, that style had been on sale at the time.

Amélie blinked once. Then twice. And you could see her processing your words, possibly translating them into French, then back into English, and still being unable to make sense of them.

You got out your phone, glancing around to make sure no one was looking over your shoulder. You showed her then, eighteen year old Jack Morrison, beaming at the camera, swathed collar to toes in a crude suit made of white duct tape covered in yellow ducks. Someone had even made him a bowtie and boutonnière out of the same material.

"Oh..." Amélie gasped, eyes widening in horror. "Mon dieu." She sat back in her seat, expression dazed. "That is...the multipurpose adhesive used to repair air ducts, yes?"

"It has a lot of uses," you said cheerfully. "But that was the original purpose."

"...Does he still have this...article of clothing?" The last phrase was spoken with the distaste that would normally be reserved for words like "atrocity," or "rodent corpse," or even "bureaucrat."

"Maybe," you said, though you knew it wouldn't fit him, not after SEP. Might fit Michael though. You wondered, briefly, if Michael had done the same thing. You'd have to ask.

"I will...have a discrete word with Gabriel," she said after a few deep breaths. "I am certain he would never allow the Strike Commander to appear in public dressed like that."

"Of course not," you said, nodding sympathetically. "But you see my concern."
Amélie nodded solemnly. "I am beginning to comprehend what a heavy burden Gabriel bears."

You almost laughed, till you realized she wasn't just talking about Jack.

"So I hear you got railroaded too, huh?" You asked as you stepped into the office, a little amused by Gabriel's grimace. You had a bag of leftovers in one arm, and an overfed, sleepy raptor in the other. She cooed drowsily and you scratched her head.

"Those two are incredibly dangerous together," Gabriel muttered, referring to the Lacroix couple. "I don't know why I was ever worried about her safety. She's too fucking cunning. Can talk her way in and out of everything."

"Relationship goals," you said solemnly. "One day the three of us could be even more dangerous together."

"We're plenty dangerous together," Gabriel scowled at you. "Maybe not as slick, but that's Jack bringing down the team."

You snorted, not entirely sure if that was an accurate assessment. The three of you could be pretty handy in combat, as you'd seen in DC, but Amélie and Lacroix seemed to work in perfect synchronization. It would be some time before you reached that level of teamwork. You gently set Isha down in her bed and she snuffled softly as you covered her with a blanket. "Yeah, apparently he RSVP'd and didn't warn us?"

"I am well aware," Gabriel said, raising a brow as you unpacked one box of desserts for him. "So you did bring me something from your little unsanctioned party. A little warning would have been nice." He gave you a sardonic look. "Do you know how many inquiries I had to field about what exactly my agents were doing and how come other people didn't get invitations?"

"Nope, no idea," you said cheerfully. "I didn't know it was going on till Jesse dragged me over. Apparently, Amélie and Tataryn took over the planning since I've been...preoccupied."

"I see," Gabriel's expression softened. "Just so you know, Ana is incredibly put out."

"Already accounted for: Jesse and Reinhardt were taking her a batch of goodies, as a friendly self-preservation gesture," you said. "I have some for Jack too."

"Heard Wilhelm brought a goddamn chocolate fountain." Gabriel looked just a little sulky, but he didn't say anything to that effect. You both understood that no matter how much his subordinates loved him, having the Blackwatch Commander there would dampen the mood. This was a agents-only social event. Reinhardt was the exception, and only because he wasn't in any Blackwatch agent's direct chain of command.

"He did. Amélie miraculously managed to convince him to bring something other than sausages. Spent some time making sure that Vo and Isha didn't go play in it." You set chocolate-covered berries, bananas, and pastries on a plate in front of him. There were plenty of dessert samples, and Gabriel's lips quirked upward as you poured him tea from a thermos. "I'm pretty sure Hanzo and Vo ate their respective weights in sweets." You also saw Genji packing up some select chocolate items and heading in the direction of the infirmary, but that was only something you'd only point out to Jesse.
"So you had fun?" Gabriel asked.

"Yeah," you said, looking up to see him smiling wryly at you. "I did."

"That's good," he said, picking up a strawberry. "Tell me all about it."

So you did, from Jesse and Athena being unwilling to bother you in his quarters, to Shoal's confrontation with poor Oladele, to Amélie's tactical manners victory. Gabriel snacked on the food you brought him, his shoulders relaxing as you recounted Jesse and Tataryn's outrageous flirtations with Shoal.

"An Annual Blackwatch Tea Social, huh?" He chuckled. "I'm not against it, on the condition that someone brings me a tithe of the desserts."

"And your sexy butler serves them to you with tea?"

"I prefer liquor and coffee, but I suppose I'll take the sexy butler," he said, fingers gripping your tie. He tugged you closer, lips brushing gently against yours.

You laughed, kissing him back. "We need to get Jack back for failing to inform us of this upcoming social obligation."

"Oh yes," Gabriel agreed, his smile downright mean. "We do."

"Ambush him tonight? But not in the way he likes."


Chapter End Notes

With my wrists being how they are, I'm trying to keep the update schedule to once a week.

So, I'm still thinking on it, but I did see the "Soldier 76 identifies as gay" tweet and am conflicted about how to write the Angst!AU. On one hand, I've been writing excerpts/plotting/talking about it for awhile. On the other hand, it's not published and writing Jack as bisexual instead of gay feels like erasure. Granted IAL is fucking huge, canon-divergent, and has generated quite a lot of its own internal lore. I considered writing it as "poly-relationship, but Jack isn't sexually attracted to Lucky," but that doesn't quite feel right either. Part of the trouble is, things go terribly wrong, like they do in canon, and while the story goes into several reasons (part of it being the strain on the relationship and things not being as healthy as they should be), it may come off as "in contrast to In Alio Loco, if Jack was only more committed to Gabriel and especially Lucky, everything would have turned out fine." And that's not accurate. Granted the Angst!AU will have a lot less sex than IAL because, well, circumstances. I'm still mulling it over, so your comments are welcome.

Also, I'm a little annoyed at this lore dropping this late and through Twitter. More representation is great. But this kind of feels like J K Rowling announcing Dumbledore is gay after the series is over, you know? Am also slightly concerned about "Gabriel's family." I am adding something to that effect in the Angst!AU, but it's
obviously canon divergent.
Chapter 113

Chapter Summary

The perils of trying to going out and have nice things.

Chapter Notes

Mamimi made R76 kids celebrating the lore announcement.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Next week?" You couldn't hide your surprise. "So soon?"

Lacroix nodded grimly. "I've been able to independently confirm some of Prince's claims. If we wait, the proposed tech upgrades will negate our current approach. We need to strike Hanoi earlier than I would like."

You sat across from him, arms crossed. "And then transition directly into Operation Crashhawk." Which meant you would be going to Shanghai after Hanoi, having "fallen" in combat.

"Yes," Lacroix said. "Operation Tarasque is going live."

You exhaled. You'd been over this plan numerous times. You'd seen the terrain from satellite and localized photography. You knew your fellow agents were more than capable. But this, this operation was big. Not just in that it had multiple combat squads working under black ops conditions. This operation had been your goal from the moment you set foot in Zurich. This was the justice you'd sought for Black Base Delta, for your dead friends, for Shin and Captain Patel.

And it brought equal parts fear and exhilaration to your chest.

"It will be combat-heavy," Lacroix said, bringing up a screen, showing the courtyard approach, complete with heavy omnic mechs and multiple turrets. "Nguyen has fortified her home, and while I've been able to work some vulnerabilities into key points, we will have to be extremely cautious."

You knew this. Nguyen's Hanoi complex was home to an entire mercenary company, several researchers, dozens of combat-grade omnics, and other nasty tech surprises.

Gabriel would be leading the main fire team to their central command. Tataryn, Diallo, and Jesse would be his backup. They would be drawing most of the attention. Genji, Hanzo, and Ziv would be taking the southern labs, mining data and taking prisoners as needed. You and Lacroix would be going directly after Nguyen. Everyone would have combat-ready Athena drones. On Sing would be on standby: Lacroix and Zheng brokered a deal on sharing technology gleaned from Nguyen's databases.
Amélie was not coming, and you had not said anything about this, mostly because you understood that she would have an extra large target on her back. Nguyen was after Amélie to get to Lacroix. There was no point in making that easier for her.

"Will that be enough?" You could work fine with Lacroix, but having only two of you seemed...insufficient.

"She will be expecting me," Lacroix said. "She will want to see me face to face. Maybe she will be expecting Amélie, but she will not be expecting to you."

"So we're walking directly into a trap," you said, shaking your head.

Lacroix shrugged. "After a fashion." He leaned forward. "There will be omnics. There will be least one other human. A relative of hers probably. It will be private and intimate, as all revenge killings should be."

You weren't even surprised. "Oh boy."

"Do not relax your guard. She will not make it too easy for us. If she has any control of the situation, she will be gunning for you; it won't be personal, she's only interested in me. Your presence doesn't matter to her. But she will want me there, if only for catharsis."

"Even better." You crossed your arms. You believed that Nguyen hated Lacroix that much, though you wondered who was the bigger narcissist. Lacroix, probably. "So are you calling dibs?"

"No," Lacroix said, shaking his head. "This is too serious. If you get the shot, take it. Though if she is in the middle of confessing something, I admit, I will be sore."

"Yeah, well, better sore than dead," you muttered.

"You are correct," Lacroix said, smiling faintly. "It is heartening to see that you are willing to walk beside me into a trap set by one of our greatest mutual enemies."

"Pfft, I just know that you're the bigger supervillain," you said with a shrug. "I'm more worried about sending Ziv into combat. Hanzo asked me to "help" him with a problem he's having with Feng. I'll take that opportunity to remind him just how important Ziv is to us." You wouldn't have to say anything to Genji. Genji knew. "You ever going to tell me why Nguyen is so damn mad at you?"

"If you're with me when I confront her, rest assured that you will hear all about it," Lacroix smirked.

" Seriously?" You scowled, because Lacroix was obviously enjoying stringing you along.

"She doesn't usually monologue, but after all these years she will want to have her say," he said, taking great pleasure in misinterpreting your question. "If you stay quiet, I'm sure you will learn something."

Rolling your eyes, you decided you were going to find some way to embarrass him at dinner tomorrow night.

"Uh oh, why are you two looking at me like that?" Jack asked as he stepped into Gabriel's
Both you and Gabriel sat on the couch, arms crossed, as you eyed an increasingly nervous Strike Commander. He swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing as he quickly took off his boots, set them neatly beside the door, and hung his overcoat over a chair. Silly Jack, he should have left his shoes on so he could run.

"What's this about RSVPing for dinner tomorrow night?" You asked, voice silky and pleasant.

"And not saying anything to us about it?" Gabriel added, smiling with teeth.

"Indeed, Amélie said something about asking you last week," you continued.

Jack laughed, rubbing the back of his neck as he approached. "Oh, that. It completely slipped my mind. She asked if I was free and I checked my schedule and I was. She said she'd invite the rest of you too, but I’ll admit I was distracted and-

"Our invitations were sprung on us today," Gabriel said, his voice a low rumble.

"Oh, can't you make it?" Jack asked innocently, his smile too wide. "I didn't see anything on the calendar when she asked if we would all be able to-"

"Get him," you growled.

Both you and Gabriel leapt off the couch. You went for his knees as Gabriel caught him in a headlock, the two of you wrestling him to the ground.

"Ow! Damnit! What'd I do?" Jack laughed, even as you pinned his legs and Gabriel held him in a chokehold from behind.

"Way to warn us, amor," Gabriel said, nipping Jack's ear.

"I forgot!" Jack protested weakly. "Honestly, I figured they were going to invite you and we'd all go out like we talked about before. Why are you upset? You love fancy dates, Gabe. And baby, you love all that gourmet food!" He beamed at you. "This Italian restaurant is supposed to be really high end!"

"You're so oblivious! How have you survived this long?" You growled, crawling into his lap and biting his bottom lip.

"Dumb luck," Gabriel grumbled.

"I'm sorry! I honestly didn't realize they'd wait this long to invite you! I didn't think it was a big deal. It's just dinner."

"It's never just dinner with them!" You shouted, throwing your hands up.

"She's right," Gabriel said sternly. "Some warning would have been nice. We've been trying to figure out Gérard's angle all evening."

"Food and socializing?" Jack said slowly, looking between you and Gabriel like you were insane. "Why else would-?"

"It's never that simple," you scowled. "Also, have you considered the risks of all five of us in public together-"
"Six," Jack said. "Agent Mihret is coming."

Gabriel groaned. "Goddamnit, Jack."

"And yeah, Amélie said Gérard was handling it. Relax, baby. It'll be fine," Jack said in soothing tones.

"He's doing this on purpose," you muttered. "He has to be. He can't be that dense, can he?"

"He could, but I suspect you're right," Gabriel scowled, roughly ruffling Jack's hair with his fist, before releasing the other man. "Come on, corazon. Let's go eat all those desserts you saved for him. He doesn't deserve them."

"What? Oh come on," Jack cried. "I spent all afternoon getting passive aggressive messages from Ana about how she didn't get an invite, then a one word message that just said, "Finally," and then Jemison and Shoal took long lunches-"

"Jemison made three kinds of pie," you said. "And you shall have none."

"It was good pie," Gabriel added, as the two of you climbed to your feet and returned to the couch, leaving Jack sprawled on the floor.

"You two are ridiculous," Jack said, smiling sheepishly at you, as he followed you to the couch. "I know I hate dressing up, but it'll be worth it to see you and Gabe." He swept your hair aside and pressed a kiss behind your ear.  "I'm sorry, it really did slip my mind. And it shouldn't have. I am very excited to see you and Gabe in fancy clothes."

Jack snuggled up against you, ignoring your soft grumbling as he kissed the top of your head. "Love you, sweetheart. Love you both."

"He just wants desserts," Gabriel said, not taken in by Jack's charm.

Jack leaned over you and kissed Gabriel's cheek loudly. "No, I want to see my handsome boyfriend and tricky girlfriend smile. That's all the sweetness I need."

"How are you so cheesy?" You groaned.

"Cheese is one of your favorite foods," Jack said, sensing your weakness. "It's why you love me so much."

"That's fine, still doesn't mean you're getting any of this," Gabriel drawled, serving himself a large slice of cherry pie.

"Maybe I'm hungry for something else," Jack said, both arms wrapped around your waist.

Exhaling loudly, you let Jack pull you onto his lap, before he draped one arm over Gabriel's shoulder. "You're awful."

"But you love me anyway," he murmured in your ear. "I'll make it up to you both. Promise. Just give me a few more days."

Gabriel raised a brow. "What did you have in mind?"

"It's a surprise," Jack said, eyes dewy as he beamed at you both. "It'll be a good surprise, honest." He nuzzled your neck before he leaned over and planted another kiss on Gabriel's lips.
"You still haven't replaced my clothing," you said, clicking your teeth at him.

"I'll do that too," Jack said. "Honest. Do you want credits, gift cards, or the dubious satisfaction of seeing the awful mess I make when I try to shop for clothing for you?"

You briefly pictured Jack ordering things online, all in completely wrong sizes and hideous patterns.

"Take the money," Gabriel said, shaking his head, smiling faintly. "Trust me."

"I'm still eating your cake," you said, petulantly.

"And I'll let you," Jack said, kissing you again. "Because I love you that much."

That, you admitted reluctantly to yourself, was real love.

"Is this really necessary?" Jesse asked. He sat on your bed, watching Bandit and Isha wrestle on the floor. He crunched loudly, eating a bag of jalapeno chips, elbows resting on his knees. "You aren't going to be gone that long."

"Best to be prepared," you said, appreciating his optimism.

Isha squeaked and reached up, tugging on his pant leg. Laughing, Jesse handed her a chip, which she promptly passed on to Bandit, and extended her hands once more.

Grinning even wider, Jesse handed the little glutton two chips.

You sat on the floor, wrapping knickknacks in extra hoodies and carefully packing up your stuff in clearly-labeled boxes. There wasn't a whole lot, but there was no guarantee your room would be unoccupied the entire time you were gone, and you did not want to make anyone else go through your things.

You had a bugout bag with clothes, weapons, Isha's supplies: these were all going with you to Shanghai. You knew the rest of your belongings could be shipped, but you weren't sure you needed to cart a giant teddy bear halfway across the world. And your plants? Gabriel and Jack were going to take care of them, which either meant they were going to die, or Gabriel and Jack would assign someone to care for them. Maybe you could get them sent to you.

Feng had already sent you pictures of the condo across from hers. It was secure, expensive, and furnished with the basics, though she was already planning a shopping trip so the two of you could decorate it. She had sent you a very professional message with the details, and you appreciated her trying to keep her enthusiasm in check.

"You'll come visit me in Shanghai, right?" You didn't look up from sorting your socks. Some of Gabriel and Jack's had gotten mixed into your laundry. Finding some of those hideous white socks with the athletic stripe, you casually tossed them into the trash. Jack would never know.

"In a heartbeat, sweetpea," Jesse said, giving you a wry smile. "Ain't gonna be the same without you around. Bandit's going to miss Isha something fierce. Those two are as thick as thieves."
"Yeah, Isha's definitely going to miss Bandit. I'm bringing her stuffed dog for sure."

"And Ziv and Genji just ain't you," Jesse said almost too casually. "I know they have our backs, but they're still a little rough around the edges. Can't be as straight with them as I am you. And don't let me started on Vo and Hanzo." Jesse blew out a breath. "I ain't looking forward to handling their bullshit. Same with Tataryn. Yeah, he's a friend, I guess, but everything is a goddamn hustle with him."

"For sure," you nodded in sympathy, your throat a little tight.

"And I don't have to say anything about how the boss is gonna be..." Jesse sounded a little guilty.

"You just have to encourage him to come visit me too," you said, sounding calmer than you felt. "Though maybe on separate occasions. Since I'll be in a condo. Across the hall from Feng. Not sure about the space?"

Jesse snorted. "I could stay with Feng."

"True," you said, lips quirking upward. "You did get an open invitation last time. And she did seem quite impressed by your biceps."

Jesse shrugged. "Maybe. I think she only likes me for my dog, but that's fine." He gave you a smug smile. "But Daniels, Vashtai, and Shoal keep sending me flirty messages and invitations for drinks. Tataryn has too, but I know that bastard is just trying to foist more work on to me, and I ain't buying it."

"Oh my," you laughed. "Got a favorite yet?"

"Ain't rushin' into anything right now," he said, almost shyly. "Just enjoying the conversations."

"Be careful now, all three of those ladies are incredibly dangerous for admittedly different reasons."

"Hey now darlin', don't you go slandering your Jesse like that. I ain't leading no one on. Just...talking is all." He gave you a pointed look, his cheeks turning pink.

"Of course," you said cheerfully. "Did you notice where Genji went after the tea party?"

"...Didn't he pack off up a bunch of chocolate and head off in the direction of the infirmary?" Jesse laughed.

"That's what I thought." You smiled slightly at that. Maybe it was just friendly self-preservation. Maybe it was more. Either way, you were glad someone was working to keep Angela sweet. "Going to have to talk to Hanzo later. He's in a snit about Feng. I think. It could be something completely unrelated, but he's blaming Feng."

"It's strange to think of Genji as the less...repressed brother," Jesse said, shaking his head. "I admit, I was skeptical at first, but I think having Hanzo here has been good for him. If only so he can see just how messed up his brother is and work hard not to be that way."

"I think it's more than that," you said. Because Hanzo was trying. Maybe not succeeding, but lately Zenyatta seemed to be hovering around Hanzo talking about the Buddhist idea of "attachment" and how it influenced the Shambali teachings. You hadn't heard the word
"forgiveness" yet, but you figured Zenyatta was working up to it. "But I'm surprised Genji hasn't resorted to frustrated violence yet," you admitted.

"Oh, he has," Jesse laughed. "Pretty early on. Just decked Hanzo straight out for some stupid comment he made. I was worried, but Hanzo just took it, didn't fight back."

You blinked, a little surprised because you'd heard nothing about this. "When was this?"

"Right after Lucerne." Jesse shrugged. "Was worried that Genji was going to really let him have it, but he just abruptly walked off, and the next time I saw them, they were acting like nothing happened. Ain't healthy to do things like that," Jesse sighed. "But I can't exactly go around pointing fingers."

"Nah, we're probably the most normal people in Blackwatch," you said with a confident nod.

Jesse squinted at you, took his hat off, and scratched his head. "Sugarpie, you have a pet dinosaur and everyone thinks you're a government experiment with insatiable sexual appetites. I don't know what about that equates "normal," which says a lot."

Wrinkling your brow, you glared at the wannabe cowboy. "And? We're still the most normal people in Blackwatch, despite our reputations."

"Me, sure," Jesse laughed breezily. "I'm charming, good-natured, and well-adjusted. You? You'd knife someone for a piece of cake."

"Jesse McCree-"

"But you're still the best friend a guy could ask for," Jesse said, his smile soft. "And I wouldn't have you any other way."

You gave a sharp huff. "Yeah, love you too, asshole."

Jesse's grin widened. "Enough to make me some karaage before you go? Because I need something to take the sting out of being abandoned."

"What?"

He nodded emphatically. "I need soul food to soothe my broken heart. Bandit will too. And Mihret? Think of poor Mihret who ain't got no other friends besides-"

"Goddamnit, Jesse," you snorted. "You sound like Tataryn."

"Now that ain't true! I'll go shopping with you! I'll shell out for the ingredients! I'll even help you make it! Just don't lump me in with that guy!" Jesse laughed.

Shaking your head, you just sighed, already knowing that you'd have to make an enormous batch of karaage before you left.

You really did like the dark blue dress. The fit was flattering, the material cool and silky, and the crystal beadwork incredibly fine. But this time you were wearing gloves, for tactical reasons. The tanto went in a sheath on your thigh. You chose a long coat, so the tanto would stay hidden and you could fit your pistol in the pocket.
Gabriel currently occupied Jack's bathroom, styling his hair, trimming his beard, and generally hogging the counter. So you were in the bedroom, using the mirror in there to apply your makeup. Jack still hadn't arrived, but that was no surprise, for someone who got so pissy over military punctuality, he was criminally late to most social events. But Gabriel had already picked out Jack's outfit, so that was one less thing to worry about.

You wondered about the futility of putting on lipstick. Chances were you'd need to apply it at least one more time before you left. Though if you could leave discrete marks on either of your lovers...

A raucous wolf whistle pulled you out of your reverie and you glanced over your shoulder at the man in the doorway. Gabriel leaned against the wall, arms crossed to emphasize his shoulders. He cut a striking figure a deep red jacket, black tie, white shirt and narrow cut trousers, emphasizing his muscular thighs. It was too well-fitted to be considered retro, but something about it reminded you of the glamour of old school R&B singers. You couldn't wait to see him from behind.

"Let me see the whole thing," you said, twirling your index finger, because that gave you an excuse to stare at his ass in those pants.

Smirking, and not at all fooled by your ploy, Gabriel obligingly spun around, even slowly pulling off his jacket, showcasing those broad muscled shoulders. Those trousers clung to his skin though... You sighed happily, admiring the outfit, and the man who wore it.

"Are you sewed into your clothes?" You teased. He was wearing black suspenders and you raised a brow, recognizing those platinum cufflinks you'd won off of Lacroix. Apparently, you weren't the only one feeling petty tonight.

"Want to find out?" Gabriel chuckled, swaggering over with his jacket in hand. He leaned over and kissed you hard. "Silly question though. That would make it difficult to undress. Now you've got the right idea, hermosa. All I have to do is lift this little skirt up-" His fingers toyed with the hem of your dress and your breath caught. "And you're all ready for me."

Cheeks burning, you pushed his hand down. "I've spent way too long getting dressed for dinner. You don't get to mess that up. Not yet."

"That's fine. I can wait to unwrap my present," Gabriel purred. "I'm a patient man."

You kissed him again, squeaking as he pressed his knee between your thighs. "Gabriel!"

"I'm not messing anything up," he said, laughing. "Except maybe your panties, and you shouldn't be wearing any anyway."

You blinked, feeling the deer in the headlights look on your face. Because you knew dinner with Amélie, Lacroix, and Ziv was already going to be an...interesting event. If Gabriel was hellbent on teasing you throughout, that would make it even more challenging.

The door slammed open, and Jack ran in. "Sorry I'm late, I'll get changed. It'll only take a second!" He shouted, as he slammed it shut again, and hurriedly kicked off his boots.

"Your tux is hanging up in the bathroom," Gabriel called, giving you a smug look. "I had to iron your damn shirt again. Try hanging it up next time, Morrison!"

"I forgot! Thanks, babe! You're the best!" Jack called, his voice distant as he rushed to the bathroom. "I might need your help with the bowtie!"
"In a minute," Gabriel said. "I'm helping Lucky get ready."

You rolled your eyes at the obvious lie. "I'll come help you."

"Thanks, sweetheart! Can't wait to see you both!"

Wiggling out of Gabriel's grasp, you tried to slip out of the bedroom, but he caught you around the waist, his lips brushing the side of your neck.

"Bet we could go once before he's gotten the damn bowtie on. He can never get it right on his own," Gabriel murmured in your ear.

"I don't buy that for one second," you laughed. "When you're like this, you can go for hours."

Gabriel chuckled, sounding terribly pleased. "And that's a bad thing?"

"It is if we want to make it to dinner on time," you said, even though you kind of did not.

Gabriel pressed hot kisses down the side of your throat. "We can be fashionably late."

"Umm...can I get some help?" Jack peeked into the bedroom, his shirt half unbuttoned, the gray bowtie draped over his shoulder. "Helping Lucky "get ready," huh?" He grinned at you both. "Need another hand? Or tongue? Dick, even?"

Gabriel chuckled, and released you. "You need to finish buttoning your damn shirt, Jack." He leaned in and gently kissing the other man while he took care of the fasteners.

"But I like it better when you do it for me," Jack murmured, eyes soft as he stared at Gabriel's face.

"Malingering," Gabriel muttered, tying the bowtie neater than you ever could.

"You both look incredible," Jack said, fingers trailing down Gabriel's lapel. "That jacket's really bold. I like it. And sweetheart, we've both been fantasizing about you in that dress since we got that one teasing glimpse of it. Dinner's going to be hard tonight. And by dinner, I mean my dick."

"Smooth, Morrison," Gabriel laughed.

"Where's the lie?" Jack asked smugly.

Gabriel held the tuxedo jacket while Jack shrugged it on. It was a classic black jacket and white dress shirt, but the cummerbund, bowtie, and pocket square were a satiny gray that shimmered in the lowlights.

"I don't know how we're not going to attract attention with the two of you dressed like that," you said, admiring them both.

"I don't really care," Jack said, giving you bright smile. "I'm having dinner out with the two of you. And I plan to enjoy it."

Gabriel's expression softened, and he kissed Jack's cheek. "Is that so, amor?"

"I don't even have to eat," Jack said. "Happy just seeing the two of you looking like you're walking on to the red carpet." He leaned back, drinking in the sight of you and Gabriel. "Looking
forward to the day when we can do this more openly."

Your breath caught and you bit your lip. Because with you going undercover, that was even more of a pipedream than before. Taking a deep breath, you disengaged with that line of thought. Tonight was going to be challenging enough. You didn't need to look for unnecessary distractions.

Gabriel chuckled. "We should go. Amélie gets incredibly fussy when you muck up her plans."

"Who wants to drive?" Jack asked, putting on his shoes.

"Me!" You and Gabriel said at the same time.

"That's too bad, I've got the keys," Jack laughed as he stood up.

"I'll drive so you two can neck in the back," you said, looking forward to watching that in the rearview mirror. "I'm wearing makeup so-"

Jack bent over and kissed your forehead. "I don't mind wearing your lipstick, but it probably won't look as good on me as it does you."

"I don't know about that," you said, distracted by the idea of the three of you wearing lipstick and seeing just how many marks you could leave on each other's bare skin...

"Let the Strike Commander drive," Gabriel purred in your ear. "We'll have the backseat all to ourselves and Jack can watch while I stroke that sweet little pussy-"

You jerked forward, snatching the keys out of Jack's fingers, because once Gabriel started on you, you weren't sure you'd be able to keep your composure.

"I'm driving," you said quickly. "It'll look weird if the Strike Commander is chauffeuring his subordinates around. Gives me an excuse to be there."

Gabriel laughed, probably because in thwarting him, you were denying yourself. But you did not want to wobble into a fancy restaurant, sweaty and disheveled in front of Ziv and Lacroix of all people.

Jack just smiled, looking a little disappointed. "Whatever you say, sweetheart."

Athena directed you a discrete employee parking spot behind the restaurant that had been reserved specifically for your party. You climbed out of the vehicle first, shoulders taut. Gabriel and Jack had indeed made out in the backseat loudly, and they both made sure to frequently comment on how much they wished their girlfriend could join in, if only she wasn't a stubborn mule... Bastards.

You surveyed the area, hand on your gun. Athena had access to the CCTV network and was monitoring the area, but that didn't mean you could let your guard down. You opened the door, and Jack stepped out, straightening his jacket, his hair only a little mussed.

Gabriel followed, giving you a sardonic grin. He adjusted his collar, not a hair out of place, his smirking face infuriatingly handsome. In that moment, you loved and hated his
insufferableness. It was an all too familiar feeling.

You shut the car door a little too hard and followed Jack to the kitchen entrance. The door opened automatically and an omnic maitre d' in a suit ushered you into a very clean, very modern stainless steel kitchen.

"Mr. Morrison, Mr. Reyes, Ms. Strike, your party is already seated. My apologies for the unconventional greeting, however since discretion is your priority-"

"There is nothing to apologize for. We greatly appreciate your flexible accommodations," Jack said, smiling at the busy kitchen staff as the three of you followed the maitre d' out of the prep area, into the dining area, and then off to the side where a private banquet room had been reserved. The maitre d' left menus on the table for you and stepped outside.

Dark wood panels lined the walls and crisp white table cloths lay draped over every table. Candles had been lit, and the Lacroix-Mihret group were already sipping their wine, seated at a large round table, Ziv bookended between the Lacroix couple. Probably so they could elbow him when he misbehaved.

Lacroix wore a charcoal suit with a lilac shirt, and a coordinating pocket square, a silver tie clip, and cufflinks. He gave a nod as greetings, his bearing terribly smug. Amélie continued the theme, in a violet off-the shoulder dress, her silver jewelry heavy with amethysts. To top it off, Ziv wore an indigo suit with a black shirt, several silver rings adorning his fingers, and ears.

"...Were we supposed to match?" Jack asked after a moment. "Because I didn't get that memo."

You resisted the urge to facepalm. Because your dinner companions really were that fucking coordinated and they made it look great. Jack pulled out a chair for you, beside Amélie. Gabriel sat on your other side, and Jack between Gabriel and Lacroix.

"You all look fantastic," Amélie said, her relief clear as she scrutinized Jack's outfit. She gave you a nod of approval, and went on to really examine Gabriel's clothes. "I like the cut, you modernized the jacket with narrower lapels, but kept the classic silhouette. And the color is so striking."

"Not at all like a sleazy lounge singer," Ziv offered helpfully and then gave choked cough. You didn't see who got him, but both Amélie and Lacroix smiled serenely.

"Those cufflinks though..." Amélie tilted her head to the side. "They look very familiar." She slowly turned her head, eyeing Lacroix thoughtfully. "I bought you an almost identical pair a year ago..."

Gabriel's smile sharpened. "What a coincidence," he said in a tone that implied the exact opposite.

Lacroix winced.

"What ever happened to those?" Amélie asked smiling brightly at her husband.

You poured yourself a glass of red wine, not bothering to look at the label, because if Amélie chose it, it wasn't something you'd be able to afford on your salary anyway.

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask, Chanceux," Lacroix said blithely. "She won them off me in a game of cards."
You nearly choked on your wine, not expecting Lacroix to tell the damn truth and shift the blame onto you. Coughing, you blotted at your mouth, feeling Amélie's gaze before you actually looked up.

"You were gambling with my husband?" Amélie asked, one brow arched. "For his clothing?"

"For his pocket money, and then he threw in his cufflinks because I was about to call it a night, but apparently I'm a magpie that cannot resist shiny things." You grinned, trying to remember the exact wording he'd used. It was in French, and under his breath, so you weren't entirely sure if you'd gotten the phrasing right, but it was a close enough translation, judging by Lacroix's resigned expression.

"And that's the last time I played cards with her," Lacroix said, shaking his head.

Amélie just laughed, patting your arm. "We must go to Monte Carlo some time, Chanceux. It will be great fun. And you must teach me how to beat the pants off Gérard; he cheats, you know.

"She does too," Lacroix said with a wry smile.

"I think they look very nice on Gabe," Jack beamed, and you squinted at him, because he wasn't that dumb. He grinned at Lacroix and the spy rolled his eyes.

"Affecting an air of naïveté at your age is most unflattering, Commander," Lacroix said.

"What are you talking about?" Jack laughed. "We're about the same age."

Lacroix's good-natured smile surprised you a little.

"They do look lovely on you," Amélie said with a smile at Gabriel.

"You have excellent taste in accessories," Gabriel said, pouring himself some wine. "I'll admit, I am aware of their providence and wished to express my compliments to both the giver and the intermediaries." He leaned over and kissed your cheek. "Excellent job ladies."

Ziv shot you a pointed look as you drank more wine, both of you trying to figure out if this was a friendly or hostile exchange.

"Thank you," Amélie said. "We should go shopping some time. I know a few people can procure some truly exquisite pieces."

"Sounds like fun," Gabriel said, and you had to really stare at him searching for sarcasm. But no, it looked like he was being sincere. "I've been meaning to pick up a few things."

"Should you be looking for something special for yourself, or perhaps something special for your lovers?" Amélie's expression bordered on delight.

"Am I shopping for wedding rings or nipple rings you mean?" Gabriel laughed.

"I know artisans who specialize in both-" Amélie said without batting an eye.

You stared in horror at Amélie. And then you glanced at Gabriel who sat there looking comfortable and Jack, who'd narrowed his eyes at Gabriel.

"Amélie, we should talk about this later," Gabriel laughed, ignoring the looks he was getting. "We can go out for coffee, do some shopping, perhaps mislead some tabloids-"
"Yes," Amélie nodded enthusiastically. "Maybe we can bring Chanceux and buy her some new clothes, and perhaps set a trap for Talon spies while we are at it."

"I like the way you think," Gabriel told her, pouring himself more wine. "Jack owes Lucky some clothing money anyway. It'll be a fun day out."

You could see Ziv turning that statement over, start to open his mouth, then wrinkle his nose in disgust and glare at Jack. But he didn't say anything, and that was a miracle. One probably prompted by sharp elbows or kicks to the shin, but you'd take it.

You glanced at Lacroix, a little surprised by the fond smile on his face as he watched Amélie plan another social excursion that could possibly end up with dead bodies and more shopping than you wanted to contemplate.

Jack poured himself some wine, giving you a sympathetic look.

"We already ordered the antipasti," Lacroix said, as you picked up a menu, and found it mostly to be in Italian. Oh, there were English descriptions under the dish names. It was a good thing Jesse wasn't here. He'd try to tell you about them using his "authentic Ee-Towl-Yan" accent, and the less said about that, the better.

You browsed, flipping to the dessert menu, and not seeing the promised "Tiramisu Bomboloni Tower" or apricot amaretto meringue cake. You shot Amélie a suspicious look, wondering if you'd been lured here under false pretenses.

"He is a guest chef, not a permanent fixture," Lacroix said, reading your expression. "Your love of dessert has not been forgotten. But you must eat your dinner first.” He gave you a smug look and you pursed your lips at his patronizing tone.

You returned to scanning the menu. Out of the corner of your eye, you saw Jack's brow furrow as he silently mouthed Italian words and frowned. Gabriel flipped through the menu and then set it down as the door opened and servers came in carrying large platters. A woman in a crisp apron took a moment to describe each dish for you as an Athena drone carefully scanned each plate for poisons or other drugs.

There was Sardinian carasau, a wafer thin cracker bread spread with bottarga - dried mullet roe, then topped with pecorino cheese and olive oil. It was a strong mix of umami and salty flavors, and while Jack didn't seem crazy about it, Gabriel and Ziv dug in.

The bright green dip was maro, a raw fava bean spread made with garlic, mint, Romano cheese, and olive oil with a smattering of black pepper served on warm bread. Jack was already reaching for the bread, though you wondered if he'd eat the bean spread. He tried it, muttered something about "weird green hummus," but kept eating.

There was a Venetian-style pate served with thin slices of fried polenta. Of course, Amélie and Lacroix seemed to like that. The baked tomatoes were stuffed with salmon, garlic, and green olives. The most popular dish was the pyramid of bite-sized, piping hot, meatballs made with garlic, mashed potatoes, cheese, and milk: they were incredibly soft and juicy, and you needed that recipe. You heard Jack say something about how this was "nothing like Olive Garden," under his breath, and Gabriel groaned. But Jack helped himself to a good portion of the meatballs.

Finally a waiter brought in a tureen of mussel soup with beans, celery, and basil. It was light and warming, and you began to wonder if you were going to have room for dessert.
The portion sizes were extremely generous, and that was strange because most of the posh restaurants you'd been to did not offer such big plates. Maybe Lacroix had worked something out ahead of time? Because those SEP metabolisms were insane.

"Those were some vacation recommendations," Jack said, inclining his head at Lacroix. "I'm a little envious at how well-traveled you are."

Lacroix gave a modest shrug. "There is a lot of research required in espionage. I don't go into anything blind. But you have traveled a great deal as well," he said politely.

"I'm a little envious of all the fun places you've been to," Jack amended with a grin. "Gabriel's been trying to convince me to try some more adventurous vacations."

"I refuse to go to Pigeon Forge ever again," Gabriel scowled.

"But pigeon- you began.

"It's a lie. There aren't that many pigeons," he told you. "It's just a campy tourist trap in the Smokey Mountains: pretty if you want to go camping or to judge other tourists, but not much else."

"As you can see, someone is hard to please," Jack continued with a warm smile. "So I'm happy for all the help I can get."

Wait, first Feng and Athena were helping Jack. Now Lacroix? You glanced at Gabriel who looked just as suspicious.

"Eritrea has beautiful coastline," Ziv said, not looking up from his wine glass. "Government's still shit, but I went there a few times as a kid."

You blinked, a little shocked by Ziv's attempt at polite conversation.

"I'll look into it," Jack said, taking another meatball. "The closest I've been is through Somalia," he said. "But that was all...combat."

"I suppose it's hard to take in the regional charms while getting shot at," Ziv said picking at his stuffed tomato.

"Always assumed that was the charm," Gabriel said with a dry laugh.

"We are planning a vacation, Gérard says you have already approved his leave," Amélie said to Jack. "Ziv has visited France a few times, but I think we can give him a more comprehensive tour and work to improve his French language skills. That is, if Gabriel will sign off on it?"

"Really Amélie?" Gabriel scowled. "Fix his manners while you're at it, and you can take him, with my blessing."

"Oh you're one to tal- Ben-zona!" Ziv snarled glaring at Lacroix and rubbed his side.

"You are so generous," Amélie said as if nothing had happened. "I know he is an indispensible part of your cybersecurity team, but we really appreciate you looking out for him. He tends to overwork himself and it makes him difficult. It is wonderful to know that both you and Chanceux take such good care of him."

Gabriel looked like he'd swallowed a lemon and it had gotten lodged halfway down his
throat. But he muttered an ungracious "no problem."

Ziv huffed as Amélie winked and smiled at him.

You were saved from more strangely polite small talk by the arrival of the main courses. You had gotten the lamb ragu with square noodles called *maccheroni alla chitarra*. It was heartier than you expected, thick chunks of lamb in heavy sauce made it feel more like stew than pasta. The flavor verged on gamey, but it was well-balanced, and Gabriel really seemed to like it, casually taking bites off your plate. Ziv and Amélie also helped themselves to a sample, ignoring Gabriel's frowns.

Amélie chose quail sauce on fettuccine, though there was much more quail meat than pasta on the plate. She fed Ziv a forkful and teasingly ignored Lacroix when he tried to take a bite off her fork.

Gabriel ordered swordfish steaks with *salmoriglio* and capers. The plate was large, but the steaks were only about an inch thick. They had been grilled and brushed with *salmoriglio*, a blend of olive oil, oregano, and lemon juice. He made Jack try a bite, and you slid a whole steak off his plate, because they were small, and also because he kept stealing your lamb.

Ziv happily took his baked artichokes with shrimp and mozzarella, sharing willingly with Amélie, but grumbling under his breath when you and Lacroix snuck bites.

Jack ordered the roast lamb Abruzzi-style, cooked rare, with potatoes, garlic, rosemary, and Romano cheese: well-seasoned meat and potatoes for Jack's Midwestern palate. It was leg meat, possibly a whole leg, and he kept pushing portions onto Gabriel's plate, grinning as Gabriel dutifully passed on pieces to you.

Lacroix chose the fricassee chicken with porcini mushrooms and Marsala wine, and somehow managed to have a forkful of chicken in place whenever Ziv opened his mouth.

The conversation stayed on the food, Lacroix waxing poetic about the wine while Amélie suggested more restaurants she wanted to try.

The food was incredible, but you couldn't quite quash the antsy feeling in your gut as you sat there, acting civilized. It felt a little unnatural, like everyone was playing pretend, and while you knew there were numerous individual tensions within the group, everyone was trying so very hard to get along that everything felt stilted. It was...odd. You weren't sure you liked it. Maybe you just needed a quick walk.

"Excuse me," you said, getting up. "Need to use the facilities."

"She means, "scout the place for desserts," Gabriel said, leaning over and nudging Jack.

Rolling your eyes, you slid out of your chair and exited the private dining room.

So maybe you were looking for a dessert buffet, but there was none. No glass display case. No performing chefs. Just rich people in fancy clothes enjoying their expensive meals. A little disappointed, you headed back, stiffening as a songbird-sized Athena drone landed on your shoulder.

"There's a man who's been hovering around the dining room entrance. I am unable to
identify him, but he walks like he's carrying a gun," she said softly in your ear. "I've notified the rest of the party."

You pulled out your phone, pretending to be distracted as you glanced around the corner. Sure enough, there was a brunette man in a black suit with his back to you, blocking your path to the doorway. The bulge of a large gun on his hip ruined the lines of the jacket, giving him a clunk asymmetrical look. It wasn't just vanity. The fact you could see that he was carrying was a tactical error. There were better, more discrete holsters that didn't ruin outfits, but still gave excellent access. Who was training these amateurs? And who was dressing them?

Wait...what? You ran those thoughts through your head again, specifically your sartorial observations. Oh hell, Amélie was a terrifying influence.

"Excuse me," you began, as the Athena drone rose from your shoulder.

He turned, swinging his fists, and the blow glanced across your jaw, but you were already moving. Your shoes made it much harder to dodge, but you managed to avoid the full impact. You tasted blood and your first instinct was to slam your blade extensions through his throat and end the threat. But you needed to find out whom his target was, how he got in, and if he was acting alone. And it would be easier to do that if he was alive.

He tried to follow up with another strike, but you raised your left arm, blocking his next hit, and then you smashed the palm of your hand into his nose. You heard and felt the cartilage crunching, blood spurting onto your right hand. You grabbed him by the hair with your left fist and slammed his head into the door. The thud was incredibly satisfying.

He dropped, even as the door opened and Gabriel stood there, expression grim, as you crouched over your attacker, checking to make sure he was really out. You took his gun, and then patted him down for more weapons. There was a garrote on his wrist, a knife on his belt beside his phone, and another small gun in an ankle holster. You took them all.

"What'd he do? Cut in line for the dessert table?" Gabriel asked, crouching down beside you.

You snorted, then winced, touching your face with your unbledded hand. Never mind, there was blood on that one now too.

"Don't mess with it," Gabriel scolded. "We'll get you some ice." He cupped your chin, gently tilting your head back as he inspected your face. "Doesn't look broken." He tapped his nose. "How's it feel?"

"Isn't an issue," you said. "Split my lip is all."

"We've arranged a pickup," Jack said, as he leaned over to inspect your work. "Athena and some of your agents are keeping an eye on the perimeter, but no one's cut and run yet."

"Apparently, you can't even be trusted to go to the bathroom by yourself," Ziv scowled, peeking out from behind Jack. His gaze travelled past you and he grimaced. "Gérard, get over here!"

You turned then, realizing that you'd attracted an audience. A waiter and a woman in a green headscarf both stared at you. The waiter quickly averted his eyes, but the woman in the headscarf held up her phone, obviously filming you. You gritted your teeth and glared at them, the waiter quickly turning on his heel. How much had they seen?
"That was utterly brutal," a woman said coolly, still recording. "Exactly what I'd expect from the Strike Commander's bodyguard."

You froze, unsure of the threat she presented.

"Ms. Kharoti," Lacroix said, pushing past Jack. To your surprise, he pressed his right hand over his chest and nodded. "What a surprise."

The woman laughed, then returned the gesture, lowering her camera. "Monsieur Gérard Lacroix in the flesh. It has been a long time. Marrakech, three years ago?"

"You haven't changed at all," he said.

You relaxed, just a little. If Lacroix knew whom she was, you and Athena could always take care of incriminating footage.

"This is Ms. Reshtina Kharoti, a very respected investigative journalist," Lacroix said, his smile a little too sharp. "What a strange coincidence that she is here."

You blinked as Ziv handed you a pair of handcuffs, and you secured the man's wrists. He was still out, but why was Ziv carrying around restraints? Because you couldn't just use the professional grade ones for sex games on unenhanced humans. It was way too easy to cause damage. Jack raised a brow, but Ziv was already heading back to the table.

"Good job, Agent Strike," he said, a wry smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. You didn't miss the gleam of excitement in his eye. You really hoped the goddamn reporter wasn't as observant as she looked.

"So many VIPs in one place," Kharoti said crisply. "One has to wonder why."

"Perhaps it is just a social excursion; a meal shared with friends," Lacroix said cheerfully.

"Which is why Agent Strike just knocked out a man?" She asked, skepticism clear. She had soft features and was deceptively pleasant-looking, like someone's good-natured aunt. She wore red-framed glasses and a loose fitting long green tunic-dress over white pants.

"A hazard of our congregation," Lacroix admitted with a Gallic shrug. "Now, your food is getting cold, agent," he said to you. "I've already asked someone to bring you some ice. You should go get cleaned up."

Nodding, you gave the reporter a long unfriendly look before retreating back into the private dining room. Gabriel dragged the would-be assassin inside and closed the door, letting Lacroix handle the reporter.

You turned to find Jack in front of you and he gently dabbed at your face with his napkin, brow furrowed as he wiped the blood off your mouth.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" He asked.

"She was fucking recording," you hissed.

"Don't trouble yourself, Chanceux," Amélie said, smiling brightly at you. "Gérard will handle it. He has a way with...reporters."

"Is that as sinister as it sounds?" You muttered and Jack leaned in, kissing your forehead.
"He didn't damage your dress, did he?" Amélie asked as she looked you over.

"I would have killed him," you said sharply, realizing that you meant it.

Amélie eyes widened and she gave you a look of pure delight. "Spoken like a true lady. She is magnificent tonight, is she not?"

"She's my hero," Jack teased. "Don't worry, Athena was recording too. I'm looking forward to seeing you in action."

"Shouldn't have gotten hit," Gabriel said, embracing you from behind. "That was clumsy work." He kissed the top of your head, the gesture softening his admonishment.

"I'm in heels," you complained.

"Could've kicked them off," Gabriel said, sounding slightly amused.

"I didn't think he was going to come out swinging," you said, a little petulant because he was right. "I figured I could just sidle up, pull my civilian act, and suckerpunch him."

"You're too cocky," Gabriel said voice gruff as he rubbed your back.

There was a thud and you all turned to see Ziv kicking the unconscious man right between the legs.

"What?" Ziv shrugged. "It's not like he needs those to talk."

To your surprise, Gabriel and Jack just chuckled and didn't even tell him to stop.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a weird week. Had a creeping crud kind of illness, not painful, just left me listless and nauseated. I've been sleeping it off. Got a call from the local prison program that supports drug addicts and wondered who the hell in the family listed me as an emergency contact for such things. Played phone tag. It got weirder. The guy said he'd heard I could help house a participant who also happened to be a sex offender...

...I called back and made it very clear that I did not handle any kind of housing. He said he got my number from his boss and it was very "WTF."

Most of the dishes mentioned are courtesy of the chef Marcella Hazan.
Chapter 114

Chapter Summary

Your evening has an unexpectedly "military" flavor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After bringing you an ice pack, the maître d' apologized profusely for the security breach. Jack assured him that he didn't hold the restaurant responsible, that Overwatch security had the issue under control, and more importantly that the food was excellent. Then he requested that dessert, all the desserts in fact, be brought in soon. He winked at you, as soon as the maître d' wasn't looking.

Lacroix came in, a few minutes later, his manner relaxed as he sat down beside Ziv.

"Well?" You asked, crossing your arms.

"Do not worry about it," Lacroix said as he sipped his wine. "Kharoti is a very reasonable individual. You can talk to her yourself."

"I'd rather not." Frowning, you looked over at Ziv.

"We can always hack her files," Ziv said, taking a bite of your lamb. "Athena's already monitoring her data uploads." He glanced at his phone. "Oh, it looks like Diallo's here to pick up your wannabe assassin." He held the man's phone in his other hand, brow furrowed as he unlocked the device. "Any bets on his target?"

"Jack," Gabriel said.

"Gabe," Jack said at the same time.

"My money's on Gérard," Ziv said and Amélie nodded.

"Same," you said, and Lacroix merely waved his hands, like he was signaling an end to the applause.

Ziv scrolled through the phone, his frown deepening, and he held the screen up. There was a picture of Amélie, recent by the look of it, in a ruby trenchcoat and dark glasses taken as she walked down the street.

"There's not a lot on here; it's probably just a burner. Athena is lifting coordinates and doing a deeper scan. I'll take a closer look when I get back to the lab," Ziv said, carefully wrapping the phone in a bag and putting it in his pocket.

"That was the other day," Amélie said, a little pale. "When I came in to inspect the premises." She shook her head. "I wasn't alone, but I didn't think I'd been followed. How embarrassing." She poured herself more wine. "I am grateful for your quick actions, my friends," she said.
Lacroix was staring hard at the man on the ground, his gaze flat and reptilian.

"We all have prices on our heads," Gabriel said. "Some more than others," he shot Lacroix a wry look. "I suppose we should do this more often. Dress up. Go out. Spring traps. Enjoy the rest of the evening."

"I do appreciate a man who can mix business and pleasure," Amélie winked.

"It's more like he can't separate the two," Jack said, elbowing Gabriel.

"How can I, when I have to work with you and Lucky all the time?" Gabriel leaned over and kissed Jack's cheek, his voice husky.

There was a knock, and Athena announced Diallo and Távio's presence. You blinked as Gabriel got the door. Saluting, both agents grabbed the prisoner, gave you a nod of acknowledgement, and made a quick exit. You caught sight of Kharoti lingering in the hallway, not overtly filming, but you knew better than to assume.

"Maeda Vargas is progressing well, isn't he?" Lacroix asked after the door had shut.

"He's not a bad kid," Ziv said, giving you a reluctant half smile.

"Very earnest. Better-behaved than your other protégée," Gabriel grinned at you.

Ziv narrowed his eyes at Gabriel and Gabriel actually reached over with his fork and stole a piece of shrimp off Ziv's plate. Glaring, Ziv reached right back and took a slice of swordfish.

Gabriel just chewed his shrimp grinning a little spitefully at Ziv. "The swordfish is better."

"Good, you can leave my food alone," Ziv snapped.

"Távio is a charming boy," Amélie said, resting one hand on Ziv's shoulder. "I'm very impressed by his good manners and quick thinking." She inclined her head at Jack. "Don't you agree?"

Jack raised a brow, mouth twisting into a moue. "Yeah, he's OK," he said, looking like he'd bitten into a chunk of raw bitter melon.

"He's still holding a grudge over being described as "steamed cornmeal on weakass milk toast," by the boy," Gabriel laughed.

Ziv choked on his wine, turned his head, and sprayed the back wall as he coughed violently. "What? When was this? How come you never told me that?" Ziv gave you a glare of outrage.

"It was back when we got rescued in Greece," you said. "He was delirious." You gave Jack a sharp look.

"I'm not holding a grudge," Jack grumbled. "I don't work with the boy so I don't have anything to add."

"Uh-huh," Gabriel laughed.

Amélie giggled. "You should hear some of the things Gérard says after he's had a head injury. He once woke up furious at me for letting bunnies take over the kitchen." She leaned over conspiratorially. "We'd been living in a hotel in Prague for three months. There was no kitchen."
Lacroix shook his head, his smile tolerant. "I was heavily medicated, _ma cocotte_. I apologized profusely. I offered to buy you as many rabbits as you wanted, cooked, stuffed, or alive."

"It is still an amusing story," Amélie winked.

"Jack's alarmingly enthusiastic when concussed," you said, recalling the mountain base in Mongolia. "He can twirl a baton really well too."

Ziv choked on another mouthful of wine, glaring at you. "Ben zona! You're doing this on purpose."

You smiled slyly. "He's very cuddly and affectionate."

"It was just you, me, and Feng," he scowled. "And no one will believe Feng."

"Her brother was there too," you said.

"Oh...yeah, I forgot about him," Jack said, a little sheepishly. He leaned against Gabriel. "This one, he just gets grumpier."

"Why am I not sur-" Ziv grunted and then abruptly fell silent. You eyed both Amélie and Lacroix, their expressions almost identically and unconvincingly "innocent."

"Oh, the next course in en route," Athena announced. And you immediately set your ice pack aside, trying not to rub your hands together with such obvious glee.

The Tiramisu Bomboloni Tower reminded you of a _croquembouche_, the pyramid of creampuffs stacked on top of each other and then coated in caramel. In this case, the Italian doughnut balls were filled with a combination of mascarpone and espresso custard, then covered in a dark chocolate glaze. The outside had the slight crispness of a good fresh doughnut, and the inside was soft, gooey, and bursting with creamy coffee flavors. Lacroix and Gabriel were particularly taken by this dessert, sipping cups of strong black coffee while they chatted about the LA Lakers.

The chestnut and salted caramel panna cotta was rich and creamy, somewhere between pudding and sweetened gelatin, and Jack happily ate several servings of that though you found it a little bland in comparison to the other desserts.

Amélie was partial to the honeyed plum semifreddo, a frozen mousse that reminded you of gelato, albeit one that tasted strongly of sweet plum wine.

The apricot amaretto meringue cake was a layered confection, but not overpoweringly sweet as you'd feared. Sliced apricots had been soaked in amaretto covered in mascarpone on crisp disks of baked meringue. Ziv was already on his second piece.

You also had a glass of zabaglione, a whipped egg custard drink. It was normally made with sweet wine and served with fruit, but yours had been laced with cognac and dark chocolate-covered biscuits instead. You weren't complaining.

"We should do this more often," Jack said, nuzzling Gabriel's neck. He'd apparently already finished his zabaglione. "Next time we can cook for you-"
You nearly choked on your drink and started sputtering. Gabriel patted your back, giving Jack a look.

"You cooked just the other weekend," Lacroix said smoothly. "The Family Day cookout? That was quite stressful. I think we should treat ourselves out more frequently. It's much easier when we have someone else do the cooking."

You exhaled slowly, trying not to look as relieved as you felt. Lacroix winked at you behind his cup of coffee.

"Yeah, I guess," Jack said, shaking his head. "But this also took a lot of work for you to arrange. Figure we could do something casual. You know, hit up that little kebab place Lucky and Gabe like so much. Or go to the park when they have the food truck festival-"

"We should," Amélie said, with surprising enthusiasm. "Good food doesn't have to be an expensive elaborate affair. There was this little Chinese restaurant I used to frequent when I was in London. They had exquisite soup dumplings." She gave a wistful sigh, then perked up. "I bet Feng knows where to get good soup dumplings."

"She does," you said, recalling the slumber party. "There's this street vendor and they were amazing-"

"I will call her and take notes," Amélie said.

"We need to find a good pho place," Ziv said, apparently unaware that he had pastry cream on the tip of his nose.

"The nearest one is in Bern," Lacroix said with a heavy sigh. "Yes, yes, there are Vietnamese restaurants here in Zurich, but nothing I would recommend. Well, there are a few places that make passable banh mi, but not pho."

"We could always do 2AM McDonalds runs," Ziv said. "Don't look at me like that, you and McCree and Genji used to do them all the time-"

Sometimes you still did, though now it skewed more toward Genji harassing you or Jesse to make him omurice or pancakes.

"I do like their fries," Amélie said.

"Jack likes Happy Meals," you said.

"No, sweetheart, that's 'happy endings.' I'll show you the difference later," he laughed, and you felt your cheeks go hot.

"No, he really will buy one for the toy," Gabriel said, shaking his head. "Not every toy, but some-"

"Ziv does the same! They are just overgrown children!" Amélie laughed, as both Jack and Ziv protested loudly.

You finished your zabaglione, not missing how Lacroix watched his lovers, his expression oddly soft, an unfamiliar poignancy in his eyes. His lips quirked slightly, almost smiling as Amélie patted Ziv's head and Ziv slumped in his chair, groaning loudly. And it occurred to you that you knew exactly how he felt, how bittersweet it was to make plans like this, all the while knowing that next week you were out. That you were finally walking into Hanoi. That some of your people
might not be walking out and you were faking your death.

You took a sip of Gabriel's zabaglione, trying to soften the lump in your throat.

"Do not worry, Chanceux," Lacroix said, meeting your gaze. "I will make sure to include you in the planning. Your insights are always useful."

"Thanks," you said, taken off guard, because deep down, you knew he wasn't just talking about another dinner party.

She was waiting for you when you went out to scout the exit. There were no other reporters, no obvious traps, and Athena had done an excellent job of maintaining watch. But Kharoti sat at a table, drinking coffee and slowly eating a bowl of what looked like limoncello gelato. She rose, obviously not content to pretend to watch you work. The wait staff gave you wide berth, though you'd been nothing but polite and maybe a little too eager when it came to the desserts...

"Agent Strike," Kharoti said, greeting you with one hand extended. You reluctantly shook it, not quite liking the idea of making nice with a fucking reporter of all people. Not that you hated reporters, but you were a black ops agent, focused on doing your work in secrecy. Reporters were the antithesis of that.

"Ms. Kharoti," you said, careful to keep your tone neutral.

She held up her phone, showing the video of you getting smacked all the way to the part where Gabriel knelt beside you examining your face. There was nothing overtly wrong with his behavior, but to see it from another angle, the gentleness in his touch unmistakable.

You stared very hard at her, waiting for the bluff, the demand, or even a threat.

To your surprise, she clicked the little trash can icon and deleted the video.

"I didn't back it up," she said, chin jutting out defiantly.

"OK," you said, now terribly confused. If Lacroix had intimidated her into silence, why the hell was she still hanging around the restaurant, obviously looking for a scoop?

"Consider it a gesture of good faith. I'm working on a story," she said, dark eyes locked on your face. "A few actually."

"I hear that's your job," you said, surveying the area. There was no one paying attention to you, so you pulled up a chair and sat across from her. "What does this have to do with me?"

"You're obviously an experienced covert operative," she said taking a deep breath. "I don't want any unpleasant visits or tragic accidents."

"You don't seem very frightened," you said, not buying that explanation either. Though it would be just like Lacroix to make you the bête noire. That was fine. If it kept the press off your back...

"I want you to see that I am good at my job, but also trustworthy. It's one hell of an ethical
tightrope, but I do what I can."

You raised a brow, realizing this was the preliminary for an interview. Curious, you waited for the rest of her pitch.

Kharoti adjusted her headscarf. "Your name has turned up on the periphery of my investigation. I've been doing a piece on multinational corruption, mostly Vishkar," she gave a wry smile. "But I'm sure you know, there are points when it's difficult to disentangle these corporations from the governments they are influencing."

You inclined your head, nodding once.

"And of course, they are never very happy when you reveal how closely intertwined they happen to be." Kharoti folded her hands in her lap.

"I bet you have one hell of a target painted on your back."

"Well, I have managed to upset the DIB, the ISI, several mid-tier politicians; I may be avoiding that part of the world for the moment," she shrugged demurely. "But that's all part of the job."

"So where do I fit into all this?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," she said leaning forward. "Vishkar is not a fan of yours, though they don't seem to have much intelligence on you either. Only that you've been spotted eating dinner in the company of Zhai Feng, the White Rabbit CEO and alleged Triad Dragon Head."

"That sounds terribly suspicious," you said dryly, not liking where this was going. "Much like this government corruption you've been troubled by."

"It does, but you could take into account that Zhai Feng has been actively thwarting Vishkar's growth in east Asia. Her coalition also owns a minority stake in Lucheng Interstellar, which so far hasn't gotten involved, but it makes for quite the complex story. And while I can't claim that White Rabbit is...acting altruistically and free of corruption, Zhai Feng hasn't left me any car bombs yet."

"If you're looking for personal protection, I can recommend a few trustworthy agencies," you said, recalling that Feng did have a second cousin that was allegedly good at making car bombs.

Kharoti squinted at you, like she wasn't sure if you were threatening her. "I work for the Atlas News Network, and while there has been some...pressure from above to let certain stories go, my boss is as driven as I am and very adept at...covering for me. I am not without allies."

Well, that probably meant she had more protection than a freelance journalist. That was something. "Is this an "enemy of my enemy" kind of thing?" You leaned back in your chair.

"I know Zhai Feng is trying to field legitimate business opportunities for her clan. I know she fought a bloody succession battle. I know she's walking a very fine line, and I actually respect her for it. But I'm not trying to do a story on her yet or find protection. I want to know if you or your people can give me anything on Vishkar. And I just thought you'd like to know how much I've already found out."

You blinked as she slid a data chip across the table.
"This is my resume, my hook, and an example of the quality of my work," she said. "I can respect and protect the secrecy of my sources. I hope you'll consider contributing."

She picked up her spoon back up and took a bite of her gelato. Her hands shook a little, and it occurred to you then that she had to be aware of the risk she was taking by approaching you directly. That you were a stranger, a killer, and a networks operative that could just as easily silence her for drawing your attention and getting too close to the truth. You had to respect that level of chutzpah.

"How do you know I'm not one of the bad guys?" You asked, taking the data chip and sliding it into your jacket pocket.

"I don't, not for sure," she said. "But anyone who fights off three terrorists to save one little girl and doesn't even try to take credit for it? Well, I have a good feeling about them."

You felt your eyebrows creep higher, realizing she'd been investigating what happened in DC. "You're not just doing a story on Vishkar."

"I've given you a freebie," she said with conspiratorial smile. "Talk to me after you've read that. I think you'll be very interested in what I have to say."

You left her finishing off her gelato, and went ahead to scout the parking lot. It was no coincidence she was here tonight. And you had your suspicions about who tipped her off and why. Wheels within wheels, contingencies for plots layered over more schemes. You were rapidly approaching the endgame with Nguyen. But there was still Petras and the rest of Talon to deal with. It would be a gamble, revealing anything before you'd acted on it, and you weren't in the habit of leaking anything to the press. Gabriel wouldn't like this development at all. You'd have to add this to the list of delicate actions you needed to discuss with Lacroix.

"You're thinking about killing people," Jack said, his tone light as you climbed into the car.

You'd forgotten how perceptive he could be. "Sorry. Tradecraft habit. Do I look murderous?"

"No. You get this stony calm, almost like you've found your meditation place and then you look out at the world with cut-glass eyes." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Gabriel does the same thing, but with angrier eyebrows."

Gabriel just laughed.

"Sorry, I've become a really bad date," you said, recalling your extremely awkward meal with Joon almost a year ago. Despite the nasty surprises, tonight wasn't a total disaster. There were odd lulls and strained conversations in the beginning, but after a little more wine and that attempted attack everyone else had loosened up. Maybe it wasn't just you. Everyone had been somewhat stressed about tonight. Some of them were just better at hiding it.

"The reporter?" Gabriel asked, rubbing your shoulders.

"No disappearing the reporter," Jack said, not actually sounding worried. "If you have to
"I have Athena looking into her. She deleted the footage," you said, trying to sound calmer than you felt. "Voluntarily and without any posturing on my part whatsoever," you added, seeing Jack's frown in the rearview mirror. You then explained her proposition, including how well informed Kharoti seemed to be. "I'll admit, I'm intrigued, if only to see what she knows. But I'll go over it in-depth with Lacroix before we make any plans."

Gabriel nodded thoughtfully. "It wouldn't hurt to keep an eye on her, especially if she knows as much as you suspect."

Unsaid was the obvious point that you couldn't just trust her convenient timing or ulterior motives. And while you wouldn't kill a journalist for reporting the inconvenient truth, you would kill a Talon pawn or a rival intelligence officer trying to entrap you, regardless of her profession.

Jack crossed his arms, staring out the window as you drove back to headquarters.

"Everything OK?" You asked.

He shrugged, giving you an hesitant smile. "I was hoping we could go a night without kidnapping or assassination attempts. You know, just have dinner with friends, tell embarrassing stories, and talk shit. I'm not blaming you or Amélie, just wishing things hadn't gone down like that."

"But the food was worth it," you said. "As was the sight of you and Gabriel dressed up so nicely," you added quickly.

Gabriel laughed at your clumsy save.

"That was some dessert selection," Jack agreed, rubbing his stomach. "I think I'm going to need a nap."

"You're thinking about sleeping?" Gabriel asked, tone incredulous, bordering on outraged.

"Only a little," Jack said. "Thinking about pouncing on our badass girlfriend too, but don't know how she's feeling."

"I need a little more time to digest," you laughed. "And let me remind you that if you mess up this dress-"

"The Ball is coming up; you should get a new one anyway," Gabriel teased.

"But I won't-" You fell silent, knowing that while the ball was about a month out, you didn't want to say that maybe you wouldn't be here for it. And that was also the anniversary of...

You swallowed your words.

Jack reached around the seat, his hands resting on your shoulders. "We don't know the future, sweetheart." He squeezed gently. "Worst case scenario, it could be a masquerade ball. Gabriel would enjoy that."

You blinked, a little surprised by Jack's creativity.

"We've been talking about it," Gabriel said sounding smug. "The planners might panic if we tell them to change the theme this late in the game, so we can just tell the Overwatch personnel to come in masks as a joke or some kind of challenge."
"We can do Christmas in LA or Shanghai, I'll let you and Gabe negotiate that one."

Heart in your throat, you stared at the road.

"Shanghai will be easier, we'll only have to buy presents for one person," Gabriel said, tone light.

"Feng," you croaked after too long of a pause. "You have to get Feng something or she'll be devastated," you said, as turned off into the Overwatch HQ complex.

"Two people is still easier than Gabe's family," Jack said and you heard a loud thump. "Ow! It's true! I never know what to buy your sisters! And Catriona is going to make fun of me no matter what we get her!"

"I guess that's fair," Gabriel groused. "It's obvious that your manic little Triad boss is much easier to please. I bet you could give her an empty cardboard box and she'd be amused for hours."

Jack laughed and you stared ahead, driving slowly into the motorpool garage, the weight on your shoulders just a little lighter than before.

The three of you went to Jack's room and you kicked off your heels immediately, dropping onto the couch with a sigh of relief. There was a low rumble of laughter and you tilted your head back in time for an upside down view of Gabriel tugging on Jack's bowtie while the two men kissed, Jack running his hands up Gabriel's chest. Gabriel squeezed Jack's ass, and Jack laughed, breaking away, his gaze falling on you. Jacket still on, he vaulted over the back of the couch and landed right beside you.

"You're awfully distracted," Jack said, leaning over and kissing the side of your neck. "But by the wrong things."

"Sorry," you said, biting your lower lip. "There's so much I have to do before-"

Jack leaned in kissed you then, his hands squeezing yours. "I know. And we'll do everything we can to help. But tonight's just for us. Leave the rest of it at the door." He pushed your hair back, forehead pressed to yours, those blue eyes stormy with emotion.

You nodded once, blinking as Jack pulled you onto his lap, rubbing your back while you rested your head on his shoulder.

Gabriel crouched down in front of you, forearms resting on the back of the sofa. His eyes were soft as he leaned in and kissed your forehead. "Did you eat too much dessert?"

"Yeah," you said, a little sheepish.

"Just means you'll taste extra sweet," Jack murmured, teeth grazing your ear. "Do we need to go to bed?"

You laughed straightening up so you could look him the eye. "I'm not that tired, but I was distracted." You took a moment to admire Jack in dishabille, his bowtie draped over the back of his neck, the first two buttons of his shirt already open. His jacket was a little wrinkled, hair tousled, and he looked so damn beautiful it made your heart stutter. "Now I'm making time to properly admire you," you said.
Jack kissed your throat, looking very pleased.

"I like him better like this too," Gabriel gave a throaty chuckle. "Sure, he cuts a fine figure when he's dressed immaculately, but he's so much sexier when he's a little disheveled."

"You're always talking about how anticipation is good for me," Jack said, giving Gabriel a cheeky grin. "I think it's time you got a taste of your own medicine." One hand rested on your hip. "What do you think, sweetheart?"

You raised a brow. Gabriel was the one you expected to pounce first, if only because of how much he enjoyed seeing you and Jack dressed up.

"You want to give him a show? Make him wait for it even longer?" Jack asked, his other hand toying with the hem of your dress. "You'll have to leave the dress on."

"Damnit, amor," Gabriel's soft groan made your breath catch. Jack's evil idea had some merit then.

Of course, if Jack was in troublemaking mood, you'd have to lay down some ground rules. "You better not-

"Damage the dress?" Jack rolled his eyes. "Roger that, boss. I'll be careful with the dress." He hiked it up, fingers already stroking your thighs, they crept higher, rubbing your panties and you gripped the back of the couch, pulse quickening with each stroke.

"So that's the plan, you two are going to tease me?" Gabriel rasped.

"Think of it as a private show," Jack said, grinning over his shoulder. "Or a truckload of karma hitting you with a personal delivery."

"Really?" You asked, because while weren't exactly keeping score, at least when it came to Gabriel and Jack's little games with each other, you were pretty sure that Jack had been the biggest tease all week. He'd been the one sending everyone dirty pictures...

"You were too caught up in the dinner to notice, weren't you?" Jack sighed, giving you a look of mock sorrow. "Well, sweetheart," he kissed your nose. "While you were focused on the gourmet meal and navigating the social pitfalls of our outing, this jerk kept groping me under the table."

You raised a brow. "Tonight?" You didn't know why you were surprised. That was exactly the kind of thing they'd do. But maybe you had been just a little distracted by the food, because you had not picked up on that at all. That would explain some of the tension...

"He started it," Gabriel said, unrepentant.

"I was rubbing your knee. You went straight for my dick," Jack scowled.

"Not my fault you can't keep up. I play to win, boy scout."

"I had to maintain eye contact with Gérard for part of that. It was awkward as hell," Jack growled.

"Huh," you said, not sure what to make of their misbehavior. You might have felt left out, except you didn't want them getting you all hot and bothered in front of company. Especially not Ziv.
"Figured you wouldn't want to get too handsy in front of Mihret and Gérard," Gabriel said. "Otherwise I would've included you."

"Appreciate it," you said. "Now please never mention either of them ever again while we're trying to do sexy things."

Jack chuckled. "Wish you'd have taken a turn in the backseat with one of us. Gabriel was going to finger you just to see if he could ruin those panties or I was going to just push them aside and tongue fuck your pussy before we got to the restaurant. It would have sexy as hell to watch you walk in on shaky legs."

You swallowed roughly, whining softly as Jack's thick fingers slid inside you. His eyes narrowed and teeth clenched as he watched your face, his fingers curling. You arched, breathing hard as he pumped his fingers in and out, his focus staying on your face and your reactions. The intensity of his gaze surprised you. He lunged forward, mouth at your throat as he pulled you tighter against him.

"Jack!"

"You look so damn good," Jack growled, hips grinding against your thighs. "Reminds me of that first time. The three of us in that hotel room. You on Gabe's lap, making those cute little noises while he stretched you out." He shuddered. "I'll admit, I envied him a little. Seeing you shake and squeal while he bounced you on his cock was much better than anything I had expected. And Gabe? Watching him struggle to keep himself under control so he wouldn't let loose and show you the result of months of frustration that had been building up? That was fucking hot."

You fumbled with the zipper of his pants, whimpering as he withdrew his fingers. Jack helped you unfasten his pants before he tore your panties off, tossing the shreds onto the floor. You glared at him.

"Didn't damage your dress," he said, his grin wild. "You didn't say anything about the rest of it." He wrapped one arm around your waist, pulling you closer.

"You pushy bastard," you growled, rubbing yourself against the tip of his cock.

"You love it," he laughed.

You lowered yourself onto him, squeezing your eyes shut as you took him in one stroke. He always felt so good, just thick enough and oh so deep, and you sighed happily, clenching around him.

Jack threw his head back, gasping as he tightened his grip on your hips. He hiked your dress up around your waist, forehead resting against yours. You shuddered as you felt him twitch inside you. "So aggressive. That night you were so sweet and shy for Gabe-"

"Is that what you want? "Sweet and shy?" You narrowed your eyes at him, not liking that characterization at all.


"It all looks good on you, corazon," Gabriel murmured and you looked up to see him watching you both, his eyes dark with lust. "Go on then, put on your show. Don't let me interrupt your fun," he said, the barbs in his tone just barely noticeable.
"Not having fun?" Jack asked, giving Gabriel a smug grin.

"I didn't say that," Gabriel smoothed his hair back, his teeth bared. "Just wondering how much longer you're going to stall."

"Someone's impatient," you said, giving him a crooked grin.

"I've been very patient," Gabriel said, sourly.

"Come on, baby. I think that's a hint for us to start moving," Jack laughed.

Knees digging into the cushions, you rolled your hips, whining as you adjusted to Jack. He jerked upward in response, his cheeks already flushed. Gripping his hair, you pulled him in for another kiss, and Jack moaned into your mouth.

"We should use this position more often," you said in his ear. "I like being able to look you in the eye while I ride you."

"Whatever you want, sweetheart," Jack cupped your face. "Just don't stop." A splash of red stained his collar and smeared the corner of his mouth. You took a moment to admire your lipstick on him, while you rocked your hips. Jack embraced you, head tilted back as he stared up at you, clearly appreciating the view.

"Love how you feel inside me," you murmured, wanting to reciprocate. "Love watching you while you're touching me."

"It's my pleasure," Jack groaned. "My apparently...delayed pleasure."

You raised a brow, slowing down. "Oh?"

"You were all business tonight," Jack begun to bounce you harder on his lap, his thighs slapping against your ass. "Sexy as hell, but almost untouchable."

"Anticipation," you said, winking at him, though you were breathing hard now.

"Thought about following you out of the dining room, maybe slipping into a closet or the washroom and having a quickie," Gabriel said, voice husky. "But decided it was too risky."

"You were right," you said, not wanting to think about the assassin or the reporter and just how dangerous tonight had been.

"He's not the only one who had that idea," Jack said, nipping your collarbone. "We both wanted to, though if all three of us just up and disappeared..."

"We would definitely get caught," you said.

"Our other companions would have certainly figured it out," Jack agreed.

Gabriel just laughed. "I figured if I just got you alone and kept your mouth covered, I could give you a good fuck against the wall without anyone catching us."

You bit your lip. "Wasn't safe."

"I know," he said, giving you a wry smile. "But it's a good fantasy." He leaned over and nuzzled Jack's cheek. "If you were worried about keeping quiet, you could have always sucked one of us off. Either in a closet or in the backseat of the car. Jack gets loud, but I can be discrete."
"Damnit, Gabe," Jack growled, his motions growing more frantic.  

"See?" Gabriel loosened his collar, bowtie already off, the top few buttons of his shirt undone. "Keep teasing, Jackie. I'll give as good as I get."

You pressed your palms against Jack's shoulders for leverage, hips bucking faster as you sped up, Gabriel's wicked words spurring you on. It wasn't hard to imagine you and Jack in the backseat, you on your knees, sucking Jack's cock, both of you still fully dressed. It was just as easy to picture Gabriel shoving you into the coat closet of the restaurant, pressing you against the wall, and taking you hard and fast right there.

Growling, Jack gripped your hips, picking up the pace. "That's it, baby. It's just us here. No need to be so restrained now. Let it all out."

Clinging to Jack, you moved with him, breaths coming hard as he urged you on. No matter the angle Jack was always just enough make you feel full, and this position let you comfortably take him all the way to the hilt. "Jack-"

"I know you're close," he groaned, squeezing you against him. "That's fine. This is just the warm-up. Gabe's going to want attention next, and after that we can both take him down a peg. All right?"

You shivered at the thought of having Gabriel between the two of you. Jack cursed as you clenched around him, the tension in your belly tightening. You liked that plan a lot.

"Get her ready for me, Jackie," Gabriel said, voice low and harsh. "We'll see who lasts long enough to "take me down a peg," you goddamn instigator."

"It's OK, sweetheart," Jack murmured in your ear. "He knows by now that he can't damage that damn dress."

You laughed, swatting Jack's hip.

"You can spank me later," he said, with a cheeky smirk. "After you've come all over my lap. Because some of us don't care if we get our clothes dirty."

"Damnit, Jack," you laughed, breath catching as one of his hands slid between your thighs, thumb already rubbing small circles around your clit. You arched, head thrown back as Jack changed the rhythm, switching to short hard strokes that reverberated through your core. He stayed sheathed deep inside you and you could feel your heart beating in time with his rough thrusts.

"Love you, sweetheart. Love you too, babe." He angled his face in Gabriel's direction. "Want more nights off-duty. The three of us doing things together. Taking you out. Fooling around in the car. Having you both here-" Jack's fingers moved faster, the friction increasing the tension between your legs. He glanced back at you, blue eyes brimming with painfully honest emotion.

The light pressure of his fingers snapped the final twisted nerve that held you together. You went rigid, keening as your orgasm hit, all that tautness unwinding rapidly and taking you to pieces.

Jack's gaze never left your face. He panted loudly, cheeks ruddy, sweat on his brow as he let go, hips shaking as he filled you with his own release.

You cupped his face, kissing him with a fierce desperation. Because you couldn't think of the right way to frame the things you needed to say. Because he was yours, and you needed him to
understand that. Because if your time was limited, you didn't need to spoil it with the wrong words.

Jack smiled up at you, hands squeezing yours, his expression tender as he brought your fingers to his lips.

"I love you too," you said, voice rusty.

"Never doubted it," he said.

You stayed in his lap, hiking your dress up as you felt his cum start to drain out of you. Jack really didn't seem to care about his pants, just holding you there against him. You sighed as you felt another hand your shoulder gently rubbing the bare skin. Gabriel's beard brushed against the back of your neck as he kissed you there.

"Have I ever told you how much I love seeing the two of you together?" Gabriel asked. "Anticipation or not, it's a beautiful sight."

"The asshole just knows we adore him and likes seeing his harem play nicely," Jack said with a wink.

"Wait, it's Gabriel's harem? I always figured it was the Strike Commander's collection of kinky bodyguards, you know, one of the privileges of rank, and not just because Jack is some kind of nymphomaniac. Though he definitely is," you said with a solemn nod.

Snorting, Jack nipped your shoulder.

"Don't be silly," Gabriel said, helping you off Jack's lap. You expected him to spin you around for a kiss, but instead he pushed you against the couch, positioning you on your knees, with your arms on top of the backrest. "Everyone knows that Lucky Strike is a rogue government experiment with insatiable appetites, and that she's amassing her own stable of super soldiers for nefarious reasons."

"Oh yeah, that's definitely it," Jack said with a nod.

You blinked, not realizing that they were aware of that rumor. "What?"

"It's fine. We're onto your schemes. But we don't mind serving a ruthless warrior queen on her never-ending quest for cake. It certainly has its...benefits," Gabriel laughed as he pushed your dress up around your waist, his warm hands kneading your bare ass.

"Now, wait a minute." You frowned at that spin job, and glanced over your shoulder. Gabriel kissed you then, tongue slipping into your mouth. He took you off guard as he pressed his thickness against your slit. Jack's cum stained your thighs, and your fingers gripped the couch cushions as Gabriel pushed into you from behind, his crisp dress shirt scratchy against your back.

You still ached from Jack, and if Jack made you feel comfortably full, Gabriel made you feel like you were being stretched just past the limit. You whined softly as he released you, head dropping forward and resting against the couch.

Jack chuckled, and he eased your breasts free of the dress, pinching and lightly squeezing while Gabriel's thighs pressed against your ass. With this angle he went almost too deep and you shivered, heart already beating too hard.
"The dress is still intact," Jack said, before lowering his head to your nipples, sucking on them.

"But you're going to be a mess, baby girl," Gabriel said, rocking his hips, giving you a moment to adjust, before he pulled halfway out, shaft slick with a mix of your and Jack's fluids. "That's just what you get for teasing me, hermosa. And Jack? Well, he's not off the hook either..."

You pushed your hips back, taking him back to the hilt in one audacious move. Gabriel swore in surprise as you set the pace, panting while you watched him over your shoulders and sheer smugness widened your grin as you clamped down on him. You weren't unaffected; there was always a little resistance, a bit of drag as you took his cock inside you. And Gabriel's entire body radiated heat, always a few degrees higher than your own. The man could melt you from the inside and you didn't care, you just took what he had to give, because all those worries and all that love you felt for Jack? You'd felt it for Gabriel too. And while you'd never doubted or denied it, admitting these things to yourself was invigorating, once you got over the initial terror and trepidation.

You rolled your hips, using the couch to rebound and build a harder faster rhythm, despite your disadvantaged position. Gabriel gripped your waist, panting as he moved to catch up with you.

"What do you think you're doing?" He growled in your ear.

"You don't like it?" You asked, clenching around him and he tensed behind you, breathing growing more ragged.

"You're getting awfully cocky," Gabriel sounded amused, but not at all worried, like he thought you were going to tire yourself out first. "You sure you're up for all this, baby?" Arrogance permeated his tone and you knew what you had to do.

"Oh we're just getting started," you laughed, nuzzling Jack's face. "Aren't we, Jack?"

Jack kissed your jawline as he rolled your breasts in his hands. "You reassigning me, boss?"

You nodded, squeaking as Gabriel's hands slid between your thighs, his fingers roughly stroking your clit. Squirming, you moved faster, Gabriel easily matching you. Jack laughed and rose off the couch.

"Flanking the target," he said and suddenly Gabriel stiffened behind you and broke into a stream of curses. "Manually laying siege to the rear port-

"Goddamnit, Morrison!" Gabriel shook with laughter. "You corny Hoosier bastard-"

"Scouting the entrance! Some resistance, boss, but he was unprepared for the pincer attack and he's caving pretty quickly," Jack shouted, somewhere behind Gabriel. "Keep up the frontal assault. He can't hold out forever!"

"I hope you're happy," Gabriel muttered in your ear, breaths staggered. "Once he starts with the goddamn military metaphors, he can go on like that all night."

"Oh no," you giggled, burying your face in the couch cushions. "This is not my fault!"

"You're saying you have nothing to do with the fact that he has his fingers in my ass?" Gabriel nipped your shoulder, hands cupping your breasts. He shuddered, body pressed up against yours.
"I take a little responsibility there," you said. "But I had nothing to do with the jargon!"

"Secured the back passage! Preparing to storm the defenses! Brace for impact!"

Gabriel gave an exasperated sigh. "The only thing you're destroying, Morrison, is my hard-on," he lied, because you could feel him inside you, and despite Jack's cringe-worthy dialogue, Gabriel was nowhere near soft.

Jack just laughed and Gabriel tensed, arms tightening around you. "Hey, I left off the naval terms this time. I thought you'd appreciate that."

"Jack, have I ever told you how sexy you are when you just fuck me silently?" Gabriel asked. "Like, without any words coming out of your beautiful quiet mouth?"

"Phase Two initiated," Jack said, humming happily. "You ready to secure the payload, sweetheart?"

It took you a few seconds to pull yourself together, mostly because Jack was absolutely ridiculous. "Roger that," you said and Gabriel groaned. "The payload is mine!"

"Not you too-"And then Gabriel froze. You heard Jack grunt, and you could easily picture that look of pleased concentration on his face as he eased inside Gabriel. Gabriel braced himself against the couch, his arms on either side of your body.

You leaned over and kissed his bicep, clenching your internal muscles and Gabriel moaned in your ear, a low needy sound that had you shivering.

"Locking down the objective! Rally to me!"

"Hold up," Gabriel said, hoarsely. He unzipped your dress, gently pushed it over your head, and carefully set it on the end table. It looked intact, but you weren't thinking about that right now. Your bra came off next, though he tossed it on the floor. "Your stockings are a lost cause," he said. "But I do love how you look in a garter belt." His fingers traced the lines on your skin, his touch making your nerves sing.

"It's very sexy," Jack said, voice husky. "All set?"

There was a pause as Gabriel straightened up and you could hear the soft sweet sounds of your lovers kissing. Gabriel sighed, and suddenly you were pressed firmly against the couch, Gabriel hammering away at you from behind.

You yelped in shock, and then began to move, whining as Gabriel's heavy balls slapped against your ass, his hands gripping the back of the couch as you and Jack worked him from both ends.

Gabriel went deep, his thick cock splitting you wide and you milked him as best as you could, not immune to the feel of his bare skin against yours, the heat of his mouth on the back of your neck.

"Love this juicy ass," Jack groaned. "And your shoulders, in that jacket? Fuck, Gabe. I'm going want to see you in nothing but that damn jacket."

"That can be arranged," Gabriel panted.

"Just wanted to sit in your lap and leave lipstick marks all over your throat," you managed
“Wanted to ride in the backseat with you...but wouldn't have been...presentable after.” You gripped the couch, using it as an anchor to push back against Gabriel's hard thrusts.

"Having you both out, dressed up..." Gabriel swallowed roughly. "That alone made it a good night," he said. "One that keeps getting better."

You were a slick, sweaty mess, stretched on Gabriel's cock. Being sandwiched between you and Jack threw off his rhythm, so he couldn't just pound you into the sofa, but he was still fucking you hard, and it took all your focus to keep him from gaining the upper hand. You kept an irregular tempo, moving with him and then half a beat faster.

"Doesn't it feel good, Gabe? Taking it on both ends from us? I love how she feels around my dick, how tight she is. The way she squirms and moans when you hit just the right angle. It's even better when you're getting your ass filled at the same time. You really need to let me pound you more often. I know you love how deep I get. All those sensations together is kind of overwhelming. Like you're drowning in pleasure-"

Gabriel tensed, hips bucking fast as he thrashed between the two of you. You clawed at the sofa, crying out as he broke your rhythm, his strokes getting harder and faster as his control shattered. His fingers moved roughly against your clit. You couldn't tell if it was just you or if the entire piece of furniture was shaking under his thrusts, but it didn't matter. You were too close to care. He sunk his teeth into your shoulder and you wailed, a low and desperate sound as he dragged you over the edge with him. Your orgasm hit hard as his hot cum splashed against your inner walls.

And then you were falling, falling, holy shit, literally falling, and you swore as the couch tipped backward. You toppled with it, bouncing between the cushions and Gabriel's hard body.

"Goddamnit!” Gabriel shouted, and you squeaked as he threw his arms out to slow the descent. Gabriel braced himself above you, managing to catch himself and land with most of his weight on his forearms instead of on you.

You lay there sprawled out on your stomach, legs in the air, the shoes in the doorway at eye level. Gabriel was still tangled up with you, and you could hear Jack laughing in the background. Not just chuckling, but full out belly-laughing as you tried in vain to wiggle free.

"Hold still," Gabriel said, a voice rough.

You huffed softly, but stopped moving.

It was only for a moment as Gabriel pushed off the ground, careful not to crush you or drag you in uncomfortable directions. Suddenly the world righted itself, and you glanced over your shoulder. Gabriel had gotten the sofa upright, and he leaned over to kiss you gently.

"You OK?” He asked.

"...Did we just...?" You looked between him and the couch, trying to think of the right words.

"Don't think it's broken. Just threw it off balance," he said, stroking your hair. "Did you manage to come?"

"Right before," you said. "And then I nearly died of shock."

Gabriel chuckled and kissed your nose, hugging you against his chest, his large hands warm
against your back. "Well, you're OK now. But I have to point out that I rescued us and we're fine
now. No thanks to a certain blonde asshole who is still just standing there laughing at us." He
glared over at Jack.

"I'm-" Jack wheezed. "I'm sorry," he got out, clutching his stomach and wiping tears from
his eyes. He was still mostly dressed, though his cock hung out of his pants. He looked kind of
ridiculous. "Oh God-"

You curled up on Gabriel's lap, smiling as he traced his thumb along your bottom lip. You
kissed his hands. "New allied coalition?"

Gabriel grinned at you. "Sounds good to me."

Jack sat on the floor hiccupping with laughter. So he was completely defenseless when
Gabriel jumped him. Aching, but still hanging in there, you got up to join the counterstrike.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, I'll make updates weekly, she said, and then failed. >.< Sorry about the lateness.
It's been an eventful week. Had some tax issues to handle, getting up early today to get
my car fixed, and still have medical bills to deal with. Also in a "polar vortex." It's not
as awesome as it sounds; a bunch of places closed today and I got out of work 4 hours
early. And my hands started acting up this weekend/week. So been taking it slow.

In nicer (I guess?) news, I have acquired a second nephew. He was a bit after his ETA,
and I suggested that they name him "Delay Fish Jr" or "Control Group 2," but no word
on whether or not they're going to take my suggestions. :P I suppose I'll see him later.
(Babies all look alike and when they send me pictures I'm pretty much like "yup, that's
a baby.")

I really really want the Overwatch Legos, but I've been very conservative with my
money this month because of tax stuff and now car repairs. But maybe next month... (I
keep seeing nendos and stopping myself. The Legos I can kind of justify... and are
cheaper.) Also, I discovered dark chocolate oreos, carrot cake oreos (with cream
cheese icing/filling), and got myself more unicorn pudding (it's cotton candy flavored
and comes with temporary tattoos) and chocolate-covered nutter butters. (Teen!cousin
came over and we made a junk food run.)

Listening to podcasts at work. Trying to stick to nonfiction ones just because it's easier
to focus on work when I'm doing nonfiction. Enjoying My Favorite Murder, Stuff You
Missed in History, Lore, Radio Lab (I love Radio Lab), and the Splendid Table (now
that it has a different host. I never liked Lynne Rosetto Kasper, but Francis Lam seems
cool.) So if you have recommendations, I'm open. I did not like Last Podcast on the
Left. I started with the earlier episodes and couldn't get into it. They're funny, but the
one guy who continually does the racist caricatures spoils my enjoyment. I hear they
get better later on, but I've tried two episodes and just couldn't. Someone Knows
Something's first season (and lack of resolution) intrigued/pissed me off. I'm not
starting the second season. It's well produced, but I hate getting invested in something
that might not get solved.

Hope everyone is doing OK.
Chapter 115

Chapter Summary

Friendship isn't always smooth sailing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Transferred?" You stared at Lacroix, trying to wrap your head around what he'd just told you. "What do you mean he's been "transferred"? This isn't a fucking job posting or a boarding school! This isn't a goddamn hotel! He doesn't just get to switch accommodations because he dislikes the wallpaper!"

"It was done under the Director's personal orders," Lacroix said grimly, his eyes flat and distant. "I've put some people on it, but Richard Prince has already been moved to an undisclosed American facility. One of those old-fashioned extraordinary rendition sites in Poland." He shook his head, holding up one hand to stave off the rest of your rant. "I have already traced the chain of orders, identified the security failures, and flagged everyone involved. This was done without Jack or Gabriel's knowledge or consent, but there really weren't so many "security violations" as everyone involved was taking orders from our own director. Petras cites placating the Americans, but we know the real reason."

"There's nothing-?"

"Nothing else we can do about it directly. At this point, possession is nine tenths of the law." Lacroix heaved a tired sigh. "I suppose it doesn't matter in the long run. We have already acquired more valuable intel from him than I had expected, but I would have liked to had the opportunity to get more."

Petras would probably ensure Prince was silenced, and while you felt absolutely no regrets over that, you hated that he'd stolen an asset out from under you.

"Have you alerted General Singh, Senator Armstrong, Agent Brant, and the rest of our American allies?"

"Yes," Lacroix said taking a slow long drink from his mug and you had the sneaking suspicion that wasn't coffee. "Hopefully, one of them will be able to keep a close eye on the situation. But I am not optimistic."

"Not a word I've ever associated with you," you said. "Except when it comes to Ziv's behavior. And even then I'd be more inclined to use "delusional" or something with more nuance."

"Because you have a great deal of mastery over nuance," Lacroix said sourly, giving you a pointed look.

"Not my specialty," you said without missing a beat, keeping a big smirk on your face, maybe just to annoy him. "Which is why I want to know your opinion on Kharoti and her
investigation. That's some suspicious timing." You had already looked over her data, finding a few minor errors and few small connections between midlevel government officials and Vishkar representatives that you had not been aware of, but none of it was surprising. It was thorough work, impressive for a civilian, but ultimately not useful to you. Maybe she would be good at disseminating any information you needed leaked, but she was too intelligent to do it for free, so you'd have to be tricky.

Lacroix took a sip of his drink, settling in his chair. "There are a lot of factors at play. We certainly aren't ready to go public with any discoveries, though we could do far worse than Kharoti."

"She knows you," you said, and maybe it sounded a little like an accusation.

"She knows I am a poster agent of Overwatch. We have crossed paths on occasion, usually at cultural events, where I attended as Amélie's husband, not in any other official capacity. She is aware of my DGSE background and some of what that work entailed. She does not know me, Chanceux," Lacroix said.

You rolled your eyes, not sure why he was being so fussy. Well, that was just part of whom he was and it had been a difficult morning for him. You could cut him a little slack. Or at least not squabble with him over every piece of minutiae. "She's knows you well enough to approach me instead. Whatever that implies."

Lacroix nodded at that. "I know you are not inclined to deal with the press. I am willing to take the lead on this maneuver, however she did come to you, so you may have to serve as the mouthpiece again," he said. "Though I'm certain that dealing with her will be far less distasteful than Petras."

"I can think of a dozen people, ones that I've personally killed, that are far less distasteful than Petras."

Lacroix laughed. "Ziv is looking into her archives now. She has quite the encryption. It might be easier to arrange a meeting with her. I will draft a list of acceptable topics."

"You don't think she's Talon? Maybe in the employ of another intelligence agency?"

"No, but I suppose you can never be too careful," he said. "I realize you don't read many things outside of intelligence briefings, but Kharoti is well-respected investigative journalist who specializes in forensic accounting and is not so well-liked by government officials with something to hide."

"OK," you said, trying not to scowl at Lacroix's tone. "So do you think Kwento arranged this meeting?"

Lacroix blinked. "You think she tapped Kharoti as an ally against Petras? I suppose that's very possible..." Lacroix smiled. "Look at you, thinking outside the usual parameters. Are you feeling all right?"

You narrowed your eyes, crossing your arms. Because another set of possibilities had just opened up. Kwento wasn't the only person who would use a reporter as a pawn.

Lacroix's irritating little smirk widened.

"How goes your interview with our party crasher?" You asked, somewhat annoyed that you didn't get to sit in on this one. He had, after all, interrupted your dinner and punched you in the
face. But Tataryn and Lacroix were handling the details, Tataryn playing the dubiously good cop.

"There was no major security breach. He hired a decent hacker with her own surveillance network, who happened to be in Zurich at the time. She's been dealt with and he's just a hitman who had access to a good facial recognition program. He is of little consequence."

"So you're just going to let him go?" You asked, raising a brow.

Lacroix gave you a withering look. "You are nowhere near as funny as you think you are."

"Hey, you're the one downplaying his worth. I wasn't sure if you were going to transfer him out. I browsed some of the files and it sounded like the Germans wanted him for questioning regarding-"

"Chanceux, what he knows does not affect us. But I will do my due diligence and extract the maximum amount of usable intelligence from him while he is under my care. I do not trust anyone to be as thorough," Lacroix said, smile chilly, the look in his eyes almost manic and definitely downright uncivilized.

"Just following up." You held very still, not entirely comfortable with this side of Lacroix.

"Do not concern yourself, Chanceux. I am handling it," he said, tone a little less vicious as he straightened his collar. "I must ask, do you remember the designation I gave the "traitor" list?"

You raised a brow, not expecting him to ask you straight out, but not at all surprised that he had changed the subject so rapidly. By now you were used to his ways, his conversational hairpin turns and goading smokescreens. "The file was Revenant Gun, Clearance level Ultramarine, Priority Degas," you parroted back.

Lacroix smiled broadly at that. "But you have not been able to access it again, have you?"

"I think you know the answer to that," you said, because maybe you'd checked a few times for updates, without success. "Not that I need to. I've made a point to remember the dangerous ones." The witting traitors that were just waiting for their moment to strike.

Lacroix folded his hands in his lap. "I have made some additions to the list, as recently as this morning."

"Are you going to show me?"

"Not right now," Lacroix said, waving his hand. "You have more important things to focus on. I was just curious if you recalled the code words."

You stared at him for a long moment. He met your gaze, those brown eyes oddly pleased by your accurate response. And that was an answer in and of itself.

"You could always-"

"I'd rather handle these cases individually. I am, after all, also waging a campaign of disinformation within the traitor ranks. It's a delicate operation. Should the need arise, Athena will give access to someone I trust to deal with the situation. I am not the only one monitoring our fifth column. Do not worry your pretty head over it."

It wasn't that Lacroix kept his cards close to his chest, you were used to that. Or even the patronizing tone and petty wording. Yeah, that was irritating, yet it came with territory. However,
the fact that he was withholding that information, at such a crucial time, bothered you. But then, you weren't going to be around to deal with it, so...

"Yeah, OK," you said. Because as much as it annoyed you, it was out of your hands; there was no point in sharing that intel with you if you were going to be gone: you would only become a bigger liability. Everyone higher up knew that Lacroix had compiled a list. If something happened to him, Lacroix would have several contingency plans in place.

"Now, I think you should go see what the elder Shimada is so worked up about. I've heard that he's been particularly moody as of late."

"Oh joy," you said, standing up, now with the sneaking suspicion that Lacroix knew exactly what had Hanzo out of sorts. And while you knew you should focus on dealing with the elder Shimada, Lacroix had given you plenty of things to think about. Like just what the hell was he angling for? And how many schemes did he have in play? And where exactly did you fit into it all?

"Is this really necessary?" Hanzo asked, exasperation just barely covering the horror in his voice.

"You wouldn't let me pull over to scoop up the road kill, so this is the next best thing," you laughed, pushing the still-frozen raw liver several feet into the vent above the air exchange.

Hanzo just sighed. "I cannot believe that months later you are still amused by this."

"Well, yeah," you said, rolling your eyes as you replaced the metal grating. Grinning, you headed to the fridge, and uncapped a bottle of distilled vinegar. You pulled out the milk, the half and half, and the orange juice, and then added a good dose of vinegar to each, putting more into the dairy products to ensure they curdled.

On a whim, you shook all the carbonated drinks too, because why not? You were tempted to switch the labels on some of the canned goods but that seemed a little blatant. Also, Hanzo was obviously growing more impatient.

Shaking his head, Hanzo leaned against the kitchen table. An Athena drone kept watch by the door, but your target had moved to a new apartment, possibly in an attempt to escape the "haunting" of his house. Unfortunately for him, the security was even laxer than before. Yes, there were surveillance cameras, but Athena had disabled them pretty quickly. You considered adding more vinegar to the brandy snifter sitting in living room.

"Are you almost done?"

Sighing, you poured the vinegar into the brandy, and turned to face Hanzo. "You told me you wanted to talk privately."

Dressed in a drab custodial jumpsuit with an unassuming cap, Hanzo blinked at you, like he hadn't expected you to remember.

"I didn't just bring you out here because I thought it would be fun." In fact, pretty much anyone else would have been more fun. Everyone else, Gabriel included, got really into the swing of sabotaging things for the sheer joy of it. Hanzo just kind of stood there uncomfortably, constantly exuding a low-key air of disapproval.
"Your AI is here as well," Hanzo said, staring at the wall.

Hanzo had accidentally found out about Athena when Feng had announced her early on in the preliminary discussions for the On Sing blood oath. And while you weren't really worried about him blabbing, it felt strange that he was privy to one of Overwatch's bigger secrets. Sure, he was part of Shit Spiders, but his clearances were narrow and very specific.

"Right, so we get out of here, maybe go pick up some afternoon cake and tea?" You asked, trying to think of something that would make His Fussiness more comfortable.

"Yes, that sounds acceptable," Hanzo said, arms tightly crossed.

"Well, give me a moment to play in the medicine cabinet, and then I'll be ready to go."

"You're not going to poke holes in his prophylactics, are you? Because I tried to explain to Tataryn how that would backfire but-"

"Oh, that is evil," you laughed, rubbing your hands together. "I was just going to replace his pain medicine with sugar pills, and pour salad dressing into his shampoo..."

Hanzo squinted at you, like he still couldn't tell if you were half-joking, actually serious, or simply fucking with him. Silly Hanzo, the answer was very obviously "all of the above."

After you left the apartment, you'd shed your custodial jumpsuits, gone to the bakery and a coffee shop, and then put Athena in privacy mode. She'd be keeping watch for you, but she wouldn't be eavesdropping. *You hoped.* That was a lot of trust to put in someone, and given your own natural curiosity, you knew it would be hard to reign in that impulse if you had the power to eavesdrop on well...almost anyone. Hopefully, Athena had better self control than you did.

You stopped at a park. It was a bright autumn day, warm and sunny, the leaves on the trees just starting to change. You and Hanzo sat on a bench, sipping your drinks, a box of pastries creating a respectable boundary in the middle. But it was still just the two of you, out together alone for reasons other than work. With any of your other Blackwatch friends, you wouldn't have thought twice about it. But your relationship with Hanzo was different.

It was strange to realize that your initial enmity toward Hanzo - the asshole who damn near killed Genji and also shot you with arrows - had faded over time. It was a gradual process. Constrained dislike turning to resentful irritation, softening with pity, and slowly becoming a sense of mild, if constant, exasperation.

You inhaled the steam off your coffee, watching him out of the corner of your eye as he took drinks of his soy latte. It surprised you that he'd ordered that instead of fussing about the subpar tea selection at the cafe. Was that growth? Or had he just given up on finding a place that served tea to his standards? And really, what was the difference?

You took a bite of a tiny chocolate almond tart while you basked in the sunlight. The chocolate filling was silky smooth and the salted slivers of roasted almond had a delightful crunch. It was pleasantly warm outside, and you tried to focus on that comforting feeling, instead of Hanzo, who sat hunched over beside you.

He had changed into an oversized light green jacket and sleek gray and gold plaid pants. The outfit was Shibuya street casual, somewhat clashing but oddly stylish. Hanzo made it work.
"So what's going on?" You didn't look at him. The park was really quite pretty in the afternoon sun. Shanghai had a completely different climate and milder winters, which should have been a plus in your book. You never expected that you would like Zurich this much. However you'd lived here long enough that it was home: you knew where to eat, what shortcuts to take, and where all the CC cameras were. And you knew that you would miss being here.

"How did you handle Agent Zenyatta?" Hanzo asked, abruptly breaking his brooding silence. He continued to stare straight ahead, shoulders locked tight. "He likes to follow me around spouting ko-ans and platitudes, posing abstruse philosophical queries, and prying most invasively into my personal life."

"That's just whom he is and what he does," you said, covering half your face with your napkin so he didn't see your smirk, those complaints so very familiar. You didn't hate Hanzo, and you didn't want anything truly bad to happen to him, but knowing that he was Zenyatta's new target made your smile just a little wider.

"He doesn't do this to my brother, or even Agent McCree."

"He's a healer," you said, taking another bite of your tarts. "He thinks it's his job to fix things that he deems are...broken, and he doesn't care that those things might not be any of his goddamn business."

Hanzo gave you a wary look. "I won't argue with your assessment."

"You haven't heard the whole thing," you said. "He doesn't care if you'd rather everyone left your personal issues alone. He'll go straight for the throat, though he doesn't bite all the way down. Just...makes you very uncomfortable. I suppose having him constantly poking at me was good for me, in the long run," you said reluctantly, because it was unlikely Hanzo would repeat that, and even less likely that anyone would believe him if he did.

And now that Zenyatta was off your case, you could take the time to deconstruct his methodology and appreciate his skill. The main thing was that he knew exactly how much to push, never quite going too far. On top of being insightful, his approach was incredibly annoying and thought-provoking, or maybe just plain provoking. It was miraculous how no one had punched him in the face yet, though having a head made of metal might have contributed to that.

Either way, seeing him inflict that on other people was like watching an artist work. Still, he was oddly gentle with Genji and only lightly teasing with Jesse. Both men seemed quite fond of him. But Hanzo was getting the same treatment you'd received back when Kwen-to thought you were a Petras spy. Did Zenyatta suspect Hanzo's motives? Maybe. But it was more likely that the busybody monk had honed in on something in Hanzo's psyche and had taken it upon himself to "help." Likely, it was something Hanzo was avoiding, and Zenyatta was aggressively holding up a mirror, waving it in Hanzo's disapproving face, much like he'd done to you.

"I do not like his implications," Hanzo said through clenched teeth. "If he is upset by my past treatment of Genji, he can just come out and say it, like everyone else has."

"Still having trouble?" You asked, glancing over as Hanzo angrily bit into a spoonful of strawberry trifle.

"No," Hanzo said, and you believed him, because his involvement in Bayan's rescue had gone a long way in buying him grace with Blackwatch. More importantly, Genji had been quietly reminding everyone that Hanzo was his personal guest (and burden) and not to overstep their bounds. "I am simply frustrated by him."
"Yeah, I get that," you said. You leaned back against the bench, dusting the crumbs off your lap. "But it is really him? Or is it whatever unpleasant truth he's been hinting at?"

Hanzo exhaled loudly, nostrils flaring. He glowered at you, eyebrows knitting together in anger. "If you have something to say, you may state it plainly as well." The words were polite, but his delivery said, "I would like to invite you to go straight to hell."

You snorted. "Oh come on, he's real good at getting under one's skin. Plenty of people have given you shit since you arrived, and you didn't give a damn about them. Why does Zenyatta bother you now? Especially when he's been nothing but polite?"

Hanzo crossed his arms, his expression shifting from irritated to indignant. You chuckled, because that had been a rhetorical question, though maybe Hanzo hadn't picked up on that part. "I can answer that for you. It's that cute harmless face, disgusting decency, and serene attitude. He's so "nice" that you hesitate to strike back, and he takes full advantage of that. He's good at verbal sucker punches. I think he'd make a hell of an interrogator. He'd either shame or irritate people into talking."

"I cannot complain about his manners or delivery," Hanzo said, averting his eyes.

"I know," you said. "But whatever Zenyatta is picking at-" You might have had a better idea than you let on, because you were paying attention to both parties. "-it bothers you, because he's got a point." You took a sip of your coffee. "And because he picks the most inconvenient times to start in on you."

Hanzo crumpled his cup on one hand. Fortunately, it was empty.

You picked up a cream puff, happily munching on it while Hanzo dealt with his inner turmoil. Zenyatta like to spout out truths a person didn't want to confront. It was really quite inconsiderate of him.

"I actually wished to discuss something else with you," Hanzo said after your cream puff was gone and several minutes of silence elapsed. Apparently, you had politely hit a sore spot. Dealing with Zenyatta had taught you some things too.

"I actually wished to discuss something else with you," Hanzo said after your cream puff was gone and several minutes of silence elapsed. Apparently, you had politely hit a sore spot. Dealing with Zenyatta had taught you some things too.

"Sure," you said. "But if you wanted to talk about him, you came to the right person." You were going to bang this drum just a little longer. You had earned it after all. "He annoyed the hell out of me for months. And I had someone giving me similar warnings. At the time I thought they were terribly smarmy and unhelpful." You were being nicer about it than Lacroix, or at least a lot more straightforward with your advice. "I've been through the metaphorical sandpaper, I will acknowledge the benefits. But I didn't like it. Not one little bit."

Hanzo leaned back against the bench, setting his crushed cup to the side. "I...see."

You wanted to tweak him more, but Hanzo had asked for your help. It wouldn't be helpful to goad him into silence. Funny, maybe, but not helpful.

"I actually wished to speak with you about Feng."

You hadn't forgotten. You leaned forward, elbows on your knees. Taking a gulp of coffee, you wanted for the rest of his statement.

There was just more silence. You wished Hanzo could condense his conversations to at least half the awkward pauses. It would make things go so much faster.
You sighed, wondering if you'd given him too much flak over Zenyatta. Were you going to have to coax the information out of him? Despite the fact he claimed that he wanted to talk? How bothersome. "What about Feng?" You asked, sounding a little more sarcastic than you should have.

"I may have miscalculated," Hanzo responded immediately. He wanted to talk. But you would have to wheedle the information out of him. Oh joy.

"What about?" You asked. "We both know she plays up her flakiness, but-"

"Yes, yes," Hanzo waved a hand dismissively. "I am well aware of her skill at subterfuge. I mean I may have miscalculated on something else."

You snorted, really appreciating how he stated his problem "plainly." Taking a deep breath, you had to remind yourself that Hanzo was repressed and very bad at honesty, but he was trying and you should encourage that. "About what?"

Hanzo stared at the ground, shoulders bunched up again. "You know we've talked about the possibility of an alliance, maybe retaking the Shimada ancestral home."

Feng had already said she would help out, as long as Overwatch approved. You'd been there for at least one of those conversations. "I thought you were going to talk to Lacroix and Gabriel about-"

"I have not forgotten," Hanzo said tersely.

Neither had you. "This is all rehash," you said, rolling your eyes. "It's your turn to speak plainly and tell me what-"

"I formally asked for her hand in marriage for the sake of a political alliance," he said, words coming so quickly that they blurred together.

It took you a moment to make sense of it all, but when you did, you choked on your coffee, sputtering and spraying liquid across the ground. Coughing violently, you whacked at your chest while Hanzo glared at you fiercely, his cheeks very red.

"It's just political," Hanzo said quickly. "I made that very clear with a list of reasons why it would be a mutually beneficial arrangement. And while I am currently not her equal in status, I would not be coming to the table empty-handed. I have access to several sources of income, preferential business and political connections, and-

You held up one hand, the coughing slowly subsiding. "It's called the Heimlich Maneuver." You blotted at your mouth with a napkin and glared at him. "I was choking, you asshole."

"On liquid," Hanzo said disdainfully. "That isn't enough to incapacitate you."

"I can't listen to you and clear my blocked airways!"

"Don't be so dramatic."

"Don't be such a dick!" You tossed your napkin at his head and it bounced off.

Hanzo stared at you incredulously, eyes darting between you and the crumpled trash on the ground. "That was un-"
"You proposed marriage? Just for an alliance? What the hell were you thinking?"

"It's how things work in our spheres," Hanzo said sharply. "You of all people should understand the power of such collaborations."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"Lower your voice," Hanzo said, and you looked around, noticing some of the park's patrons watching you warily.

"What the fuck does that mean?" You whispered angrily, retrieving the trash.

"You and Commander Reyes are complementary figures within Blackwatch. He is the force, you are the restraint, but Blackwatch runs smoothly because you work well in tandem, possibly because of your romantic attachment," Hanzo said, his tone condescending. And while Hanzo wasn't completely wrong, he was oversimplifying things. "But I come from a stringent family tradition. Feelings are tertiary. Matrimony is politic-"

"Is this the same family tradition that had you maim and nearly kill your brother?" Your words popped as you over-enunciated, fists clenched too tightly.

Hanzo jerked backward like you'd slapped him. "No, that was poor judgment-"

"And making a half-assed marriage proposal was good judgment?" You hissed, hands in the air. "Did you even think about how that would make Feng feel? "Oh, nothing personal, but we should get married for purely pragmatic reasons. Don't worry, I don't actually like you that much, but you've got some fine political clout that I want to join to my nice financial assets." Real fucking smooth, Hanzo. Please tell me you didn't spring this on her. That you discussed it with her fir-" Who were you kidding? Of course, he hadn't. He'd just assumed she'd see the "wisdom" of his proposal and accept.

Hanzo closed his eyes.

Since you'd known her, Feng had always flirted because she was attracted to the person. And she seemed to genuinely like Hanzo, even back before it was an acceptable thing to do. And now Hanzo was willing to use that good will in an attempt to consolidate power? That really didn't sit right with you.

"Feng's my friend, and she seems to be doing a pretty good job on her own. If she's taking on a partner, she deserves someone who will treat her well and support her. Not a goddamn convenient business arrangement. Hell, I thought you were her friend. You don't treat people like commodities, just to boost your status, especially if you care about them."

Hanzo seemed to shrink under your gaze. He heaved a deep sigh. "I...do like Feng. Perhaps not in that way. But maybe I could. Some day."

It was nice that Hanzo could finally admit these things. But it wasn't nearly enough. "You're not making this better."

"I admit that I miscalculated," he said, hanging his head, hands folded in his lap. "And now things are strange between us."

"I bet."

The two of you sat there in tense silence, Hanzo wincing several times, like he could
telepathically pick up on your vicious thoughts. But that certainly didn't stop you from thinking them.

"It was unwise," Hanzo said after several minutes. "Your assessment is correct and I regret my thoughtlessness. I never intended to cause her distress. I expect that you want berate me more?"

"Yeah, I do." You tilted your head back, staring at a puffy set of clouds. They looked like sailboats gliding across the clear blue sky. Rubbing your temples, you tried to sort through the buzz of angry thoughts filling your head. You were a little surprised to find you were disappointed, like you'd really expected better from Hanzo. Huh. "I want to shout at you," you said after some deep breathing. "But that won't actually help anything."

"I want to fix things," Hanzo said, earnestly.

"How?" You asked, before you could stop yourself.

Hanzo flinched. "I...am not sure. That is why I asked you."

You blinked.

"You helped me understand some of the...detrimental behaviors I had been inflicting on my brother. And I know you offered him advice on how to deal with me," Hanzo said, quietly. "You are also good friends with Feng. I did not know who else to ask."

You stared at him, realizing that he actually had a point, that you might be the most qualified person and that was terrifying. "Does Genji know?" You asked, because you weren't sure how to respond to that statement of pure desperation.

"I have not told him, but he is more...insightful than I remember," Hanzo said, actually sounding embarrassed. "Perhaps it is just another thing that has changed since he left home," he murmured, tone almost wistful.

"Most everyone in Blackwatch is a lot more perceptive than they let on," you said, because he had to be figuring that out by now.

Hanzo gave you a sidelong glance. "Yes, I'm coming to understand that. But to answer your question, I do not know if Feng has told him. They also speak frequently, but he has not broached the topic with me." Hanzo paused. "Do you think he has feelings for her? I always assumed it was the angry little German doctor, though he seems to have quite the rivalry with Agent McCree..."

"Couldn't say," you replied, not actually lying. "He never talks about that kind of thing with me."

"Oh," Hanzo sighed. "Please understand that I never intended to be hurtful. I had thought Feng would be more open to the prospect given her...flamboyant ways. I have always viewed marriage as the formation of a professional economic and political coalition. I do not know how else to speak of such things." He stared at his hands.

You could believe that. Normal people thought they would marry because they liked someone and maybe because they wanted children. But Hanzo wasn't anywhere near normal. "How do these things work in your...sphere?" You tested the word, knowing that Hanzo's background was alien.

"I always knew I would have to marry, that I would need to formulate alliances and produce
heirs. I knew there would be negotiations, long betrothals, and professional respect. Perhaps once
the agreement was cemented, we could socialize more...intimately. At least, we could personalize
our arrangement. But the initial details were to be handled by an intermediary."

Translation: Hanzo was so rich, he didn't have to learn to talk to people. You shook your
head, knowing that sharing that thought wouldn't help anyone.

"Do you actually like Feng? Or is this just about what she can do for you?" You paused,
trying to soften the words. "More specifically, what you think you can accomplish together as a
mafia power couple?"

Hanzo inhaled sharply, confirming your suspicions. "It has taken some getting used to, but I
do enjoy her company. She is very different from anyone else I know. I admire her ideas, or at
least her ability to make them work. I respect her strength of will. I think she could help me
transform the Shimada clan. But... I do not think I can offer much as a romantic partner." He said
that last part very quietly, like it hurt to admit his shortcomings.

You pinched the bridge of your nose, knowing that Hanzo wasn't in a place to date, let
alone be in a committed relationship, and that was nothing new. But it was strange to hear him
agree.

"When did you do this?"

I sent her a formal letter last week through a reputable courier. Hand-written, of course, in
English and Chinese. My calligraphy is passable, though I cannot account for regional tastes," he
said so modestly that you knew he was probably some kind of penmanship prodigy. "There were
gifts: auspicious fruit, live birds, a jade sculpture of a dragon, a Ming era painting inscribed with a
few fitting lines by a poet of great renown-" Hanzo stopped short. "You don't really care about the
gifting etiquette, do you?"

You didn't have a polite answer for that, so you rested your face in your hands. Oh god.
You could only imagine how pompous he sounded on paper. And the gifts? What the hell was an
"auspicious fruit?" And for that matter, what was an "inauspicious fruit?" And live birds? What?
You pictured Feng opening a beautifully wrapped box and a swarm of angry doves flying out and
smacking her in the face, feathers blowing everywhere. You knew from experience that they
would not have been delivered that way, but you couldn't banish the image from your head.

How had that letter gone? He probably listed all his possession like some kind of corporate
merger: I bring to the table seventeen hundred head of cattle, a custom compound bow, dozens of
well-hidden international bank accounts, other financial assets, and a myriad of emotional issues.
But do not concern yourself with the latter. I am as adept at concealing those as I am at hiding my
multitude of Yakuza enterprises.

You snickered into your palms, dragging your fingers down your cheeks and stretching out
your eyelids as you tried to process it all.

"OK, OK. So you fucked up big time," you muttered, mostly to yourself. "But marriage?
Instead of a blood oath? Well, it would make you seem a more stable candidate for leadership, but
you could've offered a blood oath instead and gotten similar benefits without hurting anyone's
feelings."

Hanzo gave you a hangdog look, mouth drooping. "I am aware of this, Lucky. But perhaps
I am not the best example of a brother either." He ran his fingers through his hair, jaw clenched,
like he was trying very hard to appear calm.
You valiantly swallowed your additional comments. Because that admission had to cost him. But you were glad that he acknowledged it. Also, it occurred to you that if they swore a blood oath, there could never be a romantic relationship afterward. They were siblings then. And while Feng had been a little slow to adopt that mindset with Jack, she had wholeheartedly embraced it after Operation I Need Coffee which was actually known as "that one time we ran off to Mongolia without Gabriel and boy did we get in trouble."

"Do you really want my advice? Because I can also just sit and try to listen like a sounding board, or I can tell you off for being a dick. I'm really good at the latter. It's kind of my specialty."

"I know," Hanzo said. "But I need your opinion. I do not know how to proceed," he said. "It had not occurred to me at the time that...perhaps Genji was fond of her. Or Agent McCree. Or even the Strike Commander's brother."

You laughed, because Jesse didn't seem interested in Feng and Michael was downright leery of her. Maggie though... Well, you weren't sure. She seemed very interested in Távio, not that Hanzo needed to know any of that.

"Bayan said she wasn't seeing anyone seriously. Not that I tried to claim exclusivity. I was willing to leave the rules of intimacy and relationships open for negotiation."

"Hanzo, stop making things worse," you said, knowing that warning was in vain. Then you blinked as your brain caught up with the conversation. "Wait, you talked to Bayan about this?"

"Not much of it. I did not speak of the proposal to him. But he mentioned her status in passing," Hanzo said stiffly.

"Huh." That was interesting, if unexpected. "Well, I guess you better apologize to her, like really outline that you understand what you did wrong. With style. And you better really mean it too, with no strings attached, you know, if you want to try to salvage the friendship." Because that would be the only reason Hanzo was sitting here looking dejected, clumsily asking for your help. If it was purely political, he could cut his losses or try another tactic. But Hanzo cared how Feng felt, and platonic or not, that was a startling realization.

"Would you be willing to intercede?"

You weren't sure what he meant by that. "I don't know what I can do."

"Talk to her? Assess how much damage I've done? Maybe give me an idea of where I can start to repair things. I have tried a few times...but she brushes me off claiming that the family is considering my offer and that it would be improper to speak of it just yet. And then she finds a dubious reason to end the conversation. Last time she swore that her brother had set his hair on fire and she needed to hurry downstairs with her half-empty bottle of water to put it out." The sardonic curl of Hanzo's mouth let you know what he thought of those obvious excuses. "You are her friend. And you are Genji's friend..." Hanzo said haltingly. "And you have been very patient with me."

And there it was, that fragile trust that he'd placed on you. Something you'd never asked for, but somehow earned. You weren't really sure how things had gotten this far.

"Hanzo, if I haven't murdered you for your insufferable attitude by now, it's because we're probably friends. My affection for Genji only gets you so much," you admitted, because someone had to say it, and it obviously wasn't going to be him. He had, after all, gotten you a nice set of blades and tried, in his own stunted fashion, to improve your hand to hand combat skills. He now occasionally did dishes after eating meals with you. And hell, you were sitting here in the park
eating pastries and talking to him about his (un)romantic life. It didn't matter if you never intended to befriend him, it had happened and life was too short to spend in any kind of denial.

"Oh," he said, sounding slightly surprised.

You stared straight ahead a little taken aback by the boldness of your own confession. "I'll...talk to Feng and see what I can figure out. Don't worry, I'll make fun of you a lot. Trust me, that seems to go a long way in making people less annoyed at you. That's a general rule, by the way, not a personal attack. Humor is powerful connection."

Hanzo managed a weak smile. "Then I would be most grateful if you would mock me liberally."

"It would be my pleasure," you said dryly, like you didn't already do that. "I'll talk to her soon." You tilted your head back and staring at the sailboat clouds that had morphed into strange hunched rabbits as they spread across the sky. "I have to go over some more things with her before Operation Crashhawk anyway."

Hanzo frowned, like he was just recalling that Operation Tarasque went into effect next week. "Is there anything I can help with?" He asked hesitantly, reaching over to take a strawberry tart.

You tried not to let your surprise show at that offer. Though it was only right that he made it. Friendship went both ways after all. "I can't think of anything right now, but I'll be sure to ask. Just make sure you keep a close eye on Ziv in Hanoi. He's bad at combat missions: he has a tendency to talk too much and doesn't know when to duck."

"You seem to have a similar problem," Hanzo said.

Giving him a hard side eye, you swiped another pastry and shook your head, wondering how the hell you got into these situations.

"Think of the back strain! Not everyone has your freakish level of upper body strength! Normal people can't go into the field listing to port! Hey look, it's Agent Weeble-Wobble, slouching sideways to duty!"

"I don't know what you think you're yelling about! No one's sending you into the field! This is just prototype!"

"Angela would agree-"

"I was just asking for a second opinion on Mihret's cyber security add-ons!"

"Great! They're really great! Easy to handle UI, flexible loadouts, and strong encryption!" She shouted back. "The problem isn't with the software: no one needs a solid metal arm!"

"I wasn't ask-"

"You know better! Use a hollow model with a composite weave or fractal structuring!"

You stood outside the door of Lao's infirmary new suite, wondering if you should leave and come back at a better time.
"It's not solid metal! Din jävla idiot," Torby snorted. "You're just weak. And you can fix that by focusing on your PT instead of berating me for doing my job!"

"I can do both!" Lao snarled back.

Well, you should leave and come back at a better time, but you didn't have a lot of time left. And they could go on all afternoon like this because despite the bickering, you got the feeling that they were having fun. So you knocked.

"What?!" They both shouted, and you sighed, knowing that it would have been wiser to walk away.

The door popped open, and Torby stood there holding a blue metal prosthesis, one that looked like it would actually fit Lao, with a large view screen built into the forearm. His frown lessened marginally when he saw it was you.

"Well, who is it?" Lao demanded.

"Just Lucky," Torby said, already walking back into the room, the door slightly ajar. "Don't just stand there gaping, get in here." He placed the arm on the window sill, fiddling with the elbow joint.

"Hi," you said, peeking in. "Is this a bad time?"

Lao sat on an exercise bench, carefully lifting her legs, weights on each ankle. She grasped the handle bars, bracing herself with both arms. "No," she grunted. "Just doing PT and discussing prototypes with Torby."

Both of them gave you hard looks, daring you to challenge that version of events. You just looked around, realizing her new quarters were twice the size of the previous room. Your go board sat on the bedside table, the placement of the stones indicating that the players were still mid-game. Ziv had asked to borrow it last week, and you hadn't seen it since.

"Who's playing white?" You asked, because white was winning.

"Ziv," Lao said, rolling her eyes. "He cheats."

"Yeah," you nodded sympathetically. "He does." You set the bag containing shrimp chips, candy, and dried fruit on the nightstand. "I got some of the stuff you like. And I put in some fruit so Angela doesn't skin me alive for bringing all this processed sugar into her territory."

"Don't be ridiculous. That girl loves Swiss chocolate more than anyone I know," Torby said.

"Yeah, that's Angela when she's not on duty. Dr. Ziegler is a goddamn hardass and has taken me to task for the amount of "junk food" I've brought Lao. Apparently, it might be hindering her recovery?"

Lao snorted. "She didn't say that. She just said "good nutrition is a requirement for a strong body." Don't exaggerate."

"She implied it," you said. "And she wasn't all calm and sweet, she was actively disapproving!" Angela had actually gotten out charts and given you nutrition facts and figures, muttering savagely about a high concentration of unsaturated fats and a criminal lack of fiber content. You'd fled as soon as you could.
"Well she didn't actually say I couldn't have junk food," Lao said. "Stop being so dramatic."

"Me? I'm the dramatic one? Are you hearing this, Torby?"

"Leave me out of your bickering," he grumbled, like he wasn't guilty of the same behavior minutes earlier. "Some of us actually need to get work done. I'm going to go make a few adjustments on this model," he said, rolling his eyes at both of you.

"The weight!" Lao shouted.

"The weight is fine! This is a field prototype!" Torby snapped as he stalked toward the door, shaking the shiny blue arm at her.

"Angela will agree with me!"

Torby just muttered something in Swedish, that didn't sound complimentary at all, and stomped out of the room, shutting the door behind himself. Shaking your head, you pulled up a chair.

Lao continued to do her exercises, her eyes glued to the floor. That was OK, you had come, unannounced, during her PT, and you knew from painful experience how much effort some of those repetitions required.

You fidgeted in your chair, not sure if you should speak. You didn't want to break her concentration.

Lao kept at it, grunting to herself as she completed another set. She began a round of stretches, trying very hard to keep silent, though you could see from the cording in her neck and the grimace on her face, that the movements were hard on her. Both Angela and Zenyatta had been trying to mend some of the nerve damage done during the spinal implant extraction, but her recovery was still going slowly. She had an automated wheel chair she could ride around in, but she hated using it.

"Did you just come here to sit and watch me struggle?" She asked sharply. "Because that's rude and weird."

"Didn't want to distract you," you said, drawing back.

"Well, sitting there silently isn't helping."

"Sorry. Do you need anything? Game systems? Books? Kittens? Because I know that being cooped up here can be maddening-"

Lao exhaled slowly, sweat beading on her forehead as she switched back to leg lifts. "I'm fine." She inhaled deeply, then blew out the air loudly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap. It's the PT," she said through gritted teeth. "It hurts. I'm not progressing fast enough. And it puts me in a bad mood." She dropped her legs, breathing hard. "But Torby tries to visit me every day around this time, and thinks he's being slick, like he's my coach or something, but I'm not stupid." She bent over and slowly began unfastening the weights, her prosthetic hand almost as nimble as her flesh one.

"He's the grumpy Overwatch Dad," you said, relaxing at her explanation. Because despite the fact that things were improving between the two of you, things were nothing like before, and you weren't certain that they could ever be that way again. It was...awkward and maybe a little painful.
"Sometimes Commander Wilhelm stops by too, and he brings me those curry sausages, and gives me a rambling pep talk," Lao said, her tone softening. "He's the encouraging Overwatch Dad, and also, not very slick."

"Yeah," you agreed, though you had not realized that Reinhardt had been keeping an eye on her too. That made you just a little less worried about how she was adjusting. After all, there was something very comforting about the older man's presence.

"It's nice to have visitors."

"Sorry, I haven't been-"

"Not everything is a dig at you," Lao said, eyes flashing.

You sighed, knowing that was true, but also uncertain as to how much of that hostility was because she was in physical pain, and how much was because of her unresolved issues with you.

"...That wasn't me being bitchy," she said after a moment. "I know you're busy, Lucky. Political shit, assassination attempts, babysitting; it's obvious that you've been pissing off some powerful bastards. It's nice to see you annoying people for the greater good." She gave you a curt nod.

You snorted, recalling your Blackwatch Prank Club activities from this morning. "Yeah, that's accurate."

The two of you sat there, Lao setting her weights in a bin. You rolled your fingers, chewing on your bottom lip. You needed to find something to talk about. You didn't want to bring up the squad, because you weren't sure how she was coping with that. You couldn't talk about active operations or share anything related to Shit Spiders, and that was predominantly what you worked on. You really weren't ready to talk about your personal life...

"Say something," Lao said. "Not this small talk bullshit. The tension is smothering me. Say something real. I can handle it."

You sighed, staring at the ceiling. "That's hard, you know. I worry about saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. I don't want to make you relive trauma, though I know you're not an invalid who'll crumble at harsh words." And if you did something to upset her, she'd yell at you, a lot, and you didn't like that either. "I don't know what I'm doing, and sometimes you lash out. Some of that shit you said before cut pretty deep. I still feel like I'm walking on eggshells around you."

Lao flinched.

You immediately regretted your honesty. "Sorry, that was-"

"No. Keep talking," she said, eyes defiant. "You're right. I won't fall apart just because you criticized me. Even if it is the truth."

Her angry agreement startled you. You swallowed, carefully choosing your words. "I know we can't just expect things to be like before," you said, because both of you had been fundamentally changed by your experiences. "But I don't know what I should expect or how I should behave. I certainly don't intend to patronize you. I just... I guess I miss treating you like a younger sister, and that isn't fair because you've been through a lot and you deserve to be treated like a respected agent. I want to be supportive. I want to do things right. But I don't know what you want."
For a moment, you thought of Hanzo, who couldn't break free from the same role he'd been playing his entire life, and the brutal expectations that went along with it. Except, maybe he was beginning to do just that. You had told him that he couldn't treat Genji like he had before, that their relationship had changed. That he had to rebuild everything over the wreckage of what came before. Your relationship with Lao had intrinsically different problems, but maybe you too were trying to solve them by doing the exact same thing over and over, with no success.

...That was dumb.

Lao crossed her arms, hugging herself. "I hate the guilty look on your face that you get whenever you see me. It makes me so fucking mad, I want to throw something at your head. But I know that's unreasonable."

"Yeah, maybe a little," you said.

She glowered at you. "What happened to me isn't your fault, but every time you look at me, I see you acting like it is. It fucking sucks. I can't tell what's real and what you do out of obligation. I can't tell whether or not we're even friends any more. I guess part of me thinks it's all obligation and that makes me feel like shit. I know I said and did some terrible things. And I know I can't just cause that damage and then expect everything to be OK. But every time I try to talk about it with you, you act like Saint Lucky the Longsuffering, and then I lose my temper and everything feels exponentially worse."

You sat back, turning her words over in your head. You hadn't realized that Lao felt so damn insecure, not that you should be surprised. She'd been through a lot, her reality warped by trauma and mindfuckery. That confession had a lot more depth and honesty than you were used to hearing from her. But Gabriel had put her in therapy, and it was starting to show.

"You were never an obligation," you said, looking into those soft brown eyes that watched you distrustfully. "Yeah, some of my "sole survivor" baggage had me acting stupid, but you were always my friend, and knowing that you were out there...and that you were suffering, that made me all kinds of crazy. Look, I would have tried to rescue anyone from our squad. But I definitely wouldn't put up with the same level of shit from Nwazue, OK? I respected the hell out of her, but we weren't friends. We never got that chance. But you and me, we were friends. I hope we still are. And you're absolutely right, we do have to sort some of this shit out."

Lao sniffled. "OK."

"And I'm patient with you, not because I think I deserve your crap, but because my friends in Blackwatch were extra patient with me when I first got here, and wasn't thinking straight either. That's it. It's not pity. It's not penance. I'm just trying to give you room to regain your balance. I'll get you back later, don't worry."

"Sometimes I do see you and just...get angry," Lao said. "My therapist says there are a lot of reasons, and most of them aren't your fault. I'm working on that." She blew out a breath. "But I can't work on that if you don't come around. And if I cross a line, you have to say something. You can't just give me that sad smile and run away like some kind of fucking martyr. Just say "that wasn't cool, Lao" or "that was too much, Lao," or even "shut the hell up, Lao, now I need to step out and cool down." I mean, use your words like a real person. I can take it."

"OK," you said. "I can do that."

"But will you?" She pressed.
"Lao, I don't know how many times you want me to repeat myself, but you're being goddamn a pain in the ass."

She snorted.

You thought of the people you hadn't meant to befriend: Tataryn, Hanzo, and Feng to name a few. You'd been straightforward with them, sometimes even tactfully so, and while you hadn't launched any kind of charm offensive, they all seemed to appreciate that honesty. You'd been so busy trying to protect Lao that maybe you hadn't taken the time to be real with her. And maybe, she was ready for it now.

"Anything else you want to go over?" You asked.

"So I don't know much about what you do any more." Lao fiddled with a small set of barbells. "Ziv says you practically live on duty and that your only friends are in Overwatch." The words were hesitant.

You snorted. "At least I have friends."

Lao smiled at that. "So he's not wrong?"

"I have friends outside of Overwatch," you said, maybe a little defensive. Granted, you had met most of them through your connections to Overwatch. "You do realize that he talks a lot of shit-"

"I noticed," she said, her expression sour. It was a familiar look on anyone who routinely dealt with Ziv. "He also says you're pretty essential to the counter-Talon ops."

You stared at her for a long moment, not quite trusting where this conversation was going. "I do that kind of work."

Lao stared at her hands, wiggling her prosthetic arm. She took a deep breath, like she was bracing herself. "You're uncomfortable. You can tell me to stop asking questions."

And here you were again, in that familiar bog of conversational pitfalls. It was a cautious dance, the steps light, quick, and ready to be corrected at a moment's notice. It was an uncomfortable feeling. "I'm considering the situation and what I'm not allowed to say. That's all. If I can't answer a question, I'll tell you straight up," you said.

"OK, so what do you do?"

"Aside from paperwork and managing other agents' moods and quirks? A lot of the fieldwork is just sanctioned voyeurism," you said. "Watch suspected enemy agents for long shifts. Take notes, maybe daydream about cake or dinner for a few minutes. Kill said agents if they're doing anything too threatening, but try to make it look like an accident. Write up a report justifying whatever action I took. Repeat as necessary."

Lao blinked. "How do you make counterterrorism sound boring?"

You shrugged and passed her a bag of shrimp chips. She eagerly tore it open and scooped up a handful. She shoved them into her mouth like a kid, her cheeks puffing out. "I do have something important to tell you though. I'm going deep cover soon. I'll be ruled MIA, maybe KIA depending on-"

Lao began to cough, spitting crumbs everywhere, and you immediately began to pound on
her back, unsure if you needed to do the Heimlich maneuver.

"What the fuck, Lucky? Did you have to wait till my mouth was full?"

"Sorry, habit," you said.

"Habit? You do this to people on purpose?" Lao blotted at her face, giving you the stink eye.

You shrugged, deciding to be honest. "Maybe."

"No wonder people are trying to kill you," she muttered.

"Kind of an overreaction," you said, taking a shrimp chip.

Lao wiped her shirt down, grumbling in Cantonese. "You're going after someone important right? You're not just doing this for fun."

"Definitely not for fun," you said. "I think we're going to have to discuss your definition of "fun." I'm not being sarcastic. Most everyone in Blackwatch has a different understanding of the word." You paused. "I will say, the most common denominator is good food. Most everyone likes eating."

Lao closed her eyes, taking deep breaths. "I'll let you know when I figure it out myself," she said. "But I want to know more about what you're doing. I know you can't say a lot, because apparently there are real traitors everywhere, but I'm glad you told me. I'd be pretty upset if I thought you were dead, and then you popped up months later..."

"Like you did to me?"

"Like you did to me!" She shouted. "Multiple times!"

"You weren't the only one who went through that multiple times! I thought you were-"

"Well so did I, and it sucked!" She glared at you, face red, her breaths come in short gasps. "I thought you were dead, and I mourned you, and then you show up like it's no big deal and act like nothing's wrong! You did that like three times! Is it any wonder I was so mad at you?"

"Huh," you said. "Well, I certainly didn't intend to do that."

"...I know," Lao said, voice small. "Just...let's agree never to do that again, OK? I know you have to keep secrets, but not that one. Please."

"Yeah, OK. Good plan," you said, smiling at your lap. "I got special permission to break protocol and give you the warning. So I'm in the clear."

"...Agent Lacroix seems to let you run rampant," she scowled. "Don't look at me like that, Ziv and Commander Reyes have both complained about your sneaky tactics."

"What?" Your voice went high. "Reyes said what? And he blamed Lacroix? He doesn't have any room to talk."

Lao narrowed her eyes at you. "I'm just saying, the Blackwatch Commander had a lot to say about your performance, and I have to admit that I'm a little shocked that he hasn't shipped you off to remedial boot camp like they did Ziv."
You squinted at her, wondering if she was trolling you. "What has he been saying?" You asked slowly, lips pursed.

"It's not all uncomplimentary," Lao said, a hint of a smile creeping across her face. "I mean, he was complaining that you're a busybody who intervenes in how he handles agents, but...considering I'm one of those agents you advocated for, I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing."

You kept your expression very neutral.

"He's also been asking about your background. Like have you always had that cake fixation? What about your "oops, I didn't mean to cause mass chaos, I was just bystanding, honest," act? Did I know anything about a missing pair of the Strike Commander's pants? Seriously, Lucky, I don't know what you've been doing, but you're a lot weirder than I remember." Her brow furrowed. "Also I'm a little surprised you haven't been doing business: Zurich seems to be a busy hub."

"It's not an act, I just have questionable timing," you protested. "And I don't have the free time or energy to manage my own black market business any more. I've got all this secret awful work to do and you obviously have seen how damn fussy Reyes can be." You grinned at that statement.

"Well, he obviously likes you enough not to ship you off to Antarctica, even if you would actually be safer down there," Lao said.

"I would fucking quit," you scowled. "The Yukon was bad, but the night everything went down, I damn near froze to death and I've never gotten over that. Had lots of therapy to work through the other shit, but...I fucking hate subzero temperatures and permafrost. Never again."

Lao blinked at the venom in your voice. "He told me about some of it. Just how everyone else...died. He didn't mention exactly how you got out, just that it wasn't pretty."

You knew this conversation would have to happen. Gabriel had briefed her on how your squad had died, but you hadn't really told her about your firsthand experiences. You weren't sure you were ready for that, to see her mourn Valdez, Shin, Captain Patel, and everyone else. But you would not conceal it from her either. You tilted your head back, staring up at the ceiling. "Do you want the details?"

"If you're OK sharing them," Lao said, her tone cautious. "No pressure. I get that...it wasn't good." She swallowed loudly. "I don't need to hear more about Shin and Julio. I...maybe some other time."

You knew this conversation would have to happen. Gabriel had briefed her on how your squad had died, but you hadn't really told her about your firsthand experiences. You weren't sure you were ready for that, to see her mourn Valdez, Shin, Captain Patel, and everyone else. But you would not conceal it from her either. You tilted your head back, staring up at the ceiling. "Do you want the details?"

"If you're OK sharing them," Lao said, her tone cautious. "No pressure. I get that...it wasn't good." She swallowed loudly. "I don't need to hear more about Shin and Julio. I...maybe some other time."

"OK," you said. "The Captain was there for part of it."

"I...I know about that," she said. "But I'd like to hear your take. How'd you get out? Did Commander Reyes punch holes through the walls or something?"

You managed a lopsided smile. "I managed to find Captain Patel, and he joined us soon after. She was...hurt bad, but still on her feet. She already knew she wasn't going to make it out. I was a little slower on the uptake." You exhaled slowly. "But she ordered me to keep him alive. Pure desperation, I know."

"Or an idea so crazy, it just might work," Lao said, her voice barely above a whisper. "That's your specialty."
"Yeah, I guess so." You clenched your fists. "The Captain stayed back to delay our pursuers and...well, by the end of it, there weren't any pursuers left." But then, you didn't have your Captain any more either. It wasn't a fair trade. You bowed your head. "On the way out, we were ambushed and got the shit kicked out of us. I thought we were done for then, so... I went a little crazy. I stabbed my way through our attackers, but Reyes was pretty out of it and they'd rigged the base to blow." You rubbed the back of your neck. It was strange telling this story to Lao, even stranger to act like Gabriel was just your boss. But speaking of the memory to her didn't hurt nearly as much as you expected.

"...He didn't mention any of that," Lao said.

"He wasn't really conscious for it." You shrugged.

"He's a big guy," Lao said speculatively. "Wears metal boots."

"He's heavy," you agreed.

"Did you use him as a human shield?" Lao asked.

"No! Now stop interrupting and let me tell the story."

Lao huffed at you, but shut up.

"So after all that I dragged him out of the base, before it was destroyed, and did my best to follow the Captain's orders. Those were my lifeline, all the direction I had. Don't think I would have had the presence of mind to do what I did entirely on my own."

"Couldn't disobey the Captain's last orders," Lao said, her words a little wobbly. "Her ghost would come back and flay you." She sniffled then.

You nodded, blinking rapidly. "I lost a few fingers in the explosion." You held up your left hand, though you were wearing gloves. "Got some burns on my leg. Was pretty concussed. Relatively minor stuff considering what went down, but after that I wasn't in any shape to make the hike to the extraction point, especially not in that weather, I know I wasn't dressed for it. So Reyes carried me. It was kind of a fever dream at that point," you said, not wanting to go into too much detail.

Lao frowned, her eyes on your left hand.

"Thanks to you and Rivka, there was a rescue transport already on its way. Otherwise I probably would have lost more than a few fingers."

Lao nodded once, her lip quivering.

"Really owe you-"

"Shut up," Lao said, voice breaking. "You don't owe me. Not after everything-"

"Well, thank you then," you said, because you needed to say something. "I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome," Lao sniffled.

You sat there, looking away as she rubbed her eyes. After clearing your throat a few times, you tried to pick up the thread of your story.
"We made it back to Overwatch. After I woke up in the infirmary I got debriefed, slapped with a gag order, and then interrogated about...everything. And I mean *everything.*" You grimaced. "It really fucked with my head, and then surprise!" You threw your arms up. "Suddenly, I'm a full agent, investigating the conspiracy that killed all of my friends. It was a rough start. Things were touch and go for awhile. I'm doing better though." You tilted your head back, staring up at the ceiling. "Reyes ordered me to see a shrink. There was no getting out of it. Recommended a good one though." You shook your head. "That first year was...hard."

Lao hesitantly rested a hand on your shoulder. "...I didn't know."

You patted her hand. It was her flesh one, her small fingers warm even through your gloves. "You didn't have an easy time either. I feel guilty complaining."

"Yeah, my trauma sucked," Lao said defiantly. "But just because bad shit happened to me doesn't mean you can't talk about what happened to you. Real friends don't treat it like it's some kind of competition, unless they're selfish assholes!"

You blinked, because while you knew that, Lao had not always reacted that way. She'd lashed out at you, and so you had grown more guarded over what you would share with her out of sheer self defense. But that seemed to be changing. It wouldn't happen overnight, however she certainly seemed more clear-headed than before.

"I know it's not a competition, at all. But...trying to be sensitive. I'm not great at it." You shrugged. "I do worry about saying the wrong thing and making the situation worse. I've never done this before. Do they make greeting cards for these occasions? If not, I think someone should look into that."

"What? You never had a friend kidnapped, brainwashed, and turned against you? No wonder you blundered through this entire endeavor. I thought you were supposed to be some kind of experienced agent." Lao gave you a weak smile.

You stared at her incredulously.

Lao began to giggle hysterically and after a few seconds, you joined in.

"Well next time, I'll know better," you snorted. "Anyway, the moral of the story is, after all that awfulness, Reyes had better be nice to me."

"Are you emotionally blackmailing the head of Blackwatch?" Lao demanded with mock outrage.

You just held up a finger to your lips. "Shhh."

Lao shook her head at you. "And you have a dinosaur. Where is she?"

"Left her with Jesse. She and Bandit are best friends and-"

"Are you and the cowboy...?" She crossed her fingers and you blinked, a little surprised by her sudden interest in that topic.

"No, but he's still single if you're interested," you teased. "You might have to fight off three other women and maybe one man but-"

Lao snorted. "You've got to be kidding. He looks like an extra from a bad movie."
"He's a good guy," you said, not actually disagreeing.

"What about the ninja?" Lao asked.

"What?"

"Are you dating the ninja?" She asked, like you were dumb for not understanding the question.

"...What makes you think I'm seeing anyone?" You asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Well, Ziv was complaining about your-"

"Goddamnit," you sighed, because Ziv couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"I don't know a lot of people." She paused. "That girl that was with you during the inquest: the Triad boss, Zhai Feng."

You sighed. "No, not her either. Now what did Ziv say?"

"He was just complaining about all the sordid rumors about your love life," Lao said pleasantly. "I was just wondering if they were as bad as he claimed."

You snorted. "Probably."

"Do tell," Lao said, eyes lighting up.

"Lao, there have been a stupid amount of rumors about me," you said. "Right now people think I'm a government experiment that might have a taste for human flesh. It's all ridiculous and I'm pretty sure some of my coworkers, including Ziv, have been starting them just to see how many gullible Overwatch agents they can fool."

"Ziv might have hinted at something along those lines," Lao said. "But he said he was doing it to protect you."

"What?" You asked, voice going high. You were going to have to do something about that boy.

"So does that mean you are seeing someone and he's been helping to generate a smoke screen?" She asked, leaning forward. "Come on, Lucky. I'm stuck in this little room all day. Give me the gossip."

"Lao-"

"It's obviously not Ziv. He likes men and was bitching about a rookie agent awhile back. Lucky, are you seeing a younger man? You cradle robber!" She cackled.

Resting your face in your hand, you listened to Lao tease you, her suggestions growing more and more outlandish. And as ridiculous as it was, you could only smile. Because in the face of everything that had gone wrong, you and Lao could still joke with each other. And that made Operation Candle Arc worth all the sweat, blood, and tears you'd put into it.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry about the long hiatus. My wrists are still giving me issues. I had some computer problems, and I wanted to take some time to fix the drafts I had that weren't working for me. Final version of this is definitely going to break 900k. I don't know about a million though. I will respond to comments when my hands feel up to it, I just wrote 4.3 k tonight, so I'm a little iffy. You can always hit me up on tumblr. I tend to respond faster on there.
Chapter 116

Chapter Summary

There is so much to do, and not enough time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You know she's not under outside influence any more," Athena said. "We tested her susceptibility through several methods after her surgery. I could still disable her, but I could not wrest direct control away."

"Maybe I'm still concerned about her conditioning. It was crude, and I don't think she's faking her recovery, but I'm still not sure what to expect from her."

"I understand, I just wanted you to know."

You nodded, Athena's comm link in your ear. "Thanks. There's no need to rush into details about my personal life. It's...a weird situation, and maybe I'm not ready to tell her everything yet. That's a...different kind of trust."

"Whatever you think best," Athena said, like she didn't really understand, and to be fair, you weren't sure you did either.

"I honestly don't know what I'm doing. I've already had one really awkward personal conversation this afternoon, prior to that one, and now I'm scheduled for another one in a few minutes. I'm only mortal: I can't do it all in one day."

"I suppose that's fair," Athena said, sounding amused.

You entered the comm room. You'd reserved it just for this social call. Locking the door, you put Athena in privacy mode and wondered how the hell you were going to address this. You'd just used up all your diplomacy on Hanzo and Lao. Did you have the energy to extend the same effort to Feng?

Then it hit you, like a Shimada brother to the face: you didn't have to be that cautious. Feng could handle bluntness.

Smiling to yourself, you opened the channel.

"Lucky! I was just going to message you! Do you prefer Extramodern Revivalist Omnica Art Deco or the Neo-Classical International take on Ukiyo-e? Trying to pick a house-warming present!" Feng sat in her egg-shaped chair, in her Pachimari pajamas for some reason, spinning around in lazy circles.

"...Those aren't toasters, are they?" You asked, keeping your expression deadpan. "Because I don't like toasters."

Feng squinted at you for a second. "Oh good, you're joking. Sometimes it's hard to tell."
"No, I really don't like toasters."

"We both know I wasn't talking about toasters," Feng snorted and sat back in her chair, like you knew exactly what she was talking about. "But since you're worried, I'll get you a blender, smartass."

"You don't have to get me anything. I can expense any neces-"

"Lighten up, it's a gift. Things suck and I want to give you something that will cheer you up and make things suck just a little less, you know?" Feng huffed. "Just say "thanks" and stop being difficult."

"Thanks and stop being difficult," you said, even if you weren't entirely clear on what exactly you were thanking her for.

Feng snort-laughed. "Careful, Lucky, you're sinking down to my level of humor."

No wonder she and Jack got along. Shaking your head, you shrugged. "Whatever, it's been a weird week."

Feng nodded. "Okey dokey. I understand that. Extended stress makes me very strange. Stranger." She frowned, staring at something off camera, then she mimed wiping her forehead with relief, sighing deeply. "Oh good, we're not out of doughnuts. I was going to cut a bitch if they'd eaten them all without me. I still might if they ate all the jelly ones. There's this place that makes lychee jelly donuts and they're fucking amazing. We'll have to get some. Though they're better with tea than coffee and you don't actually need to hear about that right now, we'll get some later. So what's up? This isn't just a social call."

"It actually is," you said, not minding Feng's rabbit hole tangents on a social call.

"You're using company time and resources for personal reasons? Oh Lucky..." Feng tittered, both hands on her chest. "The power has corrupted you. I bet you steal office supplies too."

"Yeah, well, I'll buy Isha proper art supplies when she stops eating the pencils," you said with a shrug. "Till then, she can make do with-"

Feng laughed even harder. "Oh no, how the righteous have fallen! You have stared too long into the abyss and become the very monster you were fighting."

"You're hilarious," you said. "Fine, we can call this business then. Some of what I need to say is classified, even if it is personal."

"All right, now I'm really curious." Feng folded her hands under chin and leaned forward, those green eyes bright with anticipation. "Hit me."

There was probably a smoother way to present things, but you figured compassionate honesty was the best approach.

"I heard you got a really stupid letter from Hanzo, that it was terribly insensitive, and I will admit that I choked and spat out my coffee when he told me what it said. I would have checked in on you sooner, but I just learned about it today. Are you OK?"

Feng crossed her arms, and stared at the ceiling for several seconds, her body frighteningly still. You weren't even sure if she was blinking. "He told you about that?"
You nodded, though it occurred to you that maybe Hanzo had been so veiled in his terminology that Feng didn't realize it was a marriage proposal and- No, Feng wasn't that dumb.

"That's surprising," Feng mused. "Originally, I was just going to pretend like it never happened, to be honest." She paused leaning forward like she was going to tell you a secret. "In my family, we're really good at that, especially when it comes to things that make us uncomfortable. I mean, my mother is still denial over my new career. She keeps sending me grad school applications and asking when I'm moving home." Feng shuddered. "Not Dad though, he's fine with it. He keeps cheerfully offering me all this operational advice like it's skipping rocks or driving stick shift. And it's fucking ruthless. Good stuff though." She shrugged. "But pretending it didn't happen is a personal choice. This wasn't a personal letter."

You blinked. "Uh...I'm not sure how a marriage proposal isn't personal?"

"Hanzo made it clear that it was purely political move, that he could bring something to the partnership, and that he wasn't trying to lead me on, and honestly, I appreciate the candidness." Feng gave you a wry smile.

"I don't think Hanzo knows how to lead anyone on," you said. Hell, you weren't so sure Hanzo even knew where he was going.

Feng laughed. "And he sent me some pretty impressive tchotchkes that I get to keep either way. Best of all, it got me some serious social capital within the family. Sure, Hanzo Shimada is currently disenfranchised and wandering the world as some kind of vagabond archer with severe PTSD, but look at the presents! Also he's the rightful heir to the Shimada bloodline, he's got some good DNA, wink wink." Feng did actually give you a few terribly exaggerated winks.

"...I could steal you his hairbrush, or you could pay Genji for other samples," you said, feeling gross.

Feng squinted at you. "That's terribly unethical."

"When has that stopped either of us?"

"Fair. We can talk about that idea later. Don't look at me like that! I'm only joking!" Feng said, at your expression.

"...I know," you said, not entirely sure that you did.

Feng just continued on. "Anyway, I know it's fucking stupid, but there are factions in On Sing who put a lot of stock in that. It's certainly boosted my social standing: "oh, sure Feng is manic, eccentric, and foreign, but look, someone important wants to marry her!" And as you can imagine, people in those factions generally don't like me, so it's a good thing." She shrugged. "Now some of the older family members are discussing the proper way to respond, and through my own allies I can prolong any negotiations at my leisure and call them off if I have to." She nodded resolutely. "It's not a bad thing, overall."

"Hanzo thinks he's messed up whatever relationship you have, and to be honest, I may have told him off for treating you like a commodity." You crossed your arms. "That isn't something you just spring on someone."

"It's...kind of flattering," Feng said, giving you an uncertain look. "I think. I mean, he might have been alluding to it during my Family Day visit, but I'll be honest, he was so cagey, I couldn't tell if he was talking about future alliances, Mario Kart, or what we were eating for dinner that
night. Genji assured me it was about dinner."

"Probably was," you said. "I don't think Genji knows the details." Except now that you thought about it, you didn't think Genji would miss Hanzo planning something like this. But it was just like him to sit back, play dumb, and silently watch the chaos unfold. God, he was a shit.

"I don't know. But I haven't told him, yet." Feng spun in her chair, swinging her legs. It looked like fun when she did it.

"I'm glad you're looking at this logically, but I have to admit, I was really disappointed in him for being so damn thoughtless. Which sounds terribly naive when I say it out loud..." You trailed off.

"It does," Feng said, nodding solemnly. "You really should know better."

You sighed. "OK. So I get the usefulness of the proposal, and I'm glad you've spun it to your advantage, but the fact remains, Hanzo is our idiot friend, and he didn't even talk to you personally before throwing out this harebrained maneuver. I mean, I never got the impression you wanted or needed a marriage alliance. It seems like you came from an entirely different background. Since your parents married out of affection-"

Feng choked. "What?"

"Didn't they? Your dad really dotes on your mom." You didn't add "and that seems weird because I suspect your dad is a psychopath." Because you'd learned a thing called "diplomacy." Go you. "I mean, I could be misreading it, I don't know the circumstances."

Feng furrowed her brow. "...My mother is not a sentimental person. I have a very difficult time picturing her in love. But upon further review I can't think of any practical reasons why she would have married Dad. Hold on."

You sat back, shaking your head.

Feng picked up a phone. "Li? No I haven't read your boring audit of the Brunei office and I don't plan to. Hettie already gave me the highlights. Yeah, I have something more important to ask. Do you think Mom and Dad married for love? Like it wasn't a bet gone horribly- Ow!" Feng held the receiver away from her head, rubbing her ear. "You don't have to sound so outraged! Yes, this is important and ties into underworld negotiations. I don't expect you to understand" Feng rolled her eyes mouthing, "brothers."

You snorted.

"Really? You mean my child bride theory wasn't even a little right? Well, of course I did, and last time I brought it up to her she almost pulled my ears off. I was just asking- Yeah, uh-huh. Fascinating. Uh-huh. You know, I'm really busy, but I am confident that you'll figure it out without my help, because that's your job." Feng rolled her eyes and hung up the phone. "OK, point to you. Li thinks they actually like each other and I'm just dumb. In fact, he was kind of affronted that I had to ask." She shrugged. "How was I supposed to know?"

You squinted at her for a moment, realized that Feng was way more emotionally malformed than you first thought, and then decided that that wasn't a discussion you needed to be involved with right now. "I just thought maybe you liked Hanzo and it was kind of shitty of him to leverage those feelings when he can't reciprocate." You blew out a breath. "Maybe I'm just making something out nothing," you concluded, feeling a little stupid.
Feng rubbed her temples. "It...bothers me," she said, after a few minutes of awkward silence. "You're not wrong. But I mean, you've been telling me all this time that Hanzo is in a bad spot and isn't equipped to handle a healthy romantic relationship. So I mean, I'm not surprised that he behaved in this awkward way. I don't have an excuse to sit here and feel sorry for myself over it."

"Nothing wrong with feeling a little sorry for yourself, you know, throw a pity party, eat some doughnuts, drink some whiskey, then once you've dealt with the bad feelings, you can go back to your plans for world domination."

Feng snorted. "Just East Asia, Lucky. I'm not that ambitious."

Zheng certainly was, but you kept that thought to yourself.

"I do like him, but no matter whom I like, if they're to be formally tied to me, they need to be able to hold their own in my world. Hanzo could do that. And it's nice that he trusts me enough to think this could work."

"So everything is fine?" You asked. "Because I kind of don't believe that."

"I thought you didn't like talking about feelings." Feng gave you a surprisingly ferocious look that brought to mind rabid ferrets with abnormally long claws.

"I don't. But I've spent so long in therapy and interrogations that I'm just following gut instinct. Also Hanzo is legitimately worried that he's ruined your friendship because you're behaving strangely. Moreso than usual. Yeah, you heard me. Hanzo admitted that he is worried. If Hanzo of all people knows something is wrong..."

"Yeah, yeah, I see your point." Feng spun around in her seat a few times, slowly at first, her speed gradually increasing.

You waited for her to stop. It was almost like you could see the speed of her thoughts with each revolution of the chair.

"It was kick in the teeth," she said, slumping in her seat. "Yeah. I mean, we can work well together. I do find him ridiculously hot. And he got me custom swords that match my eyes." She pointed at her eyes with both hands, her smile hopeful. "I mean, that's kind of romantic."

You nodded. "Yeah. I think so." But maybe you weren't an expert.

"We can take a poll," Feng said. "Though maybe I could just ask Genji for his expert opinion. Do you think he would know? Do you think he would tell? Should we-"

"Later," you said, trying to keep her on track. "Genji might be able to offer valuable insight, but that'll take some planning. I guess I'm more concerned about how you're handling things."

"I thought maybe down the road he'd grow to like me and we could talk about more personal alliances then. I didn't think it would be like this." She exhaled slowly. "It occurred to me that I don't really know him. I mean, I do, but I don't. Like what's his favorite color? Does he likes cats or dogs? The correct answer is both, by the way. Does he prefer mountains or oceans? You know, just the...trivial things that make us whom we are. And what does he actually know about me?" Feng shrugged. "I mean, those presents hit all the right switches when it came to wowing the family, but they weren't really for me."
"...Yeah, I got that impression," you said.

"That part isn't a big deal. But I guess I hadn't realized that he picked up on my discomfort."

You stifled a snort, because you'd seen how "nervous" Feng reacted. She said things, all kinds of things, mostly inappropriate, and she couldn't stop herself. Then she promptly forgot what she'd said. You could only imagine her responses to Hanzo.

"I mean, I called him to say I had to think about it and thanks? It was awkward, but I kind of expected it to be that way." She shrugged. "I mean, I know this sounds silly, but I used to do contract work for the police in my hometown. I am very used to all kinds of bizarre behavior."

"You get political-proposals much?"

"Several, but none that I've seriously considered before now," she said. "But overall, this isn't a bad thing, Lucky."

"If you say so," you said, because what were you supposed to do in this situation? Make her admit Hanzo hurt her feelings? Make Hanzo grovel? Maybe there was a greeting card out there that could encompass the situation with a cute cat picture and two pithy lines? None of it seemed quite right. "You don't have to justify all the reasons why it isn't "such a bad thing." It's not really a good one either. I just want you to know that you're more than a political pawn. I want you to be happy. You deserve more than that."

Feng cocked her head to the side, expression softening. "That means a lot. Thank you."

She took a deep breath. "It isn't the proposal that young, starry-eyed me dreamed of having - not enough baskets of heads - but I know my duty. I don't get to be swept off my feet. Not if I want to stay the Dragonhead of On Sing."

"Yeah, well save the Machiavellian performance for your crazy mafia family. I'm just worried about you. You don't have to downplay it to me. You're the one who matters, because you're my friend, not because you're some Triad mogul with a bunch of impressive titles."

Feng's lips quirked. "I appreciate that." She sat back in her chair, eyes shut. She held surprisingly still for almost a minute.

You sat there, a little worried about her uncharacteristic silence. "So that's why I called. Just...checking in on you."

"You're such a softie," Feng laughed. "Keep this up and you'll ruin your reputation."

You started to protest and then stopped, because out of all the friendly heart-to-heart conversations you'd had today, Feng's was the most straightforward, an exchange with some odd stops and starts, but without baggage. And it was kind of refreshing. Yeah, you'd been anxious, and there had been some discomfort, but it was nice to have a friend you could just have an honest, if disjointed, conversation with. Sure, you'd had to use some diplomacy, just to make things easier on you both, but you didn't feel like you were walking on eggshells or hindering someone's nascent recovery or personal growth. It was comfortable, despite the topic matter, and you could appreciate that.

So you just smiled. "Being both good to my friends and merciless to my enemies are integral parts of my character. So I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? I thought you were a cannibal cyborg gathering a super soldier sex cult. That sounds much cooler, to be honest"
You facepalmed. "Genji passed that one on, did he?"

"Heh." Feng neither confirmed nor denied your suspicions. "But do you really think Hanzo is that worried that he upset me? Oh dumb question: he must be to 'fess up to you. That isn't a man who likes to talk about his feelings, mistakes, or anything vaguely personal." She launched into her next round of thoughts. "He's probably better off not withdrawing the offer. We can stall or claim to be in private negotiations, and you know what, if you want to tell him I'm not that upset, that's cool. I'm just...adjusting."

"...I think he could use some practice at apologies," you said. "I'm taking suggestions if you like grand gestures. But I'll be sure to let him know that the situation isn't as dire as we first thought."

"Sneaky, sneaky," Feng said, rubbing her hands together.

You bowed, like a songstress after an encore.

"No, it's cool. You can tell him the truth, maybe leaving out all our jokes, he probably won't appreciate those. But honesty and sensitivity are ideal. That's what good relationships are based on after all," Feng said. "Platonic or otherwise."

"I don't know where you get the idea that I'm good at honesty and sensitivity..." You began.

Feng just gave you a skeptical look and snorted rudely. "Well, the bar is pretty low around here."

"This can't be right You asked, examining the timeline of the construction of defensive measures for Nguyen's compound. "There has to be more." Sure, she'd built more turrets, walls, and defensive emplacements, and brought in more cyborg troops in the past two years, but that didn't seem like enough. Not if she was expecting a visit from Blackwatch.

You knew Nguyen was many things, but stupid was not one of them.

Lacroix never really talked to you about Nguyen as a person. You knew she dressed well, but never ostentatiously. She didn't flaunt her wealth. She ate in the same cafeteria as her employees. She treated her omnic workers very well. In fact, she'd belonged to a hardcore omnic rights group back before that was considered "decent." You'd done plenty of digging on your own. Nguyen had been married, but her husband was killed supposedly due to the violence against said group. She had adopted several war orphans, but not much was known about them. Her only biological child was killed some years later as a youth, rumored in a fight over a girl. You wondered if Lacroix had killed her husband or her son, if there really had been some sordid affair that he didn't want to admit to. It didn't matter though. That was idle speculation.

Nguyen's early life had been difficult, and years ago she might have had sympathetic goals. But you could compartmentalize. Whatever Nguyen was then, meant nothing to you now. And whatever good she had done before, stopped mattering when she'd sent her hired killers to Black Base Delta. What she had done there, and to Lao, and all the civilians in the Talon terrorist attacks... Those actions buried any good she might have accomplished early on. On some level, you understood that it was a warning, a sign of how a person with good intentions could be warped into a monster. But mostly, you just wanted her dead.

"Are you sure this an accurate summary of her defensive capabilities?"
Lacroix nodded. "I know there could more, but there are size and power limitations to the compound. And we will be taking a less dangerous path. Unfortunately, our fire team will bear the brunt of her defenses. What she already has is already quite formidable, but the piece de resistance, the item they're getting from the Russian omnium, she has been working for years to get her hands on that. Everything else is minor in comparison."

You shook your head. "What is this thing?"

"Doesn't matter, we won't actually be dealing with it," Lacroix said, a strange glint in his eye. "Your clearances don't go that high, Chanceux. And don't think about running to Gabriel and Jack. It won't end any differently than last time."

You blinked a few times, staring at Lacroix as he outlined the routes you would take through the enemy base. Why would he say that? You understood the limits of your clearances, you'd had this conversation before when- Your head snapped back. It was no coincidence that Lacroix had drawn parallels between whatever Jack had found that had Petras all hot and bothered, and the omnic tech that Nguyen had acquired. And his statement correlated with your own theories.

He was telling you, without telling you, exactly what was going on. You sucked in a breath. "Does she already have it?"

"Oh yes, I finished reconstructing the courier's route last week. It was quite a perilous trek taking the back way out of the country; miles of ice, weeks of subzero temperatures. You would have hated it. But it was very circumspect, enough to bewilder most pursuers. I was wondering how she was going to get it past her compatriots, but she's always been clever and daring." Lacroix's smile was oddly gentle. "She doesn't trust the rest of Talon with her treasure either."

"Who would?" You turned back to your maps, though knew these routes by heart. You had inside footage of her metal hallways, with their triple-sealed airlocks, examples of traps including pressure plates, laser grids, and proximity mines, though those were mostly in the outbuildings and specially-secured locations such as panic rooms. Despite setting up shop in what remained of the once architecturally-rich Old Quarter, she had built a sturdy, if boring hexagonal compound with modular facilities. The layout of the grounds and buildings was fairly straightforward and repetitive.

"You should know that she has furthered her alliance with Vishkar. I don't know if we will be expecting the Korpals to have forces on the ground. But they have been exchanging tech."

"Hard light?" You narrowed your eyes.

"Yes," Lacroix said. "Feng shared what she had on Vishkar's capabilities. It will affect the main combat team more, but you should be prepared."

Muttering a few curses under your breath, you added that to your list of things to do before Operation Tarasque. You understood the capabilities of hard light technology well enough to know that it had strategic uses you had only begun to consider. In Hong Kong, you'd only had to deal with the shielding. Recently, you'd seen footage of people who could wield it like a weapon, honing points and ribbons, burning through armor with laser precision. Thankfully, such prototype models and skilled handlers with that level of control weren't common. But you knew better than to underestimate Nguyen.

"I think you know the plan by heart already, Chanceux, considering you helped formulate a good portion of it," Lacroix said, not unkindly. "Perhaps you should take a break, review some
counter photon-tech strategies, and get some rest. I understand that you've had a long day."

You blinked at him, not sure how much he knew.

"I have been meaning to ask, do you think Hanzo Shimada should re-ascend to his role as
head of the Shimada clan, with Zhai Feng and On Sing backing him?" He gave you a long look,
and you figured that he knew quite a lot already.

"No, I don't think he's anywhere near ready," you said, a little surprised by your own
honesty. "But maybe in a few years, with some good people around him-"

"And do we want a strong Shimada clan running things behind the scenes in Japan?"
Lacroix mused. "Because the Shimada are much more...involved with politics than On Sing. And
their criminal enterprises run so much deeper. They are not the same kind of entities, you know."

"I'm not sure," you said, honestly. "But maybe I kind of want him to take the shot, if he's
going to try to take Feng's route. And I think he needs a good friend to keep him honest. Genji and
Feng will support him and check his ego, but he needs someone with a stronger moral compass.
Both of them mean well, but..." You shrugged. Genji and Feng were remorseless killers. But Feng
had Bayan and her brother to keep her in line, and Genji had people in Overwatch and Blackwatch
looking after him.

To your surprise, Lacroix only nodded thoughtfully.

"Not going to chastise me for being too idealistic?"

"You know Hanzo as well as anyone here, save his brother," Lacroix said. "And you did
not have such kind thoughts about him when he first arrived. Hanzo has been...changed, maybe for
the better, by his association with us. I won't deny it and I suspect you're very aware of it. After all,
you are an experienced agent and your opinion carries weight, Chanceux." He handed you a
cigarette, his smile sly.

"Thanks," you said, accepting the cigarette and the light, because after all the open honest
talks you had today, you didn't have the energy to focus on deceiving someone as perceptive as
Lacroix. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"That's simply not true," Lacroix laughed. "I've said many complimentary things about you,
to your face even: you either weren't paying attention or were simply too dense to understand the
compliment."

"And there it is," you said, rolling your eyes.

"It might useful to have a Yakuza boss on our side. Also, you had similar thoughts when I
asked for your opinion on Zhai Feng, and you were not wrong," Lacroix continued, like you hadn't
spoken. "I suppose I was too cynical to see her potential and to recognize that you have an eye for
talent, especially when it comes to criminal endeavors," Lacroix laughed.

"I've lived long enough to begin to recognize survivors," you said, because that was the
easiest way to sum it up.

"Yes," Lacroix agreed, his eyes bright. "It is like looking in a mirror."
You sat in the small kitchen, sipping tea that Hanzo had brewed, while Genji helped himself to an array of sweets. Isha sat on your lap nibbling on a sesame ball. You were leaving behind your entire stockpile of snacks, and while Vo had already claimed as much as she could carry, the rest of your Blackwatch friends were helping you eat what was left over. No sense in letting food go to waste.

Jesse and Tataryn would be by once they were done going over something with Gabriel. Ziv was visiting Lao, and said he'd be by to pick stuff up for her. Távio was helping Diallo maintenance weapons, including her armor. So it was just you and the Shimada brothers.

"So have you made up with Feng yet?" Genji asked, inclining his head at Hanzo.

Hanzo exhaled sharply, nostrils flaring as he gripped his narrow teacup in both hands.

It occurred to you that if Genji was trying to keep it a secret or even be remotely discrete, he would have used Japanese instead of English. You sighed, wondering if Genji was truly the pettiest of you all. He certainly had the subtlety for it.

Hanzo looked at you expectantly.

"What? I didn't say a thing!" You scowled back at him.

"That's not what I meant," Hanzo muttered. "Have you spoken to Feng?"

"Yeah," you said. "Did you want details now?" You glanced at Genji who was cheerfully eating his food. He smiled back at you, and offered Isha some rice crackers that she greedily accepted. There would be crunchy crumbs all over your lap now.

You gave Genji a dirty look.

"Yes, please," Hanzo said, giving his brother a warning look. "Genji understands discretion." Of course he did. That didn't mean he wasn't going to tweak his brother every chance he got.

"She's not mad," you said. "At least she wasn't mad when we talked. A little wistful, I know the "this is purely political, I don't actually have feelings for you" approach hurt her feelings. But I think she realizes you what you meant and that you aren't just...purely neutral toward her. Getting her to admit that she was bothered took some time though. She's still processing. She might actually be mad at you later. Or she might just laugh it off and everything will be fine. I can't actually predict Feng's reactions, and neither can most sane people," you said.

Hanzo nodded solemnly, like you were giving him the gospel.

"But I think more presents, maybe a grand gesture of apology and declaration of "you're not just a political pawn to me" would go a long way in getting you a less angry response," you added. "You don't have to promise her romance or anything, especially if you don't feel that way. But just letting her know that you value her friendship would help patch things up."

"You put Feng in the friend zone?" Genji teased. "Or was it the other way around?"

You rolled your eyes. Genji definitely knew what was up.

"There is nothing wrong with friendship," Hanzo snapped. "Strong platonic relationships are not to be undervalued and those who speak derisively of such relationships don't deserve what they have."
Genji blinked. He looked at you, and then Hanzo, and then back at you. "Did Hanzo finally make a real friend?"

"Maybe even two," you said, sipping your tea. You had the sneaking suspicion that Jesse and Tataryn weren't that far behind you and Feng.

Genji leaned back in his seat, shoulders relaxing. "You realize, that the younger brother's sworn duty is to embarrass his elder in front of their friends."

"I am very aware," Hanzo snorted and reached over, offering Isha a cluster of fresh grapes. She snatched them out of his hand, plucking them off the stem and rapidly shoving them into her mouth.

Someone coughed, clearing their throat from the doorway. You glanced over to see Gabriel, giving you all a sardonic look.

"This isn't suspicious at all. Should I even ask what the three of you are plotting?" He leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed.

"Oh, we're just discussing Hanzo's love life. It's very complicated," you said sincerely and Hanzo began to sputter as he choked on his tea. Yeah, your timing of that statement wasn't a coincidence.

Gabriel snorted. "Fine, keep your secrets, chica. No need to be sarcastic. I was only asking."

You just glanced over at Genji, who was chuckling behind his hand. His eyes practically glowed with amusement. Hanzo slapped at his chest, eyes bugging out.

"I'd give you the Heimlich, but that doesn't really help with liquid," you said, trying to look sympathetic.

Wiping his face, Hanzo just gave you a furious glare.

You just winked, sipping your tea. After all, Genji wasn't the only person who knew how to be a shit.

"If you hug me, I'll burst," you groaned as Jack shifted on the couch. The three of you were in Gabriel's quarters, though Gabriel had hopped in the shower after Jack spilled a plate of enchiladas down his chest. Gabriel had made a big dinner tonight, and you'd eaten far too much.

Jack laughed and patted his arm. "You can lean on me, sweetheart."

"Too full," you muttered, not liking the idea of any pressure around your abdomen.

Jack moved, facing the side of the couch, his feet buried in the couch cushions. "Sitting back to back should be more comfortable."

"Than the couch cushions?" You muttered, but turned to the side, sighing as you felt the broad warmth of Jack's body against your own. OK, this wasn't so bad. Jack chuckled, a low rumble you could feel along your skin.

"Thanks." He reached over and squeezed your hand. "I like touching you."
"I noticed." You rested your head against him. "Not complaining." The two of you sat there in companionable silence while the shower continued to run.

"I..." Jack began. "Never mind, it's silly."

"Nope, you don't get to do that. Out with it," you grumbled.

Jack sighed. "I'm worried. I guess Petras moving Prince out from under our noses spooked me. But I've got a bad feeling about...something. Maybe it's just the thought of you leaving," he said, sounding a little guilty for bringing it up. "Just...uneasy. Sorry. Don't mean to be superstitious. And certainly don't want to make you feel-"

"You can't really jinx us, Jack," you said. "And if you're worried, well, I trust your judgment. This is a dangerous mission. Petras is behaving...erratically. And I don't want to leave." You exhaled audibly. "I'm worried too, but..."

"But we can't focus on that," Jack said. "We're adults. We know how it works."

"Still, it's good to talk to someone about it."

"I'm your CO. It's bad form for a CO to share his worries."

"You're my boyfriend. Different context, different rules." Sure, it'd be nice if Jack felt utterly confident in your success and that everything would be OK, but you were too experienced to buy into that fantasy. There were a lot of things that needed to be fixed, and more things that could go wrong. There was a lot of work to be done. And it was going to be hard.

"Just...be careful, OK? Please?" He lifted your hand and kissed it. "I'll tell Gabe the same thing. It's not a reflection of your skills."

"I get it," you said, waiting for him to tell you to look after Gabriel too. But he just squeezed your fingers.

"I know you've got Gabe's back and vice versa," he said. "Not going to insult you by implying otherwise. Just...want you to take care of yourself too. You've developed the bad habit of being a hero. I worry."

You blinked a few times, and tilted your head, kissing Jack's shoulder. "I'm no hero. I intend to take good care of myself. Because if I get hurt, it'll be Feng and Bayan looking after me while I recover and Bayan is goddamn terrifying, like 'get better and make healthy choices, or I'll kill you.' And Feng will do something insane like feed me nothing but Cheetos for three days or grow me a clone for some inexplicable reason."

"Oh...Two of you, huh?" Jack's tone grew speculative. "That'd be a sight to see. I can't say I'd complain..."

"Pervert," you laughed.

"Well, I'd obvious prefer the original." He kissed your fingers. "Just admiring the copy for its aesthetic value, that's all."

"Uh-huh," you shook your head. "You're ridiculous."

"Ridiculously in love with you," he said, and your breath caught.
You pressed closer to him. "Jack-

"I already mapped out a few dates that me and Gabe can get to Shanghai, provided no emergencies crop up."

You smiled at your knees. "I love you too."

"We'll get through this," he said. "Promise."

You squeezed his hand, the two of you sitting there quietly, till Gabriel emerged from the bathroom, vigorously rubbing his head with the towel. He laughed when he saw you sitting back to back on his couch.

"Smart choice, corazon," he said, leaning over to kiss you. "He can't spill his food on you if he's facing the other direction."

"You were kissing me while I was trying to balance the hot plate!" Jack protested. "I said I was sorry!"

"You know, I'm not so sure how effective this technique will be. I have faith in Jack's ability to overcome unfavorable odds," you said, grinning up at Gabriel. "And his uncanny way of getting us to wear his food. Is that behavior some kind of dominance ritual or something?"

"You guys are dicks," Jack sighed, squeezing your hand.

Gabriel laughed and nipped Jack's ear. "Did you leave me any enchiladas? Or did you manage to spill it all while I was cleaning up?"

"Nah, I kept him over here, away from the food," you said.

"You're a saint," Gabriel said, already heading over to his kitchenette. "Need anything while I'm up? Besides napkins for Jack?"

You laughed. "I'm good."

"Until Jack spills his horchata on your head," Gabriel said with mock severity.

Jack groaned as the two of you continued to tease him, but he didn't let go of your hand.

Your bags were packed. Your gear was loaded. Your murderbird wore her a small backpack with her own gear inside, her tablet in both hands. You'd put her dog and bedding in a separate bag. She was to travel with your mission-unrelated belongings straight to Shanghai, after you and Lacroix were dropped off in Bangkok. Your part of the mission began earliest.

You stood in the docking bay, narrowing your eyes as Távio placed a couple bags alongside your own.

"What are you doing, agent?" You asked sharply.

He laughed nervously, gaze drifting behind you and slightly to the left. "Uh..."
You followed it, to see Gabriel, who was talking quietly with Amélie, both of them looking all too serious. "What did Gabriel tell you to do?" It clicked even as the words left your mouth. "You're not coming to Shanghai."

"I...umm...well...orders?" He stammered, giving you a weak smile. "Part of my "don't get caught fighting other agents" punishment. Agent Tataryn is going to start a rumor about me being sent off to Antarctica."

You snorted, wondering if Távio knew how close he'd been to getting shipped down there before.

"You're going to need help, ma'am," he said. "I know you've got allies in On Sing, and that you're friends with Ms. Zhai, but you need someone on your side that works for you."

You couldn't exactly argue that logic, no matter how much you trusted Feng. Because that feeling didn't extend to Great Aunt Zheng.

"Where am I going to put you?" You scowled, though you knew your condo had a spare bedroom.

"Umm..." Távio squirmed under your gaze.

"Gabriel, did you even consider-"

"Part of his training," Gabriel murmured, wrapping his arms around your waist. He kissed your cheek gently. "He'll learn more watching On Sing than he will being stuck out at the farm. And you could use an extra agent around if you're serious about bringing down Vishkar."

Távio, trying hard not to look mortified and failing, began to stare at the wall with almost desperate focus.

Gabriel chuckled. "I'll give you a few days to get settled in, then I'll be sending Maeda Vargas over."

"Fine," you said, not wanting to waste your time arguing. "But if he's living with me, you're just going to have to deal with it."

Gabriel stiffened, as if it hadn't occurred to him that you'd have to house the younger agent.

"We'll talk more about this later," he said, releasing you. "Feng can always find him a place to stay."

"Hold up!" Jack rushed into the room, coat gone, just in his black fatigues. He gave you boyish grin, brushing hair out of his eyes. "Sorry, I'm late. Had to dodge some meetings." He reached over and clasped your hands, his expression gentle. "But you wouldn't leave without saying goodbye, would you?" He squeezed your fingers.

You just smiled, his ridiculous level of sweetness making your cheeks burn. "I don't know, I hear the boss is a stickler for punctuality."

"I think he'll make an exception in your case." Jack leaned over, straightening your collar, forehead pressed to yours. "Won't you, Gabe?"

Gabriel laughed and picked up Isha, stroking her head while you tried to smile bravely at Jack. "You're an ass, Morrison."
Out of the corner of your eye, you saw Távio pretending not to watch or listen. His posture was convincing, but he was standing alone with empty hands. You shook your head, eyes drifting in his direction.

Jack frowned briefly, probably remembering that while Távio knew they were in a relationship with you, he did not yet know about them. "Don't worry about things here. I'll take care of your plants," Jack said. "Athena's going to put them on a timer. She'll help me remember to water them...or maybe do it herself if necessary," Jack said, a little sheepishly.

"Thanks, Athena," you said. Though you weren't saying goodbye to her. There were several fish torpedoes coming with you to Hanoi. And you were bringing a few to Shanghai too.

"You're welcome, Lucky."

You'd already said your goodbyes to Lao. You knew Jack would inform the rest of your friends, the ones cleared for Shit Spiders anyway, of your exaggerated demise. You didn't really want to say goodbye to Reinhardt, because if he started crying, you weren't sure what you'd do.

Jack reached over and took Isha, cuddling her to his chest and blowing raspberries on her belly while she squawked at him. "You watch her back, OK? She's going to need all the help she can get."

Isha chirped at him, rubbing her head against his cheek.

"Oh good, I'm not too late," Ziv barged in, made a beeline for Isha, and gave her a little cloth bag. "For the road, baby bird," he said, ignoring everyone else while he flicked her snout.

"Hi Ziv," you said, dryly. "Good to see you too."

He straightened up, giving you heavy frown. "I'll be seeing you in Hanoi, don't get all wishy washy on me now. I just came to see Isha off."

Gabriel snorted and you just shook your head. Ziv scowled at Jack and Gabriel, but then swooped in, squeezing you hard.

"Don't worry, I'm not fooled," you said, patting his back. "You had to come. Lacroix and I are on the same transport out."

"Shut up," he muttered, hugging you tighter. "You be safe. You and the boss get dumb ideas when I leave you on your own."

"That's not how I remember things going-" You said, thinking of Spinshot and Gift Horse...and then remembering Candle Arc. Well, you were both kind of right.

"Well, you're dumb," Ziv said, releasing you. "And he's reckless."

You snorted.

Genji, Hanzo, Tataryn, Vo, and Jesse chose that moment to meander in. Jesse had Bandit in tow, and Jack had to set Isha down so she could go to fuss over him.

You blinked as Tataryn and Vo came straight to you. She was in her usual rumpled uniform that consisted of oversized sweats. Face lined and her hair steely gray, Vo held a small box in her hands.
"Made you this," she said. "Be careful. Don't let dinosaur eat."

You lifted the lid on the box, raising your brow at the four golf-ball sized ceramic orbs nestled inside aerofoam wrapping. "What kind of timer, filling, and blast radius?"


"You heard me," she said, rolling her eyes. "Guillard not soft like Lacroix." She shot Amélie, who had her back turned and was chatting with Ziv, an unfriendly look.

"I'm going to buy you a lot of chocolate when I get back," you said, suddenly very curious. "And I'd love to hear about how you learned all that."

"Later," Vo said, shaking her head, eyes darting back to Amélie. "Mission first."

She gave Isha a wary look and scurried back out to the hall, and to be honest, you were a little shocked that she came in the first place. Generally, if there were more than five people in a room, it was too crowded for her.

"Well," Gabriel said, raising a brow.

You looked at Tataryn.

"She said she wanted to see you," he said with a shrug, his smile wry. "You know how emotional she gets."

You just shook your head. "I will never truly understand her."

"It is like looking into the face of god," Tataryn agreed. "See you in Hanoi, Lucky. Try not to attract too much attention before we get there." He gave you a jaunty salute and swaggered out.

"He will miss you a lot," Amélie said, shaking her head. Her eyes lingered on the doorway Vo had exited. You had a feeling she'd heard every word out of the demolitionist's mouth. You hadn't realized that Vo actually knew Amélie fairly well. "He has already said he will wear a black armband in your absence."

"Because he'll have to start doing his own work?" You asked, just a little cynically.

"I'm sure that plays into some of it," she giggled, leaning over to embrace you. "I will tell you the same thing I tell Gérard: le trop de précautions ne nuit jamais."

"I have backup plans for my backup plans," you admitted.

"Then I will only ask you to come home safe," she said, patting your cheek. "I am already planning a Shanghai trip. Feng sent me pictures of your new residence and I believe we can greatly improve on the decor."

"What?" You gaped. You suddenly had flashes of you, Távio, and Isha all holding paint rollers and moving furniture while Amélie snapped her fingers. "I-"

"Quite the party," Lacroix said, as he stepped into the room, dressed in a fine suit, carrying a stylish knapsack and a briefcase. "But we need to leave soon if we're going to stay on schedule."
You nodded, waving at the friends you'd see in Hanoi, and then turning to kiss Gabriel. You'd see him again too. It was Jack you were saying goodbye to now.

You wrapped your arms around his neck, kissing him hard, and trying to ignore the catcalls and whistles as he held you against him, his grip just a little too tight, his body so very tense. He reluctantly released you, Gabriel's hand on his shoulder. It wasn't enough, but you were out of time.

"Kick ass out there, boss," he told you, his stance that of the Strike Commander, projecting confidence and strength. "I'll see you in Shanghai." His voice was easy and smooth, but he smiled hesitantly at you, eyes filled with words he couldn't say in front of an audience. You saw them nonetheless.

"Got it, sir," you said, winking at him. "I'll do you proud." You delivered the innuendo with a straight face and gestured for Isha to follow. You walked onto the transport, turning back to wave, your expression only wobbling a little.

Jack watched you go, one hand raised, his smile strained.

You turned back around and marched up the ramp.

Operation Tarasque had finally begun.

Chapter End Notes

Things are OK. My wrists were good for like three days, then today decided they weren't having this weather change. It's nowhere near as bad as it used to be, but it's a slow improvement. Also, I'm writing some tricky scenes, I had to rework several, and I have at least three more that need heavy overhauls, so I will try to keep updates weekly, but I'm also concerned about quality. Not that I think I'm doing a terrible job but because some of the scenes need technical reevaluation, and I need to hone the emotional nuance or something like that.

I can blather on about the process later.

I will be traveling next month. If anyone is going to be attending the LA Times book fair, I'm supposed to be going with friends.

Vampire the Masquerade Bloodlines 2 trailer dropped and I'm stoked. I might also be scarily obsessed with dragon breeding in a certain Neopets-esque game. *facepalm* I JUST WANT PRETTY SHINY DERGS. Umm, sorry. Ignore that. I've been getting about 5 hours of sleep every night and am a little insane right now.
Chapter 117

Chapter Summary

Everyone has a part to play.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You'd switched from the Overwatch shuttle to a private chartered transport in Bangkok. After telling a very sulky Isha that she had to stay behind, you'd gathered up your bags, checked them carefully for sneaky raptors, and prepared to disembark.

Lacroix had been delayed, taking a moment to change out of his suit into less attention-grabbing civilian wear. The two of you stuck to casual, climate-appropriate clothes: hats, loose cargo shorts and baggy t-shirts. You were just a pair of free-spirited tourists, backpacking across the peninsula. You both carried large hiking rucksacks, your gear and rations inside.

You took a two day lead time. Everyone else would arrive then. You and Lacroix would be double-checking your entry and escape routes and doing your own recon. Under normal circumstances, sending both of you ahead was overkill, but given how critical this mission was, the situation called for it. Plus, you didn't mind getting a preemptive look at your enemies in person.

It was early morning when you finally set foot in Hanoi. The city was bustling, wide awake and warm. The humidity had already begun to rise, and it felt so very different from Zurich. You took a taxi to the Old Quarter, Lacroix cheerfully chatting with the omnic cabbie in fluent Vietnamese. From what you'd gathered, the Old Quarter used to contain a lot of the fancy colonial French architecture from back in day. But it had been mostly decimated during the Omnic Crisis. Nguyen had managed to restore some of the historic buildings, with both private and public funds, but had discretely built her own compound there as well.

You passed gleaming skyscrapers with clean lines and rows of balconies, going into a less modernized area still populated by blocky Soviet-style tenement houses painted in bright colors. The cab let you off in this neighborhood. Lacroix paid, still chatting amiably as you scanned the area.

Lacroix led the way to a ground level apartment, typed a code into the keypad, and the rusty door popped open.

It was a tiny two room flat, all the furniture covered in white sheets. You wondered if his agents had arranged it, or if it was one of his safe houses from some time back in his mysterious past.

The two of you silently scanned the area for surveillance, and when you were satisfied it was clear, you set your bag down, opened a bottle of water, and drank.

"Tonight, I'll check in with my agents, before I verify the exit routes." Lacroix had three
agents within Nguyen's compound, that you knew of: a janitor, a cook, and an office worker. None of them were high enough up to retrieve documents or eavesdrop without attracting attention, but they were useful for sharing information on guard rotations, technical troubles, and mapping the facility. They could also provide little details. For example, most of the cyborgs were foreigners and English was the common language. Most of the staff were Vietnamese with a heavy omnic presence. The locals and the cyborgs had some tensions, though Nguyen didn't tolerate infighting or let the mercenaries bully her civilian workers.

"Sounds like a plan. Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow we'll focus on more surveillance and final preparations. Do you think you can initiate the breach on your own?" Lacroix asked.

"If you've already confirmed my insertion route," you said, already sorting through your gear.

"It's done. You'll have to stop and pick up an extra uniform before you go in, but everything else has been arranged and confirmed."

You nodded, wishing you could bring Athena along. You had a small fish torpedo, in case of emergency, but you weren't supposed to request her presence till the operation was live. You weren't sure what kind of sensors Nguyen had and whether or not they could detect a power spike from your AI. There were too many unanswered questions about Nguyen's tech capabilities...but also, Athena's.

"I'm going to shower and-" Lacroix swore and dropped his wiggling bag.

You gaped dumbly as a bundle of black feathers, still wearing her own little backpack, tumbled out of the main compartment, trilling triumphantly.

You stared, still in shock, as Isha bowled across the floor, scattering feathers. As soon as she stopped rolling, she picked herself up, and began chattering at you very rapidly, as if to tell you all about her adventures in Lacroix's luggage.

"I told you to stay on the transport!" You snapped, voice unpleasantly high. "How the hell did you even-" Isha strutted over to you, looking very pleased with herself. She latched onto your leg, happily rubbing her cheek against your calf, completely ignoring your tone. "I saw you ten minutes before we disembarked!"

"I remember that the zipper was partially undone before we left," Lacroix mused. "I thought I had just forgotten to shut it all the way after I changed clothes. She must have opened it up and crawled in while I was talking to the pilot." Lacroix shook his head, then looked back into his bag. He sighed. "Fortunately, my combat gear is still in here, but my extra civilian clothes and some of the rations are missing. You're going to have to make a few extra stops, Chanceux."

"Me? You're the one who didn't check your bag!" You scowled, as Isha chirped at you.

"But now we have an excuse to go out for dinner. Glass noodles with eel, stir fried pho, fried crab rolls, barbecued pigeon... Hanoi has some rich food culture that I think you'll appreciate."

"Oh I'll barbecue a pigeon," you muttered, glaring down at Isha. "This is a combat mission, murderbird."

She chirped again, tugging off her backpack and opening it up, revealing her armor, metal
claw-tips, and her collar-camera.

You narrowed your eyes, remembering how Isha had ignored orders and gone along with Gabriel into the fight on Family Day. Your raptor wasn't just blindly following you out of separation anxiety. No, she knew you were going somewhere dangerous, and had been smart enough to bring her gear instead of her entertainment tablet. Hell, she'd managed to stay quiet for hours, something you hadn't been sure she knew how to do. Goddamn insubordinate beast. Fowl. Dinosaur. Whatever the hell she was.

Lacroix had the audacity to laugh. "Well, she came prepared. Perhaps there's room for you on this mission-"

"Are you insane? This is a combat mission! I'm not taking my pet! She can stay behind and wait for extraction."

"Are you sure we can secure her? And do you really think that she'll be any safer alone?" Lacroix asked, giving you a cool look. "If we have to make a quick escape, are you all right leaving her behind?"

You gritted your teeth. He had a point, though you didn't like it. And now you were wondering if it was a coincidence that she'd been in his pack...

"I honestly did not think to check my belongings for errant dinosaurs," Lacroix said dryly, reading your suspicious expression all too easily. "A mistake I will not make again."

Isha just chirped at you as she tried to put her armor on. She couldn't do it by herself, but she kept trying, fumbling with the fasteners, thrumming happily to herself.

"Goddamnit, Isha." This was dangerous stuff and you weren't certain you could put aside your worry for her well-being. But you couldn't just abandon her here either. There was no guarantee she'd let Feng's people pick her up or that they'd even be able to find her. You rested your face in your hands. He was right. There was nothing you could do about it now, though your feelings weren't quite caught up to your logic.

Why had you gotten a smart pet? Why hadn't you gotten something dumb, furry, and most importantly obedient?

"You don't need that yet," you said with a heavy sigh, crouching down in front of your murderbird. "I'm going to do reconnaissance, pick up dinner, and then we'll worry about getting you geared up." You examined her gear and found it sturdy, resigning yourself to the fact that you were going to have to take her along. "You're going to stay close, keep your head down, and follow my orders, got it?" You growled at her.

She just chirruped, blue eyes gleaming smugly.

"And you're going to have to keep those little hands out of sight." You tapped your wrists. "Chicken Camouflage."

Isha snorted, but folded her arms so her hands were hidden and the limbs could be mistaken for wings. She tucked her head against her chest, mouth shut. She didn't really look like a chicken - she was too big and not fluffy enough, but she looked less like a dinosaur.

"There are several elaborate poultry breeds maintained specifically for cockfighting," Lacroix said. "You can try to pass her off as one of those. Though you will attract attention if you linger anywhere too long; she's honestly far too large."
"It might be best for you to guard the base till we're ready to start the mission," you told Isha.

She gave you a skeptical look.

"Nguyen has spies everywhere," Lacroix told her. "If they come in to set an ambush, we are counting on you to escape and warn us."

Isha sat down, eyes darting between the door and the windows. She picked up her camera collar and handed it to Lacroix.

"Yes, that will be helpful," he said, fastening it on her. "I think you could help make Tarasque run much smoother. I look forward to working with you."

Isha chirruped back.

Well, that was more polite than Lacroix ever acted toward you.

Shaking your head, you put your stuff down, grabbed a small rucksack, and went out to make contact. You would buy a bamboo cage on the way back.

Clad in the yellow and red uniform of a local courier service, you waited at the cafe, sipping sweet Vietnamese coffee. A grizzled older woman with coal-black eyes and thick wrinkled skin stepped in, her uniform matching yours.

"There you are," she said, clucking her tongue at you. "Slacking off as usual."

"But I got you a coffee, Ms. Pham! Extra milk!" You answered with the pass phrase, handing her a pale cup of iced coffee.

"It's just "Pham." She looked you up and down, apparently not impressed by your bearing. "You can keep the coffee. Stop slouching in uniform," she said. "Come on, we have deliveries to make and thanks to this pit stop, we're already behind."

You followed her out to her double-parked van, sipping the milky sweet coffee and wondering if Lacroix knew her personally or if she was just another anonymous civilian on the take.

"Just keep your head down, and you'll blend," she told you as you buckled into your seat. "I don't make conversation with the security. You'll have to explain your own presence. They're always on edge, but a slow speech pattern and a little charm should grease the wheels. Duc normally chats with them. He's well-liked, if not too bright. You just tell them that you got pulled in because he had a family emergency. His mother is in the hospital. Heart problems."

"Got it," you said, having a sneaking feeling that this woman had worked with Lacroix before.

She gave you a curt nod, then turned on the radio, Johnny Cash blaring through the speakers.

You took the hint, not trying to make any further conversation. Instead, you observed the route she took, the van lurching through congested city traffic. It might have been faster to ride a
bike, because it took forever to make it that short distance between the coffee shop and Nguyen's compound.

The reinforced concrete and metal barrier that surrounded the perimeter was thicker than you expected. The van slowed down at the guardhouse gate, and you tucked your hat over your eyes, slouching in the seat as Pham leaned over and flashed her ID.

The guards, with visible large rifles and green uniforms - moonlighting local police officers - gave her a bored nod and waved you through. It was good to know they were still on the outer perimeter of the facility. One of your mission goals was to avoid involving the local LEOs entirely.

Pham didn't even look at you, she just slowly drove along the compound roads while you stared out the window. Nguyen's cyborg research facility was a hexagonal campus, office buildings and factories in the south by the main entrance, a power station and control facility in the center, and the labs and barracks on the north side. Nguyen had a residence within the northwestern lab.

The facility was surprisingly pretty. There was quite a bit of greenery, a fish pond and ornamental trees planted by the offices. The architecture wasn't as strongly French as you expected. The buildings were only four or five stories tall and had a distinctly east Asian look with flared gables and elaborate cornices. The roof tiles were a soothing shade of green, the buildings painted white and pale yellow with narrow windows.

You'd seen smuggled photos and aerial shots, but it was different to be here on the ground. It was smaller than you expected, taking less than five minutes to drive through at low speeds. But you weren't fooled. There were multiple subterranean levels and you weren't a fan of prolonged close quarter combat with cyborgs.

Pham pulled up to the loading dock for the main barracks, and stopped the vehicle. She jerked her head sideways and climbed out of the van. You followed, letting her open up the rear doors.

You stared at the crates of peppers, cabbages, dragonfruit, and mangos. Flicking your left index finger, you spritzed the top crate of fruit with the contaminant.

Pham coughed and glared at you, obviously catching on to what you were doing. Giving you a very dirty look, she set up a pallet jack and pointed at the boxes. It looked like you would be doing the unloading. Shrugging, you climbed up into the van and grunted as you passed the crates down.

"Hey, who's this? She's not on the list," a large blonde man with a metal hand stopped in front of the pallet jack, his attention on Pham. He spoke English.

Pham growled something in Vietnamese and threw her hands up in frustration.

"Oh hey, sorry, Pham's English isn't great," you lied, peeking out of the back of the van, a sheepish smile on your face.

The cyborg wore a navy uniform, his hair cropped close to his skull. You'd killed others like him with minimal conversation. It was strange to be face to face, playing friendly and smiling at him like you were some kind of hapless civilian.

"This is a restricted access facility," he snapped at you. "Get down here, now."
You flashed your courier ID as you slowly climbed out of the van, your left hand jammed in your pocket. "Shit, they were supposed to get me cleared today." You blew out a frustrated breath. "This is my day off. I got pulled in because Duc had to rush him mom to the hospital. She's got a heart condition. Luckily it was after my midterm so-" You took on a student's frazzled demeanor, trying to look cheerful, harmless, and tired.

The guard's stance relaxed slightly. "Oh thank god, they sent someone who speaks English. This old bat is a fucking nightmare. She spits at people and I only have high school French," he scowled. "Duc always does the talking." He squinted at you. "But you aren't supposed to be here without the proper clearances."

"...I can leave immediately or get back in the truck," you offered. "But then someone's going to have to help Pham unload. Otherwise this could take awhile." You gave a rueful smile.

The cyborg guard stared at the stacked crates of produce, then Pham's surly, unimpressed face, and then had to be picturing how long it would take the older woman to reluctantly do the job on her own. He exhaled slowly. "Yeah, all right. Just this once. The next time I see you, you better have the proper passes, OK?"

"I'll get the central office to process it as soon as I get back to the hub," you said, tone bright and earnest.

"Yeah, well, don't try anything. I'll be watching you."

"No problem," you said, climbing back into the truck, staying cheerful and unthreatening. "I'll stick to unloading. Not trying to get anyone in trouble."

The cyborg gave you a curt nod and moved off the side to "supervise." But he kept his distance, possibly because of Pham's guttural mutterings.

With your back turned, you continued discretely contaminating each batch before you lifted the box onto the pallet jack. Midway through, you tucked two tennis ball-sized spherical drones into separate crates. They were low-output models, programmed to run off the ambient backscatter of the facility, and find a hiding spot. Winston had taken inspiration from the security workarounds in On Sing's devices. Signals nearly untraceable, the drones were accessible to Athena, so when the time was right, you would have eyes in the facility. You weren't entirely sure they would work, but that obviously wasn't your only reason for being here.

Pham made impatient noises, giving both you and the cyborg venomous glares. You didn't mind. Even if she wasn't "pretending" to be the difficult one, her attitude had gotten you an in with security. It took longer than you expected to unload, and you slipped on work gloves as the guard approached.

"You almost done- Oh good, last one," he muttered, watching you set the box onto the jack.

"I'll sit in the van," you said, climbing out and shutting the doors. "Pham can take the shipment in."

He nodded, and you got back into the front passenger seat, watching carefully in the mirrors as Pham guided the pallet jack into the kitchen, pushed a button, and the machine automatically unloaded the crates. The entire process could have been automated, but Nguyen only allowed in small delivery vehicles. No large trucks that could act as a Trojan horse.
Pham loaded the pallet jack and then climbed back into the van. She didn't bother buckling in, she just slowly drove back to the southern entrance and headed back toward the main roads.

"Am I going to have to burn this van?" She scowled as she looked at you.

"Bleach should do the trick," you said. "Don't...eat anything out of the back for awhile." Because you had sprayed a large amount of the modified *clostridium difficile* bacteria solution all over the fresh produce delivery. Better known as c-diff, it caused terrible abdominal cramps and violent diarrhea. Provided by Feng, this strain would incubate much faster than the natural version, but would also burn itself out sooner. And while c-diff infections could kill anyone who had a weakened immune system and didn't get treatment, this was developed specifically to incapacitate Nguyen's staff. Feng couldn't guarantee that it wouldn't have casualties, but the goal was to keep them away from work and to weaken the cyborgs, not kill them.

"Who's going to pay to have this-"

"Well, I have some money-" You started to reach into your pocket, but Pham shook her head.

"I don't want anything that you've touched," she said bluntly. "And if I get sick-"

"Just wash your hands really well, with bleach and maybe a sonic cleanser," you said. "And if you start to have diarrhea, go directly to the hospital. It'll save you a lot of pain...and laundry."

Looking positively disgusted, Pham glowered at the road.

You sat back in your seat, suddenly energized. Taking a deep breath, you focused on the route back, and on what you would have for dinner, after you washed your hands thoroughly. Phase One of the plan was complete.

Hanzo was no stranger to combat, to ambush strikes, to the personal side of killing and conquest. There was a rhythm to it, a rise and fall in action. Tomorrow's mission would be challenging, but the planning had been well executed. Still, he could not shake the feeling that all was not well. Something was off balance, a gap in the picture, a sour note in the melody, but he could not pinpoint it.

You, Commander Reyes, Lacroix, and even that unruly cowboy had formulated a respectable plan. He and Genji had provided suggestions to maintain stealth and better apply force, and he had been satisfied by the alterations Reyes had made to the plan.

Commander Reyes had an eye for tactics and listened to his subordinates. He had surrounded himself with capable people who maintained similar goals. Hanzo had to wonder how things would have differed if once upon a time he had possessed better advisers and the wisdom to accept such corrections. Perhaps that would have made a difference, but the fault was still his own. Advisers or not, he had made a terrible choice, and he and his brother, now had to live with it.

The victim of that choice sat beside him, smirking as Agent Mihret threw a handful of playing cards into the air. The hacker snarled some choice words in Hebrew and Genji actually laughed.

"What was that phrase you are so fond of?" Genji asked, lightly. "Oh yes, "get good."
"Oh go plug your dick into a light socket," Mihret snapped.

Genji just laughed harder, the sound achingly familiar and yet a distant memory. Genji didn't laugh like that with him. Not any more.

Hanzo squinted at both men. He was never entirely sure how to handle Mihret's...crass behavior. He had tried stern expressions of formal disapproval, but Mihret didn't care. He tried explaining the parameters of decent behavior, but Mihret pushed back, letting him know exactly what he thought of Hanzo's ideas on "propriety." It wasn't a battle he was prepared to fight. The hacker didn't listen to anyone except you and Lacroix, and even then...

"Are you going to apologize to Feng?" Genji asked, switching to Japanese.

Hanzo gave him a grim look. His little brother had no right to question him on his personal affairs. That wasn't his place or his concern and- Hanzo exhaled slowly. It was easy to forget that things had changed. He was no longer the honorable elder brother. He was no longer the guardian of a young Sparrow, duty-bound to teach his sibling how to be a man. He was no longer the heir of the Shimada, leading his family to greater power and prosperity. He was...just a disappointment. Sometimes it was hard to remember that it was his own stubbornness that had poisoned things. Genji was infuriating, he always had been. But Hanzo's job had never been to master Genji. Hanzo's job was to master himself, and on that dark night of blood and fratricide...he had failed. And if he continued with that same set of behaviors, he would squander this miraculous second chance.

That was unacceptable.

"Of course, I will," Hanzo said, his response coming a little too late. He grasped for lighter words that would not be tainted with bitterness. "I do not know what kind of "grand gesture" should accompany it. I don't suppose she will want me to offer up a finger or a ritual suicide, but those are the classics and there is beauty in simplicity..."

Genji snorted, eyes widening. "A joke? From you? Are you feeling all right?"

"Lucky claims that humor is an effective way to...interact with people. To promote good feelings and reduce tension," Hanzo said hesitantly. "I am starting to think she might be right."

Genji stared at him, a little incredulous.

Hanzo kept his expression serene, a smug feeling of satisfaction starting to pool in his belly. He had surprised his brother.

"From one thing, know ten thousand things," Genji muttered. "Next you'll be exchanging meditation tips with Zenyatta."

Hanzo frowned, reminded once more that something wasn't quite right. It was like grasping at fog, but he knew that something had been missed. He huffed in frustration. There was nothing he could do about it now. Hanzo trusted his instincts, though a bad feeling was no reason to panic. The plan was solid. The people were reliable. And when they encountered unexpected obstacles, they would just have to adapt. It was a lesson he was learning as he progressed. But he would keep pushing forward. He would be prepared. He would take care of Agent Mihret and his brother. This time, he would not fail.
"There is no need for you to go in person."

Feng sighed, having already had this discussion at least a dozen times. Maybe not with her Auntie, but Auntie had been there, biding her time, eavesdropping, refining her own counterarguments. She knew not to expect anything less from the old Dragonhead. That was Auntie. She was overbearing, overprotective, and overpowered, yet still, somehow not as frightening as Mother.

Feng shook her head, trying to bury her lingering trauma. "I'm going. Bayan's going. And you're coming too. But Li, Mr. Li, and that fuckwad Meng can stay behind."

"There is no need to flaunt our involvement," Zheng said, her voice cool and reasonable as her hologram glided across the floor, gracefully mimicking pacing. Even in un-life, Auntie had her vanity. Feng was both frustrated by the pageantry and comforted by the illusion that her aunt still had human tics. "We should maintain plausible deniability. And it will be dangerous. Nguyen acquired the-"

"Obviously," Feng said, her smile wry. "That's why they'll need us on hand. Just in case."

"Blackwatch won't give up something that valuable-"

"All that is up for negotiation. We made a tech sharing deal for this mission. That's tech, after a fashion. And we won't know unless we ask."

"Do you think simply asking is going to work?" Zheng asked, incredulous, like she couldn't quite believe how naive her descendant remained.

Feng enjoyed that reaction more than she could admit. "I don't know, have you ever tried it?" Feng flopped over on the couch, her gaze falling on the katana set in its display stand, the green silk soothing to the eyes. It really was a work of art. Great weight, beautiful forging, sharp as a honed razor... And Feng wasn't even a sword person. "Seriously, you've never just straight up asked, "hey, can I have that? Because I really like it. I'll take good care of it. I promise." You know, instead of threatening, demanding, or flat out killing people."

"Has that ever worked for you?" Zheng asked, her expression skeptical.

"Yes, but not on Mother," Feng admitted. "I was so scared she'd drown that puppy Li brought home in middle school." Feng paused, shuddering. "But yes, yes it has. Really well even. This one time when a guy with a gun showed up at the diner -"

"Your police work stories are absolutely appalling. You worked with savages and lunatics."

Feng shrugged, not disagreeing. "Great preparation for handling the family."

Zheng's image flickered.

Feng grinned, realizing she'd managed to irritate her near-omniscient ancestor. "And even if they don't give it to us, so what? We don't need it. We have you. And I am very curious about the other tech Nguyen has squirreled away. Despite her lack of ergonomic prosthetics and clumsy neurochemical malpractice, her products always have impressive power sources and circuitry. We could learn a few things."

"I concede that Nguyen's labs are impressive and her engineering cutting edge, but your
presence is not required for any of that. You are sending medics and offering emergency evacuation should it be necessary. There is no need to put yourself at risk. Morrison will not be there."

Feng smiled. "And?"

"There is no obligation."

"Isn't there?" Feng asked innocently. She had once made a teacher cry by answering him in nothing but very pointed questions. That tactic wasn't as effective on her aunt, but it still communicated her intent quite well.

"You are not seriously considering Hanzo Shimada's proposal?" Zheng crossed her arms.

Feng shrugged sheepishly. "Genji, Lucky, and that sexy Russian will be there too."

Zheng scowled. "Stop getting involved with Russians. Also, he's Ukrainian and-"

Feng just shrugged again. "Don't care. I'm going. You'll be with me. What can stand against us?"

"I guess that depends what Nguyen brought back from Siberia," Zheng said archly.

There was a knock at the door.

Feng glanced at Zheng's placeholder, waiting for her to reveal who was there.

"It's Hettie," Zheng said, with a sigh.

If Hettie herself had come, it was important. That woman never wasted time. Feng nodded, and the door opened.

Dressed in a violet skirt suit that would have been suitable for tea with the Queen - any of them - Hettie LaRue strode into the office, her expression severe.

Feng sat up, elbows resting on her knees as she met Hettie's gaze. "This doesn't look good. Can I offer you some tea? Cookies? Weapons-grade hard light projectors?"

"No, thank you, I already ate and am well accustomed to my current pistol. I am here to inform you that we have received a...generous offer from the Hanamura branch of the Shimada clan," the older woman said plainly.

Feng sighed, already knowing where this was going. "How did they find out?"

"People...gossip. It's what your family does, especially when it comes to your marital status."

Feng rolled her eyes. It wasn't Hettie's fault that her family was...ridiculous, but Hettie was often the bearer of bad news. Probably because most everyone was scared of her. Feng liked her. Sure, she'd "supported" Fa Hai during the interregnum, but Hettie's true loyalty had always been to Aunt Zheng, which made her timing all the more suspect.

"All right, give me the highlights," Feng said. "And tell me if any of the gifts are really cool-"

"Their offerings are comparable to all the others. However, there's a teacup Shiba Inu
puppy with Pachimari bandana in pink hand-woven basket, for you," Hettie said, allowing herself a wry smile. "It is ridiculously adorable."

"Goddamn," Feng said. She had been wanting a puppy, or a kitten, or a cheetah, not that she had time to take care of any of them. "They're playing hardball." She frowned. "What else?"

"They've offered up an interesting candidate, an attractive cousin, close to you in age, with a potential claim to the clan. He lacks the...true characteristics of the Shimada heirs, but he would be an acceptable clan leader nonetheless."

"...Yawn," Feng said, because that pretty boy was undoubtedly expendable and probably useless. "What's the catch?"

"Repudiate the traitor. Repudiate the traitor's impostor brother. Along with a warning to avoid entanglement in Shimada affairs, because you are still an outsider. They were oddly political when they said that, seeming to imply that you could lobby for amnesty for your friends, should you marry into their clan."

Feng narrowed her eyes. "That's an insult."

"It wasn't meant as such," Hettie said, giving Zheng a pained look. "It's a reminder that we generally don't overtly become involved in each other's succession wars."

"Yeah, yeah," Feng sighed. "If I wanted a lecture on tradition, I'd watch Fiddler on a Roof. Oh, have you seen the new omnic version? It's pretty good. Sometimes even Auntie sings along."

Zheng made a rude noise and Feng wasn't sure how she did it without squishy mucus membranes, but that was impressive. However, her show of derision did nothing to change the fact that Feng was telling the truth.

Hettie's expression did not change. "They sent over fresh intelligence on Vishkar's legal and illegal maneuvers, ones relating to us." She crossed her arms. "We're working to verify the data, but so far it seems accurate and quite useful. I've assigned several...troubleshooters to untangle some of these threads. I think the information will prove very useful in the near future."

Feng stared very hard at the wall, humor fading in the face of such a bald ultimatum. What was that saying about the carrot and the stick? Well, that was quite the giant carrot stick they were metaphorically beating her over the head with. She shuddered, picturing being bludgeoned by a baseball bat painted to look like a carrot, or worse, choking down giant pieces of raw dry carrot, the texture woody, the chewing going on forever....

"I don't like that look on your face," Zheng said. "What are you thinking?"

Feng smiled darkly, because they didn't have time for that ramble. "They're muddying the water."

"There are many layers to this gambit," Zheng agreed. "And no matter how you feel, you have to wonder what they're after."

"And you must not make a decision in haste or give the appearances of doing so," Hettie said. "The Shimada have sent a threat with their offer, a knife with their rose."

"Oh boy," Feng said dryly. "How romantic."

"There weren't literally any knives," Hettie amended, glancing at the katana set. "I suppose
"You must deduct points for style."

"They sent me a puppy, but no weapons?"

"Critical intelligence on our enemies, a puppy, some jewelry, a very ancient, very ugly ivory carving, dried seafood, lacquered fans, and heirloom dolls."

"Huh," Feng said. They'd gone for traditional Japanese betrothal gifts. That was awfully presumptuous. Hanzo, at least, hadn't assumed that much; his presents were simply a "thank you for taking the time to review my proposal, here are some material benefits I can provide with ease and if they please you, there's more where those came from." The other Shimada branch had overstepped and underwhelmed. What a faux pas. Was it an intentional slight angled to spur her into rash action or was it just the sloppiness of a half-baked plan? It didn't matter: the insulting aspect of this could be leaked to the rest of the family and that would generate enough outrage to torpedo the plan.

"Are you actually listening to me?" Hettie and Auntie asked that question so often, Feng found it hilarious to act like she hadn't. She also found it convenient to cover all the times she wasn't actively paying attention, like now.

"Oh, yeah, definitely," Feng laughed. "But can you repeat that one more time?"

Hettie gave her a sharp look, lips pressed firmly together. To her credit, Hettie was much better at controlling her exasperation than Auntie. "They said you don't have to marry into the clan. You don't have to form an alliance. But if we continue to support Hanzo Shimada, the truce negotiated by the ignominious Fong Chun will no longer hold, and they will declare formal hostilities once more."

Feng's good humor evaporated. Because personal feelings aside, she was the goddamn Dragonhead of On Sing. It might have been a hereditary title, but she'd fought scores of family members for it, and she'd won. How fucking dare they? Did that family of unscrupulous assassins and merchants presume to tell her what she could and could not do? Did they somehow think that they were better than her family of unscrupulous assassins and merchants? Because honestly, they both sucked and to imply otherwise was both rude and delusional.

"Don't do anything rash," Zheng said, recognizing that look on her face. "This requires finesse. You are dismissed, Hettie. Feng and I will discuss how to proceed."

Hettie nodded at both of them and promptly exited. The older woman was wise enough to know not to be on hand for this argument, but clever enough to come back in about an hour with snacks, to moderate policy choices once everyone had cooled down.

Feng glared at the nearest camera lens, not bothering to pretend like the illusion was one looking at her.

"This is a priority," Zheng said. "And Hettie wants to know what you want done with the puppy?"

Feng crossed her arms. "...Send it to Li. Maybe he could marry "Cousin Useless Prettyboy" and join the Shimada clan instead."

Zheng sighed. "Perhaps you could solve this problem before running off to Vietnam?"

Feng was no fool and nowhere near as shortsighted as she acted. She recognized a play for time when she saw one. From both her family and her rivals. Oh, what even was the difference
any more? It was a battle on all fronts, the Shimada demanding compliance, her family wanting
dominance, and Overwatch stupidly requiring that she stick to decent behavior when it came to
solving these problems. Feng didn't like fighting everyone, but she no illusions about her position.
The moment she stopped walking this tightrope, was the moment she fell. And that was worse
than the headache all the politics caused, because at least this way, she could protect her people.
Groaning, Feng knew she was going to have to spend some time navigating this minefield.

Hopefully, it wouldn't interfere with her part in Operation Tarasque.

"You haven't eaten yet, have you?" Gabriel asked.

"One ration bar, two...four hours ago," Jack said cursing his sense of time and arithmetic.

There'd been an "emergency" budget meeting on what to do if the newly proposed UN "responsible spending" bill passed: it would cut defensive spending by a third and there'd been a lengthy debate about budget priorities. Construction of the new base on the Rock of Gibraltar had started, and its future was already in question. Then he'd had to field a call from an irate Finnish politician about the property damage caused by an Overwatch agent several months ago; he was pretty sure it was a Blackwatch agent, but it didn't matter, the politician just wanted to air his grievances and make a production of the chastisement. Jack was also on call for half a dozen ops across eastern Europe and central Asia.

Then a mission in Mexico City, to halt a major Los Muertos arms deal, had gone very badly - Reinhart was handling the PR, Ana had stepped in to supervise the operational cleanup. And of course, Petras had been demanding all kinds of updates, hounding him hourly on a variety of topics, just to keep him on his toes.

"...We're at HQ. There's plenty of food nearby. Why the hell would you willingly eat one of those?" Gabriel snorted.

"I was busy. It was around," Jack said, though he had not had much of an appetite. It got like that when he was working. And his spirits had been...low. He'd expected that sinking feeling to fade a few hours after you'd left, but it had lingered, and he wasn't sure if he was just worried about you or if it was something altogether different. Jack was used to being in the fields for weeks at a time. He was used to you being gone on missions. It had never felt like this before. "I swear it didn't used to be this hard," Jack muttered, hands jammed in his pockets, chest too tight.

"Well, I know I look damn good in this armor," Gabriel laughed, sitting down on his couch while he secured his metal boots. "It's OK, Jack. You can't help your body's reactions." He winked.


"So I don't look good?" Gabriel teased, leaning over to kiss Jack's cheek. "That's harsh, *amor."

"You'd look incredible in a paper bag, Gabe. But we both know I'm talking about work."

Gabriel paused. "Petras?"

"Yes and politicking in general," Jack said. "It's damn fortunate I have Athena to help me keep tabs on...everything. I had to solve seven minor international incidents in the last forty eight
hours through talking, and I didn't even get to shoot anything."

Gabriel gave him a wry smile. "That is hard." He looked up at the ceiling briefly. "Maybe you need to hire another secretary."

Jack snorted. "Athena is doing a great job and for less pay. Unless you're offering up Lucky."

Gabriel didn't smile. "You trust that thing too much, Jack."

"...Athena's trustworthy," Jack said, pinching the bridge of his nose as he felt that old argument start up again.

"That's what they said about-"

"I know, Gabe. I was there too." Jack exhaled. He had not forgotten the massacres, the wholesale destruction brought about by the Omnic Crisis. But neither had he forgotten the other division of omnics, who by programming, whim, or something more, had defended or hidden human survivors. Jack had a keen grasp of battlefield probabilities, but he never let himself reduce everything to a numbers game. There'd been hostile omnics everywhere, but there'd been plenty of unscrupulous humans too, doing terrible things and justifying their crimes as "necessary for survival." It became a mantra, too many people convincing themselves they'd done nothing wrong because their actions were "defensive." Omnics, at least, didn't seem to feel the need to lie to themselves about their deeds.

Gabriel sat there, lips pressed tightly together, sealing in words that Jack knew he didn't want to hear.

"I didn't trust her initially," Jack said quickly. "But after everything we've been through, she's earned it. Hell, I thought you liked her-"

"I do," Gabriel said, voice even, and the admission surprised Jack. "She's got a way about her, unlike any of the ones I've met before. Think it's because she's spent so much time with my agents. But that doesn't mean I've forgotten what she is, Jack. And the fact she's so good getting us to like her? So adept at mimicking human behaviors? Well, that's something that bothers me, too."

Jack groaned, because how did you argue with that kind of paranoia? Gabriel had set impossible standards and then just looked on, with grim satisfaction, when no one could meet them.

"But all that's background noise for now," Gabriel continued. "She hasn't crossed any hard lines yet. You rely on her. And more importantly, you and Lucky trust her. We are sorely in need of trustworthy allies. We need her to keep things running smoothly. I get that she's necessary. But I don't have to like it."

Jack blinked, a little surprised by how damn reasonable Gabriel had been about his misgivings. They'd had many variants of this argument, sometimes ending abruptly, the conversation awkwardly being shifted to other topics, more often ending with someone storming out and taking a few days to cool down.

That had...improved with your presence. You didn't argue with Gabriel about AI principles. You were just openly fond of Athena and she was just as fond of you, and that seemed to sway him more than any intellectual arguments about the trustworthiness of inorganic life.

Jack nodded. "I appreciate you looking out for us. I guess one of us has to be assessing all
possible threats. And I know it can't be me. I'm too busy nodding thoughtfully at whatever is coming out of a bureaucrat's mouth, wishing to be anywhere but there... "

Gabriel laughed. "So is it just the usual weight of the world that's got you down? You look especially tired. Bags under your eyes and everything. I'm telling you, you need to work on that skin care regimen." He nuzzled Jack's shoulder.

Jack smacked Gabriel's arm. "Dick."

"You love it," Gabriel said with exaggerated cheer.

"Yeah," Jack nodded. "You're right." He patted Gabriel's cheek. "It's not just the usual bullshit. I don't like staying back while you and Lucky go out, knowing that you're walking into a trap. Not knowing when or if." Jack stopped himself, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Sorry. That's not what you need to hear before a combat run. I know better than to say that kind of shit. I'm sorry."

Gabriel gave a half smile, one arm curling around Jack's shoulders and Jack leaned into him. "Miss her already, huh?"

"Yeah," Jack nodded. "And Isha too. Dinner isn't the same without her discretely poking me for scraps." He squeezed Gabriel's hand. "It's silly, I know."

"It's not. I miss her too," Gabriel murmured, his tone gentle. "Though Lucky doesn't usually poke me for scraps. She just takes entire portions off my plate without asking."

Jack laughed, resting his head on Gabriel's shoulder. "You're an ass."

"I miss Isha," Gabriel continued, his eyes gleaming wickedly. "Unlike the two of you, she's polite about asking me to share my food."

Jack hung his head, appreciating his lover's attempts to distract him; Gabriel had such a wicked sense of humor, and with you around, he'd gotten to see it more often. "Lacroix reported in that Isha snuck into his bag and stowed away. Feng confirmed that Isha never arrived. I had to repeatedly reassure her that she didn't lose our murderbird." A panicked Feng talked at three times the speed of a normal human, and had said something weird about puppies as wedding gifts. Jack chalked it up to stress, and maybe a bout of mania. Another part of him wondered if puppies were an acceptable gift, because that sounded better than a crystal candy dish or a toaster. Though maybe he could finally get that toaster story out of you...

Gabriel sighed. "I'm not surprised. I bet Lucky's thrilled. She is hilariously overprotective."

Jack remembered cradling a surprisingly light bundle of feathers and teeth, telling her to look after you. An absurd amount of guilt clumped together in his chest. If he hadn't said that, would she still have snuck off onto a very dangerous mission? Should he be burdening Gabriel with these concerns right before a combat run?

"Stop fretting," Gabriel said, with an aggravated eyeroll.

Jack smiled weakly, because Gabriel could always read him like a book, probably a comic book with more sound effect bubbles than dialogue.

"That damn raptor likes being in the middle of things. I don't know if you've had a chance to see her during her in combat training, but she's quick," Gabriel said. "And she can take care of herself. She's not a puppy or a chicken, Jack. She's an accomplished thief. She can navigate
computer screens. She plucks out eyeballs."

"...Yeah," Jack shook his head, a little comforted by that graphic description. "But she's still our little death chicken. All cuddly and cute."

Gabriel snorted. "You're ridiculous, farm boy."

"I know," Jack said. "Sorry, I'm trying not to throw you off."

"Shut up," Gabriel murmured, kissing him. "We all know it's risky. We all know there are good reasons to be worried. And there's nothing wrong with you being anxious, Jack. I know you have to keep it behind closed doors, but you don't have to hide it from me or her."

Swallowing, Jack managed a lopsided smile. "I just can't shake the feeling that something's off. It's just nerves, I know. Maybe I'm going soft."

Gabriel chuckled, squeezing his thigh. Jack felt his cock twitch, and inhaled sharply as the other man nipped his ear.

"No, amor, nothing soft here."

"Gabe-"

"Just got geared up, Jack. As much as I'd like to bend you over the couch, I have to go soon."

"Tease," Jack muttered, without any heat. "Seriously, Gabe. I hate sending you out there, while I stay here where it's safe. Hate standing by doing nothing. I should be there with you both."

Gabriel nodded. "Yeah. I get that."

"But the Strike Commander can't go on wetworks runs. Can't follow his whims. Can't break ranks for the sake of discipline and morale," Jack said, jaw tight. There were more rules, namely "can't be romantically involved with a subordinate and the head of Blackwatch," and more importantly "can't kill Director Petras for being an utter piece of human garbage." The job restriction were really starting to grate on him.

"I suppose you could put on that mask and join us."

Jack perked up.

"-But Ana would murder us both when you got back and then we couldn't take any nice Shanghai vacations," Gabriel sighed.

"I know. I'm supposed to be in Geneva to deal with some...political issues," Jack said. "Yeah, Ana wouldn't be too happy if I ditched that to come with you." He was so very tempted to do it anyway. "It didn't used to be this difficult."

"We've had a lot of close calls lately," Gabriel said, kissing Jack's neck. "And losing people, especially ones we love, reminds us what's really important."

Jack nodded, Mateo Rodriguez's shroud-covered body still fresh in his mind. "Sorry, Gabe. You shouldn't have to comfort me. You're the one-"

Gabriel tapped a finger against Jack's lips. "Out there, it's different. I know that all too well. But you know that you never have to pretend with me. I'd say the same thing is true about Lucky."
She doesn't need the illusion of the constantly unflappable Strike Commander either. In fact, I think she kind of dislikes that guy. He's a prick."

Jack snorted. "You're one to talk."

"He is a prick, but a sexy sexy prick," Gabriel teased. "I like reminding him who's really in charge." Gabriel swooped in, taking another kiss, those coffee dark eyes warm and soft.

Jack chuckled, kissing Gabriel's nose. "Oh, so you want the Strike Commander gig back?"

"Fuck no," Gabriel laughed. "I've seen how much paperwork you get. Besides, you look better in blue anyway."

"I look pretty good in black and red too," Jack said, the familiar banter easing his heart. "And you can just delegate the paperwork. Lucky is pretty good at it."

"Get your own assistant. I saw her first." Gabriel nipped the back of his neck and Jack yelped.

"Hey!"

"I don't mind sharing lovers, amor, but a reliable personal assistant is another matter entirely. I need her to do my work, not yours."

Jack rolled his eyes. Gabe hated paperwork as much as he did, so the attitude didn't surprise him. "Maybe I'll ask Ana."

There was a long pause, Jack looking into Gabriel's warm dark eyes, fingers twined with his, and then both men doubled over with laughter.

"She'll destroy you," Gabriel chuckled. "As your black ops adviser I would strongly recommend against antagonizing her. It will be your closed casket funeral or mysterious disappearance."

"She's gotten better," Jack said. "More velvet glove on her iron gauntlet." Ana had always been a tough love kind of comrade, sometimes brusquer than she needed to be, as her harshness had the potential to be truly devastating. She had a different sort of charisma than Jack, and over the past several years, she'd grown more skillful at wielding it. "She'll help if I ask her to," Jack said. "Mostly out of pity, but I'll take what I can get."

"Ana would probably help you, since it's you," Gabriel agreed. "But we all know that's a waste of her talents."

"She's already supervising the Middle Eastern and North African operations, and handling some of the PR stuff requires more...finesse," Jack said, because Reinhardt wasn't suited for every public speaking situation. "I hate to add to her workload. I mean, what kind of leader am I if-"

Gabriel squeezed Jack's hand just a little too hard. "Stop that. I know we don't agree on everything, and that I can be very critical, but you do good work, Jack. Always have. Now's not the time to start doubting yourself."

Jack sat there, leaning against Gabriel's warmth. His lover's heartbeat was a soothing sound, one he never took for granted. Jack may have been the one to gave rousing speeches that rallied the masses, but Gabriel was the eloquent one, always imbuing his words with layers of meaning that could comfort a soul or devastate it. "Thanks. That means a lot, especially since I'm feeling a little
shaky right now.

"It was never easy sending you or any of the others out when I had to stay behind..." Gabriel shook his head. "But it's more than a job, it's a duty. We signed up for it, though maybe we didn't really know what we were getting into. We took the damage, so others didn't have to. And every time someone didn't make it back..." Gabriel shook his head. "Fault and responsibility, Jack. As long as we do this, we'll always be having that fight with ourselves and trying to balance those scales."

Gabriel rose and straddled Jack's lap, his fingers kneading Jack's shoulders.

"I love you," Jack murmured, staring into Gabriel's face, fingers tracing the scars on his cheeks. "Take care of yourself and come back home to me, all right?"

"Te amo también," Gabriel leaned over and kissed him hard, beard brushing against his skin. "You take care of the politics. I'll take care of the problematic people. Lucky'll do something questionable, but effective. And we'll all be back together in no time."

Chapter End Notes

So many revisions to do. I don't want to rush the ending. Need it to be polished.

Wrist are getting better. Too bad I have a dragon obsession.

Happy birthday Ugandan Knuckles Anon! You are the worst and the dankest of memelords.

I have international family visiting this week. Unfortunately that means I have to deal with local family, and I swear to you it's like an Abbot & Costello skit. I had to explain the same thing five times to two different people in the same phone call because they don't listen. I like these visiting family members, but after a week of dealing with my local family, I'm no longer looking forward to this visit. (They're going to want to pretend like we all like each other and are super close, and we don't. And we're not.) Oh well, I have seen my favorite Aunt in probably at least seven years, maybe ten? I don't remember. She's the one who took me places in Japan and gave me spending money (because my parents didn't.) So when her son came over 8 years ago, I took him shooting, riding, and to the drag shows (and bought him a bunch of books, some of them porn), because that's how you show your gratitude.

The cat is aggressively nesting in my lap while I type, and if I don't pay attention to him, he attacks my pens and drink. Or he starts typing on my keyboard. Or he gets on the desk and blocks the screen. There is no winning.
Chapter 118

Chapter Summary

Blackwatch isn't bad at teamwork.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Ziv and the Shimadas are already in place," Lacroix said, lighting up a cigarette as he looked up from his heavily encrypted tablet. "Gabriel's team left Siem Reap an hour ago. We should get moving soon."

You sat cross-legged on the floor, finishing off your pan-fried rice noodles and another cup of that sweet Vietnamese coffee. You and Isha were loading up on carbs before tonight's run. Lacroix had barely touched his dinner. Over time, you'd picked up that he didn't like to eat before missions, but he would be politely ravenous afterward. You understood - sometimes adrenaline made you sick to your stomach. No one wanted to put on body armor and feel queasy.

But Lacroix would not be able to relax until the mission was well underway. Every bit of progress, each problem solved, reassured him that he had a handle on the situation, that his plans were falling into place. Underneath his poise and clever quips, Lacroix was as much of a control freak as anyone else in the top echelons of military organization. You understood.

Isha sniffed, gave Lacroix and his cigarette a dirty look, and carried her plate farther away. You laughed as she hurriedly ate her rice vermicelli and grilled pork before the smoke could further contaminate it.

Several of Nguyen's civilian workers had left the compound early today, felled by a bouts of violent diarrhea. From what Lacroix could gather from his sources, it had affected several of the daytime security personnel as well, though how severely, he wasn't sure. At the very least, you hoped to thin their ranks for the evening.

The city was comfortably cool, but humid, feeling more like Swiss spring than winter. You slipped on your armor over your stealth suit, checked your carbine, and adjusted your collar. Your prosthetic attachments were all offensive: blade, EMP, and sedative. You carried your wakizashi and your carbine on your back, your tanto and Vo's carefully-packed bombs on your belt. Then you helped Isha secure her vest. It was lightweight, the same construct as your armor, and fitted to her form. She held still while you attached the camera collar and the metal tips to her front claws and her sickle claw, her blue eyes practically glowing in delight.

"This is a stealth mission," you reminded her. "We have to be quiet."

She rested her both of hands on top of her snout, giving you an amused look. Yeah, you knew she understood how to be sneaky, especially after that stowaway stunt she pulled, but it didn't hurt to remind her.

Lacroix wore a stealth suit as well, and sleek black combat armor, lightweight like your own. He carried a pistol on his belt and a submachine gun on his back. The "pray and spray"
method didn't seem to fit his style, but you'd never seen Lacroix perform in straight combat.

You checked his armor seals and he returned the favor, tightening your wakizashi strap. You put on a light jacket, and your backpack. Lacroix did the same, each of you carrying an armed fish torpedo.

"Chicken camouflage," you told Isha as you placed her in the large bamboo cage.

Quickly, she tucked her head and folded her wings.

Lacroix took a moment to look around the flat, shut off the lights, and you left as quietly as you had come. He led you down a narrow alleyway, knelt in front of a raised manhole, and pried it open. He climbed down the ladder and you followed, clutching Isha's cage tightly in one hand.

Though the temperature was mild, the air was a fetid mix of rot and worse smells. Lacroix flicked on a torch, giving you clear view of the brackish sludge flowing through the stone channels. You tried not to look too closely into the stew.

The sewers connected to an abandoned Metro tunnel via an old service tunnel, which would lead you straight under the walls and into Nguyen's compound. There would be guards stationed near the tunnels. You had to eliminate them quickly and quietly.

Lacroix found the hatch immediately, and you glanced at the surrounding rubble. It had been moved recently.

"Did you hire someone to excavate it? Or do you think we're going to have company?"

"I came here the other day while you were infiltrating the compound, to ensure the route was clear. No one else has disturbed the site." He didn't look up, carefully pulling the hatch open.

He climbed through first, shining his light. "Some of the supports are damaged. The ground looks stable and dry, but it'd be best to avoid a firefight here. Air is as clean as we can expect down here. Switching to night vision and stealth." Lacroix's voice was distant and professional, none of his usual smug humor. The flashlight abruptly shut off.

It was now pitch black. You turned on the stealth suit and slipped on the night vision visor: there wasn't much to see in the tunnel as you crawled through. It opened up into a wider tunnel with easily four meters of clearance - plenty of space to move. Still following Lacroix, you took a moment to orient yourself. You were heading south, your destination the northwestern lab building. Genji and Hanzo would be taking Ziv in from above, probably over a wall with their ninja tricks, their destination the northeastern lab. Gabriel and the fire team would be coming in from the southern entrance, making just enough noise to hold their attention.

The cool stale air and enclosed darkness rekindled old feelings, that you struggled to tamp down. You walked at a fast pace behind Lacroix, the terrain uneven, the tunnel quiet, but for the sound of your own breathing. This was nothing like Greece, grief and poison choking out rational thought. This was more like Budapest, an echo of your fears, cutting across your nerves like a cold wind. You could hear the sounds of the city in the distance. No omnics scraping at the rocks. No broken bones and shell-shocked soldiers. No ghosts from your past. You were fine.

Taking a deep breath you scanned the distance. There was a glaring blindspot up ahead. Raising your visor, you saw cool white spotlight shining on your path. Both you and Lacroix stopped.

"Checkpoint?" You blinked. "Down here?"
"Probably guarding the entrance as an escape route," Lacroix said. "Nguyen would be foolish not to station someone on the tunnels."

You had hoped she wouldn't be concerned with the tunnels, but you had expected her to be aware of their existence and to have taken some precautions. You switched from night vision to binoculars on your visor, zooming in to see turrets and a cyborg guard patrolling in front of a large metal door. The tunnel remained about the same size, without much cover. You wouldn't be able to charge them. You needed the turrets disabled and the cyborg dead before any alarm could be raised.

Silently, you reviewed your options. There would be security cameras, and if you destroyed any of the tech, engineers would notice the power failure and investigate.

You could call Athena in early to overload the power or bring down specific grids, but you would risk early detection due to Athena's large and reportedly distinct power signature. You could wait till Gabriel's fire team was ready to move, though you had planned to be in the compound first, so you could help direct them and reroute security measures. You could toss an EMP grenade, quickly take out the guards, and hope that no one investigated the downed section immediately. Well, you could capture one and force them to report in "all clear." But that was a big gamble. You needed to disable everything immediately, and keep the pretense going through ad-libbing. You could try another route, maybe backtrack through the sewers, but that would waste valuable time.

"There are two turrets, one guard, and a single camera," Lacroix said. "How would you prefer to tip our hand?"

"I want Athena in their network and they might shut things down if she's detected early, so I'm willing to do this the hard way," you said.

"Risky," Lacroix murmured. "We could wait for the fire team to draw security's attention."

"Riskier. They're counting on us to help disable some of the automated security. Can't do that out here. This is a manageable amount of enemy forces." You'd both discussed this scenario before, but you didn't mind a quick field review.

"All right then," Lacroix said. "Pass me an EMP grenade. You're better equipped to snipe the guard. We'll blackout the cameras, monitor their comms, and hope they are too short-handed to investigate immediately."

Clinging to the shadows, you opened the bamboo cage. "Stay back and keep quiet," you said.

Isha stretched as soon as she got out of the cage, the only sound was her wings fluttering softly and she headbutted you gently. You took a moment to pat her cheek and then crept forward.

It was a just a single reinforced metal door with a camera overhead, turrets on either side, and spotlights next to the turrets. All of it rested on a concrete platform that abruptly terminated a few meters out. The cyborg paced in front of the door, gun at his hip.

Kneeling in the dirt, you braced your carbine, lining up your sights and breathing evenly. Lacroix held your EMP grenade, his eyes forward.

"On my count," you whispered. "One." Your hand wobbled slightly as you centered on the cyborg's forehead. "Two." You hovered there, finger beginning to pull back on the trigger. Lacroix
stood almost too close, arm poised to make the throw. "Three," you said, as you finished the motion, the crack of the gunshot filling the space in the sequence where "three and a half" would be.

The lights flickered, and as everything plunged into darkness, you felt Lacroix rushing past you. Night vision back on, you followed. The cyborg had dropped where he stood and you crouched over him, examining what was left of his face. It was a neat shot above the right eye, and he was quite dead.

Lacroix had already torn the wires out of one turret and was working on the second. You went up to the door, pulled the spray paint off your utility belt, and covered the camera lens. Then you went back to the dead guard, and picked up his earpiece. It crackled.

"Strickland?"

Lacroix was suddenly beside you. He took the comm. "Power cut out," he mumbled with a surprisingly convincing American accent, his voice an octave lower.

"You OK, soldier? You sound a little rough."

"Hit my head fiddlin' with the lights. Thought it'd be an easy fix," Lacroix lied smoothly, his twanging American accent weirding you out.

"Damnit, Strickland, that's not our job. You stay put. We'll get a spare tech down there when we can. All the civvies are out sick and that's a cakewalk post. Hope you ain't scared of the dark." The voice on the other end laughed and abruptly cut out.

You gave a Lacroix a surprised look, then pulled Strickland's ID badge. The scanner was down, so the electric lock was disabled. There was still a large manual deadbolt, and you examined it, got your picks off your belt, and began to work.

A few minutes later, you pulled on the door, and it popped open, slivers warm yellow light leaking into the darkened tunnel. Very carefully, you peered around the cracked door, and saw an empty metal-lined hallway. It was narrower than you expected, and you searched for cameras and traps.

"Looks clear."

Lacroix stepped into the hall.

"On my six," you said, gesturing for Isha to follow, and when you looked down, she was at your feet, claws raised, poised to advance.

"Such a clever girl," Lacroix laughed. "And Isha, you are quite impressive too."

Isha nodded solemnly, as she continuously scanned the area for threats.

Lacroix laughed to himself, and you rolled your eyes as you followed him into Nguyen's base.

"I can't climb that in under a minute," Mihret hissed. "Maybe if we had grappling hooks, rappelling gear, and safety harnesses-"
"I guess we're leaving you behind then," Genji said casually, leaning against the alley wall like a punk. Hanzo had a flash of memory - neon lights, the narrow street behind yet another seedy Roppongi night club, Genji in a loud suit with his "friends" laughing too loudly, drinking too much, passing cigarettes back and forth. Hanzo had been there to drag his bother back home. To lecture him on propriety.

It wasn't a good memory, and Hanzo shook his head. This was nothing like before. The three men huddled in the narrow gap between two tenement buildings, eyeing the compound walls.

Hanzo exhaled slowly, rubbing his brow. He needed to remain focused. Was this the hiccup in the plan? Mihret's inability to scale a wall in a timely manner? Or was it the constant bickering between Genji and Mihret? The two younger men never seemed to tire of sniping at each other. And when he made the mistake of trying to intervene, they both turned their ire on him. He could think of only one peaceful solution. "I'll carry him," he said.

"What?" Genji and Mihret asked simultaneously.

"I said, I can carry you over the wall," Hanzo repeated slowly, making sure his words were in English.

There was an awkward moment of silence. Genji blinked at him. Mihret squinted, his expression incredulous.

"Pay up," Genji said, as he turned to Mihret. "I told you he'd offer."

Mihret scowled at his brother. "I didn't lose the bet! You said he'd try to throw me over!"

Hanzo rested his face in his hand, wondering how you and Commander Reyes tolerated these two miscreants.

"No, I said he'd take care of it," Genji said, sounding amused. "I didn't specify how, I just made a few suggestions-"

Hanzo drew an arrow, tied a rope to it, and fired it into the top of the wall. The arrow lodged into the concrete, rope dangling less than two meters above the ground.

"...That would work too," Mihret said, his eyes big. "Or Genji can carry me."

"Yes, but he might drop you on purpose, and then Lucky will be very upset," Hanzo said.

"Was he...joking?" Mihret asked, elbowing Genji.

"Twice in one night, brother? Are you feeling well?" Genji asked.

Hanzo just sighed and slipped out of the alley. Not looking back, he scaled the wall, taking a moment to check how secure the arrow was. It could hold Mihret's weight, but he decided not to risk it. He could just take the rope and pull Mihret directly up. It would probably be safer that way.

Seconds later, Genji was at his side, Mihret's long sinewy arms around his brother's neck, the younger ninja giving the hacker a piggyback ride. The three men stood atop the half-meter thick wall, looking down at the grounds.

"We need to move," Genji said. "We don't have all night."
Hanzo gave him a disgruntled look. He wasn't the one goofing off.


Gabriel and Diallo sat in the back of the "stolen" delivery van. She was in full power armor, positioned closest to the doors. Two sheep-sized drones waited in the back with them. Tataryn wore the red and yellow courier uniform over his armor as he slowly drove through the checkpoint, Jesse also in the uniform, in the passenger seat.

Tataryn pulled up behind the central building, where the power station and armory were situated.

There was a rap on the window.

"You can't stop here. You need to mov-"

Tataryn's arm shot out. Metal flashed. Someone gurgled and there was a soft thud as a body hit the ground. Tataryn made no move to retrieve it.

"Sorry about the mess, boss. They're going to notice something soon. Orders?" Tataryn turned around, his smile remorseless, as he wiped his bloody knife off on the stolen uniform trousers.

Gabriel smiled back. "That was the point of this exercise. Get ready to move. I'll give the signal." He manually unlocked the drones, and they powered up immediately, probably lighting up all of Nguyen's cyber security protocols. "It's time," he said to Athena.

Jesse drew his revolvers. Tataryn slipped out of the van, an oily shadow in the darkness. Diallo kicked open the back doors, her rail gun already charging up.

Smiling savagely, Gabriel followed her.

Your Athena drones buzzed softly in your bags. Crouched in the hall of the third basement level, you released them. Lights glowing faintly, they hovered beside you, guns whining as they warmed up.

"Encrypted comms transmission incoming," Athena said.

"This is Cerberus." Gabriel's voice crackled over your earpiece. "Goblin has checked in and his team is maintaining radio silence. Coyote, Wechuge, check in."

You partially suspected Ziv was ordered to stay quiet because Gabriel didn't want to him complain about his code name. Ziv wasn't the only one with complaints. You'd had time to look up "Wechuge" and found it to be the Dane-zaa equivalent of the Wendigo legend. Someone thought he was funny.

"We're in place," Lacroix said. "One of the original infiltration drones didn't survive, but the
"Athena, you have free reign over there; however you wish to maintain a diversion," Gabriel said. "Talos, take care of those turrets and keep their attention. Minotaur, give her cover fire. Siren, move the van closer to the target. Commencing Active Phase of Operation Tarasque. Cerberus out."

You sighed, because your lover was a classically-educated comedian.

Lacroix shook his head, his smile faint. "Athena, what's your read on security?"

"Half strength partially due to severe gastrointestinal distress."

You smirked at Lacroix, because that part had been your idea. He pretended not notice.

"Most of the guards are concentrated in the barracks and are starting to converge on the power station," Athena continued. "Cerberus' team has taken cover inside. My combat models are...maintaining. For the future, I will put in a request for heavier shield-bearing additions for defensive purposes."

"Don't tell me you want to be like Reinhardt too," you muttered.

"What's wrong with Commander Wilhelm?" Athena asked.

"Nothing. He is daring and very admirable, but perhaps not the most responsible role model," Lacroix said with a smile.

"I'm running customized security subroutines on these drones," Athena said. "But my main focus will be on aiding Goblin's breach and maximizing the diversion in the southwest fabrication plant."

"Roger that," you said.

"We'll request aid when we reach a closed system," Lacroix said, because there supposedly a few security nodes in these labs that corresponded with the defenses around the power station. He nodded at you. "Wechuge?"

"Yes, Wile E?"

"Be serious," Lacroix said, rolling his eyes. "We need to move. I'll take point. Isha, stay in cover."

Guns drawn, you moved through the hallways, to the stairwell. Nguyen's quarters were on the top floor. You had eight stories to go, and who knows what waited for you in the space between?

"Goblin, if you could shut off the aerial drones or at least repurpose air defenses in our location, that would be helpful," Gabriel said over the comms.

There wasn't a response, as Ziv was meant to maintain silence, but you could picture his vitriolic real time answer and Lacroix chuckled softly, his mind probably going in the same direction as yours.

"There is a backup power node on the next floor; it is linked to many of the western campus security features," Athena chimed in, thankfully only speaking with one drone. "I classify
it as high priority as it would greatly help Cerberus' team if you destroyed it. It does have moderate defenses."

"How many such sites have you detected in our proximity?"

"There are three significant nodes, though one is located in the target's residential quarters."

Lacroix nodded. "We'll take care of it. Isha, you stay behind Athena."

Isha gave the drones a skeptical look. She tapped her camera collar.

"She might be safer, and more useful in the vents. I can monitor her," Athena said.

Lacroix looked back at you.

"Yeah, OK," you said. You weren't sure about how useful she'd be, but you knew you needed to keep her out of the line of fire. Athena pointed out a nearby air exchange, and you unscrewed the grate cover and inspected the shaft. "No contact. Just surveillance," you told her.

Bobbing her head, she crept into the vent.

"Camera is on and linked to my feed," Athena announced.

There was an odd rumble and you instinctively looked down at your stomach, except you felt nothing. It came again and you glanced over at Lacroix. He sighed and shook his head, cradling his SMG in one arm, his expression almost sheepish.

"I told you to eat."

"I had breakfast, Chanceux. I am fine," he said. His stomach rumbled again. "I suppose I could have had something light."

You offered him a chocolate bar, but he shook his head. "I can wait. I am not like you. Hunger doesn't make me that much more dangerous."

"Isha has eyes on the targets," Athena announced. "The control room has four guards and one engineer. The engineer is armed. I can bypass the lockdown if necessary."

"I can maintain suppressing fire: you sharp shoot," Lacroix told you.

You nodded. "Athena, get Isha out of there. Things are going to get hot."

The buildings were modular, the floor plans formed a loop, with each building having at least two staircases, though some did not stretch the full length, truncating at the ground floor. The gunmetal walls reminded you a little of On Sing's unfinished mountain basement, but overall the decor was very "military industrial complex in repeat." It was strange how...banal your adversary's home base was.

"Is something wrong?" Lacroix asked.

"It's kind of plain. I was expecting an atrocity lab around here, with more dead bodies and maybe some skull decor and impaled corpses."

"That's where we sent Ziv's team," Lacroix said with a crooked smile. "She may keep her pits of sharks, loose tigers, and heads on pikes in that facility. This is her main cybernetics lab and
her residence. Not a lot of people want to commit their most heinous crimes where they live - it's bad for sanitation."

"...Fair," you said. "But given what I know about her, I guess I was expecting something more horrifying. This is just...meh." You gave a little shrug.

"True; these quarters don't really reflect the character of its occupants. It's a shame. She always had an eye for aesthetics, but her priorities have changed," Lacroix said wistfully, and you knew better than to believe his misinterpretation. In real life, evil people rarely resided in ancient fortresses, surrounded by gibbets and oversized crows. No, the real villains lived in palatial mansions, luxurious modern sky rises, and hi-tech compounds, like this one, donning respectability like camouflage.

The power relay was in the center of the level, striped panels and signs in multiple languages warned of the "danger." The double doors were closed.

Lacroix crouched down while you hugged the walls. He glanced at you, then Athena.

"Isha is clear," the drone announced.

Lacroix nodded and the doors slid open. Two startled cyborgs were already moving toward you, investigating the disturbance. Lacroix raised his gun and began to fire at an alarming speed. His gun was louder than you expected, a vicious pounding rhythm that had you moving half a step faster. The hail of bullets tore through the room, and you sniped one cyborg as she raised her gun, the other one jerking violently on his feet as he absorbed dozens of rounds from Lacroix.

Glass shattered. Machines cracked, splintered, and sparked. One Athena drone fired as Lacroix moved forward, taking cover behind a terminal on the left side of the room. You went right, spotting a large man with a pulse rifle, his attention on Lacroix. You lined up the angles and pulled the trigger, putting three bullets into him in rapid succession.

More shots rang out, return fire dimpling the walls as a crouching Lacroix raised his gun overhead and swept it across the room in an arc. It was a haphazard move, but in such close quarters, the bullet rain proved deadly. The engineer lay slumped over her terminal and you scanned the room for the final cyborg.

Lacroix spun to the side, firing several more shots. The smoking, leaking body of the last hostile dropped on the ground with a heavy thud.

You advanced, leading with your gun as you checked the bodies, weaving between transformers and generators. "Clear!" You shouted, when you reached the other side of the room, those double doors firmly shut and riddled with bullets.

"Clear," Lacroix acknowledged, standing parallel to you. He headed back for the control terminal and carefully moved the engineer's body. "Athena, if you want to take over-

One drone fired directly into a single transformer, showering the corner of room in more sparks. The other plugged into the damaged, but still functioning terminal.

"Rerouting power to Cerberus' position," Athena announced. "Initiating tertiary power grid takeover, and redirecting resources to Ziv's hacked turrets. Unfortunately, building security is now aware of an internal disturbance. Fortunately, most of them have already been diverted so handle Cerberus."

"Let's move," you said, quickly exiting the way you came, because obviously this was not a
particularly defensible location.

Isha joined you in the hallway, chirping excitedly, studying Lacroix's gun with greedy eyes. You winced, not liking that thread of ideas at all. But that was a problem for another day.

Shaking your head, you made your way back to the stairwell. You needed to move fast now. You couldn't give Nguyen any chance to escape.

The first batch had been basic-model cyborgs with minimal upgrades. Gabriel could slaughter them all day and not break a sweat. But the reinforcements had been trickier: they had better gear and understood tactics, keeping their distance from his shotguns and sniping cautiously from the safety of solid cover. His weapons weren't nearly as effective at long range. Diallo had planted herself in the entranceway, and was keeping them at bay. Tataryn stayed with her, providing support.

Gabriel had taken point, the central power plant his primary target. His shotguns were much more useful in these narrow hallways. The kid stuck to his side, spinning his revolver and grinning like a fool, that damn hat tilted at a cocky angle.

Athena's largest drone hovered by him, a reminder that she was controlling no less than six bodies independently, as well as helping to maintain their comm lines, tech security, and tunnel into enemy cyber defenses on top of what she was doing back home. How could you trust something *that* powerful? And how did you take it down when it went bad? It was an age-old question, and Gabriel wasn't going to let himself be distracted by it right now. Up ahead were four people in Vishkar colors, equipped with those bulky hard light projectors on their arms.

The air sizzled, and Gabriel swore as a brilliant ribbon of light shot past his ear. Another bright tentacle snapped at Jesse, and both men began to return fire. Domes of light flared under the impact of bullets and buckshot, stopping the projectiles in midair. Two for shielding, two for precision offense, but the wielders looked too young, barely out of their teens. Gabriel had fought the prototypes in Hong Kong. And he knew that those fancy shields couldn't hold out forever.

"Are we even making a dent, boss?" Jesse shouted. The kid had been briefed on hard light and its field applications, but this was his first field encounter. Gabriel wasn't worried, the boy would be fine.

"We're wearing them down!" Gabriel said, watching a dark skinned woman grit her teeth and brace her arms, sweat dripping down her brow as the shields flickered. "Keep it up!"

"You got it!"

Another tendril of light slapped into his armor, scorching the plate. Snarling, Gabriel racked his shotguns and kept firing. This kind of effort was impressive, however they were tiring already. But him? He was just getting started. Shotguns roaring, Gabriel laughed. It was good to be back in the field.

You'd encountered a few pockets of resistance, shooting through automated defenses and isolated pairs of patrolling guards. The civilian workers weren't sticking around to fight: there were panic rooms on some floors, and you were fine leaving the occupants alone. It surprised you a
little that Lacroix didn't insist on inspecting them for useful prisoners, but your team was here for one reason: Nguyen. She had her own secure quarters, and for whatever reason, Lacroix was convinced you would find her there.

Sweaty, despite the air conditioning, you worried, more than you wanted to admit, over how Gabriel was holding up. There'd been little more communication between your groups, Gabriel's teams having split up to secure the power plant. Isha wasn't dragging at all, but she wasn't bouncing any more either. You gave her a ration bar, knowing her metabolism burned through calories much faster than yours.

Lacroix has been disturbingly quiet, his expression carefully blank. There was little of the usual barbed banter, and you wondered if Vo was right. If Lacroix was too sentimental. That was hard to picture, but Vo's secrets and Lacroix's feelings were uncharted territory: you knew better than to just assume. It didn't matter though. If it came down to it, you would finish things.

Running up another flight of stairs, you arrived at the third floor. You had to make another stop here: Athena claimed there was critical data on a closed server, and she too had been very business-like, none of her usual off the wall questions. But she was operating at least six different drone bodies and managing your cybersecurity.

The lab had one of those open floor plans with glass walls and several large computer stations. There were a several plants in hanging baskets and sitting on the desks. A mural of the Milky Way galaxy covered an entire wall. Not the worst office you'd broken into, and then you heard the clicking.

It was the size of a sheep, with six fully articulated legs, two full metal claws, one much larger than the other, and a two meter long tail arching over its wide flat body. Gray omnium body, with green lights, and an oddly anatomically incorrect neon green smiling face painted on with loving flourish, the scorpion drone clicked its asymmetrical claws at you.

"...Goddamnit," you sighed.

Lacroix chuckled. "Oh, that's new."

Something inside the tail began to whine, gears grinding as a motor heated up.

"Lucky, that's a combat model and you need to keep it away from the server while I complete the transfer!"

"Really? I thought it was a hospitality omnic!" You snorted. "Isha, cover!" You raised your gun, and swore as a stream of bullets cut through the desk in front of you. You dodged sideways, one eye on Isha as you fired at its legs, hoping to cripple it. The tail twitched, gun temporarily shutting off as it recalibrated its aim.

There was another "click click" noise, and you groaned, as a neon pink model approached from the other side.

Athena was in a corner, already connected to the server. Isha had climbed a shelf, blue eyes narrowed as she watched you and Lacroix began to shoot. He had to be more judicious with his bullet spray in here.

The scorpion omnics scuttled sideways, taking cover under desks and chairs, returning rapid fire shots. You overturned a table, glancing at Lacroix. The omnics were not showering this place in bullets, which made you think they were programmed to minimize property damage. But
you weren't going to bet your life on it. Your pulse carbine whined as you sniped, trying to find a weak spot. Those legs had so many moving parts, but there were six of them. With the scorpions weaving in and out of cover, you didn't have time to see how many legs they actually needed. You targeted the tail on the green one, aiming for an articulated segment.

Five shots later, the tail was wiggling on the ground, the metal stump smoking as you turned your head to check on Lacroix. The pink one flailed on the ground, several of its legs smashed as it tried to aim at him. But he danced around it, zipping between chairs and over desks as he whittled away at it. Apparently, they really were very hesitant to hit any of the work stations.

There was a clang as something crashed into your table barrier. The large metal claw tore through the makeshift barricade and you swore as the smaller one snapped at your feet. Rolling backward, you yanked your EMP baton from your belt, extended it, and brought it down on the eternally smiling face. You squeezed the pulse button, until sparks flew and you broke the connection.

"CPU is at the base of the tail," Athena informed you.

A claw weakly grasped at your baton and you shook it free, jamming the rod back into the CPU housing and turning up the power. The omnic began to smoke and you glanced over at Lacroix who sat on top of a desk, lighting a cigarette, his gaze amused. The pink scorpion lay in half a dozen pieces, like an unfinished kit model, tossed aside by a frustrated kid.

"Are you almost done?" He asked, blowing out smoke rings.

You kicked the fried omnic out of the way, wrinkling your nose at the smell of melted circuitry. Holstering the baton, you raised your gun and put three more shots through the processor, just to be safe.

You looked over at Isha who had hopped off her perch, her gaze on your EMP baton. You had the sudden suspicion that you were going to need to lock your weapons up when they weren't in use.

An Athena drone floated over the scrapped scorpions. "We should move. I'm going to leave one unit here to finish the transfer and provide extra support to Goblin's team."

"Whatever you think best," you said, and found that you believed it.

Athena hovered there. "Do you think maybe Winston could build me a body like that? While I'm curious about bipedal life, that looks like an incredible lesson in other varieties of locomotion."

You blinked. "You want to be...a robot scorpion?"

"With hard light cannons and pulse guns instead of claws," she said. "Also, I would the model to be Overwatch Blue with our insignia one the tail and a more attractive finish. Something with texture."

"...I see," you said, squinting at her.

Lacroix just chuckled. "You should consider an arachnid body, Athena. It will cause quite a scene."

"Oh, that is valuable insight. Perhaps he will be able to build both," Athena said.
You felt Isha poking at your belt and you immediately reached down to check and see if your baton was still there, and it was. Isha headbutted you, chirping happily as you reached over to scratch her head. "All right, you're both freaking me out. I'm ready to go fight the bad guys now."

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter to tide you over: next week might not have an update because I am traveling. I am literally getting ready to leave for the airport. I have so much anxiety and it's not rational, though fat cat has been acting a little sick...

I'll be fine once I'm traveling, but I do it so infrequently I always get nervous about my pets. I have hired teen!cousin to spend the weekend with them. He's done it many times, and is very responsible. Roommate!Cousin is also here. I am just neurotic.

Hope everyone is doing well! I will try to answer comments later, but I won't have a computer till I get home. (I have a smart phone, but it's a pain in the wrist to write long comments on it...)
Chapter 119

Chapter Summary

Revelations: What happens here is a defining moment of your life, a culmination of your story, but this was never about you.

Chapter Notes

Broke 900k in the drafts awhile ago, I think?

Yumii has been a busy artist, a fashion designer, and a cosplayer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The stairwell to the fourth floor had been heavily mined, turrets hidden behind sandbag emplacements and, according to Athena, a custom designed nerve gas diffuser. Your party wasn't equipped to go that route. Maybe if you had Gabriel and Diallo with you, but they were still occupied at the central power station.

Isha scouted the vents, Athena reporting that there were heavy grates blocking her path.

"Break a window and scale the outer walls?" You asked, because you did not want to take the elevator.

"We did not bring appropriate climbing gear: that route will take too long, there are external defenses, and we will be sitting ducks," Lacroix said, staring thoughtfully at the elevator.

"I cannot guarantee that I can maintain control of the elevator equipment," Athena admitted. "It may be sabotaged already."

You blew out a breath. Great.

"She probably will not just drop us eight stories to our potential deaths," Lacroix mused, stroking his chin. "But she can be whimsical."

You weren't sure how to take that. It really didn't matter to you whom Nguyen was; you only cared about what she had done. You had learned about her personal history, purely because you needed to know your enemy. But you didn't care about her long career as an omnic rights activist, or a political prisoner, and her eventual ascent into politics. You didn't care that she was viewed quite favorably by her constituency, and even a role model for some. As far as you were concerned, Nguyen might have had good intentions in the beginning, but those ceased to have any meaning after what happened to your friends. None of that was whimsical.

Shaking your head, you crossed your arms, and stared upward, recalling a tactic Genji had shown you. "Athena, can you send the elevator down to the second floor, then move it again?"

"We are not elevator surfing," Lacroix said. "That can end just as poorly."
You blinked, unsure of why his mind had gone there. Maybe he had an incredibly graphic cautionary tale stemming from personal experience. But now was not the time to ask; you didn't need to unsettle yourself.

"Wrong direction. We're not riding in or on the elevator," you said. "We'll hitch along the counterweight frame. If Athena sends it down far enough, we should be clear to make the climb."

Lacroix stared at the elevator doors, head angled to the side. He stood in silence for half a minute. "We'll still be very vulnerable, Chanceux."

"Yeah," you agreed, wondering if you should have rappelled in onto the roof. There were AA guns and guards up there too, but the distance would have been shorter and you could have tried to take Nguyen immediately. No, that approach had already been judged as too risky. No point in second-guessing yourself now.

"Athena, you and Isha should find another way," Lacroix said.

"We may be able to use the external route," Athena said. "I can mask our heat signatures since we are smaller. It will be safer," she said, turning to face you.

It wasn't a hard call. You didn't like being separated from Isha, but you weren't going to expose her to more danger, if you could help it. "I need you to stay with Athena. So be good murder bird," you said, patting Isha's head. "And follow Athena's instructions, OK?"

Isha looked between you and Athena's drone, her bright blue eyes narrowed at you. But she bobbed her head once, a bit resentfully, though that could have been your imagination.

"Climb aboard," Athena said, dipping low to the ground.

Isha narrowed her eyes at you, but to your surprise, she clambered up the fish torpedo, her claws leaving gouge marks in the paint.

"Sorry-"

"No, this could work," Athena said, sounding oddly pleased as Isha balanced on her frame, holding on tight like she was getting a piggyback ride. "All right, I'm directing the elevator. You should have at least five minutes to get up two floors."

Prying the elevator doors open, you stared up at the darkened shaft, stretched your arms as you gripped a protruding safety bar, and began to climb.

"They've slowed down out here, boss!" Tataryn crackled over the comms.

"Good. Keep the route open, Siren," Gabriel said, firing his shotguns into the belly of OR-14. "Plenty of tin cans in here."

Jesse crouched behind the smoking ruins of some several weapons crates. Swearing violently, he returned fire, teeth gritted as he glowered at the approaching OR-14s. "I've got a bullet with your name on it!"

"They don't have names," Gabriel laughed.

"Sure they do!" Jesse snapped. "That there's Blender's Cousin. That's Athena's Secret
Admirer! And the rest of 'em are Goddamn Nightmare Fodder!"

Gabriel wiped the sweat from his brow, a taut grin on his face. "Bellyaching already?"

"Thought we was fighting cyborgs," Jesse snapped, his drawl growing thicker under fire. "Ain't got time for games, and these things just keep coming! We need to reach the power core! We're pinned down here and I ain't sure how many more hits Athena can take!"

Gabriel stared at the battered drone. They'd already lost one, and it would be optimal if Athena could reach the control center and seize control. But that was looking less and less likely. It was only a secondary goal - they were really here to hold the attention of the defensive forces - but Gabriel didn't make a habit of mediocrity.

"Siren, if you and Talos have everything under control, you can come our way. If you can't, it's not urgent. But we're pushing forward," Gabriel said.

"I've got this!" Diallo shouted.

"I'll be there soon," Tataryn said.

"We've got enough rust buckets to go around; I'll save you some," Gabriel said, reloading his shotguns.

Alternating between cables and the counterweight frame, you scaled the elevator shaft. Though it was only a short distance, it was more difficult than you expected, your muscles burning from the awkward positioning and strenuous climbing. Thankfully, your gloves had grips. You slipped more than once, your heart plummeting downward into the darkness, though the rest of your body did not. Those metal fingers dug in deep, but the irregular handholds required some uncomfortable contortions. Your boots caught in crevices, skewing your balance, but you dragged yourself up the rig, sadly aware that this wasn't even your worst idea ever.

Lacroix wasn't having any issues. He moved fast. Not like a Shimada, but far more gracefully than you. How did he make it look so effortless? Was he just good at everything? Ugh.

"Did you do parkour or something?" You asked, annoyed that you were admiring just how fluid his movements were.

"I studied gymnastics, ballet, fencing, savate, and yes, some parkour - but I only dabbled," he said breezily, pulling himself onto the target ledge with one arm. "Why? Did you want lessons?" He actually winked at you, before turning to focus on the door.

Grumbling, you scrambled up after him, managing to make it up to the ledge as he began to pry at a circuit panel. The double doors slid open, metal gliding slowly apart. You weren't sure what would be on the other side, and you raised your gun, arms now sore.

It was a futile gesture.

In the hallway stood half a dozen cyborgs, clad in full armor, in a staggered formation, their massive pulse rifles leveled at you and Lacroix. They had kinetic shields already set up, and you knew you wouldn't be able to wear them down fast enough. Your first thought was an odd measure of relief that Lacroix had sent Isha another way. Because you couldn't see a clean way out of this fight.
But the cyborgs didn't start shooting. Your gaze drifted past them, to the woman who stood at the end of the hall behind another set of protective barriers. She held a military posture, hands clasped behind her back, her stance ascetic. She was slender and shorter than you expected. Her white áo dài had red spider lilies embroidered along the skirt. You knew that face, it was one you'd stared at many times in photos, news broadcasts, and all manners of surveillance footage. This was the first time you got to see it through the scope of your rifle. Your finger drifted to the trigger, no conscious thought involved.

"Hold, Chanceux," Lacroix said, reminding you that if you started shooting, you might hit Nguyen, however you would definitely get him, and yourself, killed.

But in the back of your head, you saw Captain Patel's hunched form calmly preparing for her last stand, knowing that her squad was mostly dead and that she would never see her husband again. There was Shin's broken body splayed on the rec room floor, eyes staring unfocused into eternity. Lao's hopeless expression each time you sent her back to Talon, unable to save her... It would be worth it to wipe that bitch off the face of the planet, no matter the cost-

That wasn't true.

You caught yourself this time, knowing that you'd nearly been swept away in the moment, that while your feelings were justified, they were not smart. Just like you understood that you were all too willing to sacrifice your own wellbeing for the sake of the mission. But now you would not do that to Gabriel and Jack, or Ziv, Jesse, Amélie, and everyone else. It wasn't just you here. There was Lacroix to consider too. And if anyone got to hurt that smarmy son of bitch, it was going to be you.

You exhaled slowly, finger firmly planted on the trigger guard, the flesh pressed so tightly against the metal you could feel it through your gloves.

Nguyen was old, though she resembled a waning dowager empress more than anyone's grandmother. Her face was unlined- gene mods probably, but her hair was snow white and she wore it in a tight braid. She looked on with cool grim eyes; hair color aside, she could have been in her mid-forties, though you knew she was supposedly 76. Her bearing was aristocratic, and her full attention was on Lacroix.

You hated her so much, you could taste blood in your mouth - your own. In an effort to contain yourself, you'd bitten your lip hard.

She inclined her head to the side, and even if she was the shortest person present, she looked down on everyone. Her gaze passed over you, expression not changing at all. "As-tu amené, Guillard?" She asked, obviously surprised. "What am I supposed to do with her?" She switched to English, smiling viciously at you. "Or does it even matter to you? I know how you think. She helped you get this far; her usefulness is at an end."

You clenched your teeth, forcing yourself to keep your gaze straight ahead. Because as soon as they started shooting, you would have to throw yourself backward into the elevator shaft, and pray that you could grab onto a cable or protrusion and drag yourself to safety. They'd shoot down the shaft-you'd be a fish in the metaphorical barrel, but it was the best plan you could make on the spot.

"I thought you might like to meet the only person who can regularly coax Min into eating fruits and vegetables," Lacroix said lazily, not even looking at you.

Nguyen's head snapped back, like that was the last name she expected to hear. "You
presume that I care about the state of that *ungrateful*—" She squeezed the words out with toe-curling bitterness. "I don't keep track of every outcast that I've ever sheltered." Her voice cracked, weakening the force of her denial, and underneath, you saw the echo of something raw.

"Not just fruit," Lacroix continued, as if she hadn't spoken. "Fresh greens too. You certainly recall all the time we spent at the table threatening, cajoling, and bribing her to eat one accursed sweet potato—"

Nguyen laughed, though there was no humor in it. "You are not even trying to be subtle, and I suppose that in itself is a curiosity. I'll ask you again, why shouldn't I just kill her in front of you right now?"

"*Parce que elle est pour moi ce que je suis pour toi,*" Lacroix said, making his very casual defense of your life in French.

"*Un serpent sur ta poitrine? Un poignard dans le dos?*" She snapped back, her fury too visible for this exchange to be anything but personal.

"*Ma miséricorde,*" Lacroix said. "*Et elle est mon apprentie.*"

Anh Nguyen briefly glanced at you, barely sparing you a moment, before she returned her attention to Lacroix. "*Elle n’a pas de pitié.*" She looked back at your face, and you felt her judging your mussed hair, defensive posture, and every smudge of dirt on you. "*Comment est ton Français?*"

"Atrocious," Lacroix laughed, before you could say anything. Beside you, he pressed his thumb against his fingertips, and you got the hint. It would be better if she thought you couldn't understand their exchange.

Nguyen stared unblinking at you. "Put the gun down," she said, in English. "Slowly. Otherwise my soldiers might overreact."

Lacroix nodded at you, even as your eyes drifted toward the elevator shaft and you briefly tried to calculate your chances. Too slim. Lacroix set his SMG down on the floor and you placed your carbine beside it.

"Ensure they behave themselves," Nguyen said to her guards. "If they don't, shoot them in the knees. We can move on to softer tissue afterward."

The nearest cyborg grabbed your guns, even as Nguyen turned on her heel. "What does one more person matter?" She asked airily, not bothering to look back. "*Et elle ne parle même pas français.*"

The almost matronly disapproval would have made you laugh at any other time. Except you were staring very hard at her slender neck, thinking about what you would do when you got the chance...

"Just what kind of agents are they giving you to work with?" Nguyen asked, as if she had no idea that you were actively looking for a way to close the distance and kill her with your bare hands.

"Ones with raw, hidden talent," Lacroix said blithely.

"She seems like the type who will *always* have a great deal of potential."
Lacroix didn't laugh. He just shot you a warning look, like he was worried that you'd let your temper get the better of you.

You just shrugged. You didn't give a flying fuck what Nguyen thought of you. Your hatred transcended personal insults. You just wanted her dead. She was already responsible for the deaths of civilians, fellow agents, and people you loved. Her barbed words couldn't make you want to kill her more than you already did. But it was your self control he was worried about. You just smiled darkly. You had things in hand.

A flanking cyborg nudged your side with the barrel of his gun, reminding you to keep moving. You raised your gloved hands, walking along slowly, turning your attention to the guards.

There were two men and four women, all bearing the hefty prosthetic armaments that you'd come to recognize as Nguyen's handiwork. They were all large, strapping specimens, looking far healthier than Lao had when she'd been a prisoner. According to Lacroix's sources, most of them were Americans. You still had your batons, blades, and bombs, but armed with only those weapons, it was unlikely that you'd be fast enough to take out all six of them on your own.

Beside you, Lacroix affected that familiar, cool, disinterested smile, like you were just heading to the cafeteria to eat boring food and make snide comments about straight-laced Overwatch agents. It irked you then, how comfortable he looked, but you understood the importance of the act. The enemy should only see the feelings you wanted to portray.

You were led into a large sitting room, big enough so Nguyen's hulking guards could spread out comfortably, still maintaining a perimeter. The walls were a stark shade of white and you wrinkled your nose at the heavy smell of incense. A huge portrait of a handsome young Asian man hung on the wall. Flowers, candles, and other personal effects decorated the shrine underneath. It was crowded with random things: a ring, a dagger, worn out books, a faded shuttlecock... Was this the memorial to Nguyen's husband? And had Lacroix killed him?

"Please, take a seat," Nguyen said with mock cordiality, gesturing to a pair of elaborately carved wooden chairs complete with antique brocade cushions. She stood in front of the shrine, hands again clasped behind her back.

You rested your right hand on your hip, fingers not quite touching your EMP baton.

A cyborg coughed, jerking her gun upward. They had formed a semicircle around you, three on each side. They marched like an honor guard, stiff and formal, and you wondered if their skills were truly up to par.

You still very slowly moved your hands, because they had guns, and you did not. You took a moment to examine the carvings of birds on the armrests. The wood was worn smooth in spots, and these chairs were probably expensive antiques. You hoped that meant Nguyen would think twice about ordering her flunkies to shoot you where you sat.

"You've sent a team to commandeer the power plant and to divert most of my defensive forces. You have personally come to assassinate me. And I suspect there is at least another agent or team providing cyber security: it has been far too difficult to track your movements in my own territory." She sighed. "But it was not impossible to predict your actions. I know how you operate, and you walked right into my trap." She shook her head, the disappointment in her tone unmistakable. "I taught you better than this. Has your time with Guillard so addled your brain?"

Lacroix just smiled faintly. "Perhaps I simply realized that it was time to come and pay my
"Respect?" Nguyen's voice went shrill. "You want to speak of respect?" She gave an incredulous laugh.

You shifted in your chair, not enjoying this pointed small talk at all.

"You consort with that dog of a woman, and you want to talk about respect?"

Turning your head, you gave Lacroix a wry look. "Jesus, you're good at pissing off your exes."

Nguyen's head whipped around, fine features contorted in fury. Snarling something in Vietnamese, she grabbed a vase and hurled it straight at you. You ducked, feeling the porcelain whoosh by your scalp before it shattered against the wall, raining ceramic down on your head.

"And you are good at enraging everyone you meet," Lacroix said out of the corner of his mouth.

"His former lover? Is that what he told you?" Nguyen stared at you with outraged eyes. She made a strangled noise, a breathless incredulous gasping as she glared between you and Lacroix. It took you a second to recognize that sound as furious, borderline deranged laughter.

You smiled right back, because you were past caring about her wrath. This was the bitch who'd gotten your people killed. This was the one who gave the order to bring down Black Base Delta. She was the reason you lost Shin, Captain Patel, and nearly everyone else. In this moment, you didn't care if she had you shot. You wanted to cut her, and you wanted it to hurt.

"That was a priceless piece from the Unified Era, was it not?" Lacroix asked, commandeering her attention. He clicked his tongue as he brushed porcelain fragments off his shoulders.

Nguyen narrowed her eyes at him. "Did you-"

"I would not lie about such things. Or even discuss them with her," he said, giving you a warning look. "Chanceux has merely drawn her own regrettable conclusions."

Nguyen's shoulders relaxed slightly, but she glowered at you. "Your protégé is a fool."

Lacroix's smile broadened. "You'll hear no argument from me. But she is a fool with quick reflexes and the ability to learn from her many mistakes."

"Something tells me that you have not taught her the same lessons I gave you," Nguyen said, steely in her disapproval.

"And we've all seen how well that turned out for you," you scoffed.

Lacroix sighed, like he was actually surprised that you wouldn't shut up.

"It makes sense that she can commune with Min," Nguyen said, poison in her tone. "They have about the same level of interpersonal skills."

Lacroix laughed and you almost elbowed him. "Perhaps that is the secret."

"I don't care what happened between you and Lacroix," you lied. "But you murdered a lot of people and I'm here because of that. Fuck your sense of propriety, you're just another Talon
"You know nothing about me," she said, unmoved by your words.

"It's not about you, it's about what you've done!" You would have been out of your chair, except the nearest guard jabbed her gun in your face, keeping you seated.

Nguyen straightened, her face impassive. "Do you want me to apologize? Would that seem genuine? Would that change anything? I think not. When you've been fighting a war this long, you accept that there will be collateral damage. That you have to make hard decisions. That you must have a strong stomach to do what needs to be done. Can you honestly claim to remember all the people you've killed?" She arched a brow at you, her smug "gotcha" face making your blood boil. "What would you do if their loved ones hunted you down one day?"

"I've never killed someone who didn't deserve it," you said coldly.

"I could say the same thing. That's a very arbitrary judgment," she laughed. "And even if you really believe that, are you arrogant enough to believe that you get to decide what others deserve?"

"I was in DC," you said. "Don't even try to make that comparison."

She wrinkled her nose. "Washington DC was a joint operation: I simply provided the manpower. There are others to share the blame for that." She gave Lacroix a pained look. "I don't know why you keep this one around. She is terribly brash, uncouth, and self-righteous." The disgust was evident. "I don't remember any of you being this irritating."

"You get used to it," Lacroix said, his smile faint.

"You were always patient as a spider and you do enjoy a challenge," Nguyen said, a hint of approval shining through her words. "But I think you overestimated your capabilities with this one."

Lacroix looked like he wanted to say something, but then he shook his head and smiled sharply. "We could say the same about you and me."

"You knew how to conduct yourself," Nguyen said, flatly. "What does this one know?"

"I know Amélie Guillard keeps getting the best of you, and she's just a pathetic ballerina," you taunted.

Nguyen whirled, fury in her eyes. She pulled an ivory-handled dagger off the shrine, the blade bright and sharp. "You make a lot of claims about this one. If she is so teachable, then perhaps she will benefit from my hand."

Lacroix was on his feet, all guns pointed at him. You stared at him in shock. "That is unnecessary," he said, giving you a warning look.

"So should I remind you instead?" Nguyen asked, her voice too soft, her arms tensed. She held the dagger like she knew how to use it. In person, there was nothing frail about the old woman.

"We both know that your wrath is for me-"

"But my vengeance is for the cow you married," Nguyen spat.
It took a herculean effort, but you refrained from pointing out that it was Nguyen's blatant animosity toward Amélie that had really given you the idea that she was Lacroix's spurned lover.

Lacroix did not jump to Amélie's defense, though that was probably a tactically-motivated choice. But he stayed standing, facing Nguyen down. "Min did not leave because she liked Amélie. Min still loathes her. But you must admit her actions speak volumes. It was bad enough here that Min of all people left."

Nguyen snorted. "I suppose you are going to reprimand me for Pham."

Lacroix stared at her icily. "Pham was loyal to you. He stayed for you. He did not deserve-"

"You paid Kong back for that. Bloodily, I might add," Nguyen said, bitterness masking hints of regret.

"That was nothing compared to what happened in Hai Phong," he countered.

"Retaliation for the Versailles incident," Nguyen snapped.

"None of it makes up for what happened to Pham."

"Min made that clear enough," Nguyen snarled, through gritted teeth.

"We could do this all night," Lacroix said, raising his chin. "But that doesn't excuse what happened to Pham, and I obviously wasn't the only one who felt that way."

Nguyen's gaze wavered, her face twisted, and she looked away first.

You did not recognize any of the names or "incidents," with the exception of Blackwatch demolitionist Vo Min. But that didn't matter. You had a startling realization: none of this was about you. Nguyen's actions may have changed your life. This might be the focal point of your story, but you were a footnote in hers. You were just caught up in their history, more collateral damage. You would not get to monologue over your righteous vengeance. There was no real resolution to be had from railing against Nguyen: you didn't matter to her. Hell, you probably wouldn't even get a satisfying action movie finish, cue the rock music and the slow walk away from the explosion. That was all fantasy.

"In the end, it was never about them," Nguyen said, reluctantly. "In the end, you betrayed me, and that destroyed everything we built together."

"I never wanted anything to happen Hien," Lacroix said, his voice even. "You know that."

Your eyes drifted to the portrait on the wall. Hien was not the husband's name. But you bit your tongue, keeping a firm grip on your questions.

Nguyen just gripped the hilt of the dagger tightly. "Your regrets are too little, too late. Insults at this point."

"I cannot apologize for what I didn't do."

There were years of history between them, and you didn't have the context to understand. Lacroix certainly wasn't going to brief you on his sordid past with a terrorist, when he could just lead you blindly into a literal and emotional battle zone.
A slight movement caught your eye. You stared over the portrait and to the side, at the elegantly wrought white metal vent grating. A pair of bright blue eyes stared back at you.

Isha raised a clawed hand, a familiar golf ball-sized orb clutched within. You instinctively glanced down at your belt, then back at the grate. You couldn't check the pouch, but you instantly understood what had happened. That damn brilliant sneak had pickpocketed you back in the lab, foregoing the baton for the bomb. And she knew what it was: she'd worked with Min before.

You slowly shook your head, and she drew back, watching with narrowed eyes. She pointed to the left, and you angled your head to the side, finally noticing a familiar fish torpedo shadow hovering in front of the darkened window.

Isha began to quietly remove the fasteners on the vent grate.

You glared at her, and held one palm up like you were stretching, instead of signing for her to maintain stealth.

"I know exactly who killed my son. As do you. You should apologize for what you did in the aftermath! You should beg for my forgiveness!"

Lacroix stood there, stoic. "I already asked for his."

"Il t'aimait!" Nguyen shouted, tears rolling down her cheeks. "He loved you more than anyone in the world! You were everything to him!"

Lacroix bowed his head, and you could not see his face.

"We both know that isn't true," he said, voice rough. "I loved your son dearly. But Hien loved Odile. He did not understand Gérard."

Odile? You knew that name. Your mind instantly flashed back to Amélie's photo collection, her fond recollections of a young ballerina with clever eyes, her hair the same shade of reddish brown as-

Time ground to a halt.

You turned your head, staring at Lacroix: his bone structure, his eyes, that damnably identical auburn hair, shorter now but...

There was a very good reason you had never been able to dig up a damn thing on Gérard Lacroix's past. He'd just appeared one day on the DGSE rolls and all attempts to trace whom he had been before had been futile. The pictures, the financial leads, the database of intelligence ops: none of it had garnered any results. Hell, you'd even trawled the Foreign Legion, several mercenary groups, and the prison system in an attempt to find a match. You'd had one promising lead, until you'd found that man alive and well living under an alias in Bali. Even Athena admitted defeat.

You exhaled slowly, berating your own ignorance. Your search parameters had been far too narrow. And Amélie had dangled all that information in front of you oh so casually. She'd all but told you what was going on, and you'd been too dense to see any of it. The way she laughed when you asked her if she still spoke to Odile, if Lacroix disapproved of her friend...

You sighed. It didn't matter now.

Lacroix didn't seem to notice your reaction. "Hien went to Amélie's flat. We both know it wasn't just to talk. She defended herself. Hien was wrong, and you know it."
"But you married her," Nguyen spat, switching back to French. "You married my son's murderer!" She advanced, dagger in hand. "You chose your side!" She paced in front of Lacroix, too close for comfort with that naked blade. "After everything, I did for you, you chose her. You betrayed Hien and me."

You gave the silent guards a sidelong glance, a little alarmed to see that their collective gaze was on Nguyen, their eyes only focused on her. That meant she had them on some kind of behavior leash. She wouldn't let anyone outside her control witness this personal exchange. Whatever Chumak had tried to do to Lao, they had succeeded with this batch of cyborgs.

"There is only one way this can end." Nguyen snarled, glaring up at Lacroix.

"I don't buy it," you said, standing up slowly. "Guillard is good at getting other people to do her favors, but she doesn't like getting her hands dirty." You were lying through your teeth, but you didn't like how close Nguyen held that dagger to Lacroix.

Nguyen blinked. She'd forgotten you existed. Her head snapped back. "Someone thought they were funny, beating my son's head in with a bust of Pericles."

"Basta what?" Your gaze stayed on the knife. "Is that some kind of fancy French dance move? Or food?" You managed to deliver the line with a straight face. If Nguyen believed you were dumb, you'd let her. It gave you an edge.

Nguyen stared incredulously at you for a long moment. "I assume she has hidden qualities that compensate for her blinding ignorance?"

"Extremely well-hidden," Lacroix said, his voice soothing. "She is teachable, but rough. Your comparisons to Min are not entirely inaccurate."

You glared at him.

"Interesting how much she doesn't like your wife," Nguyen said, calmer.

"She has a problem with the rich. Envy, I suspect."

You made a face.

Nguyen exhaled slowly, wrath draining away at your distraction. "Why would you want another version of Min? You really are hopeless." She sighed, tossing the dagger back onto the shrine. She stared at the portrait on the wall, looking, just for a moment, like a sad old woman whose children never called, and wanted nothing to do with her. It was piteous.

Good.

"We could have done so much together," Nguyen said, softly. "But you have destroyed everything with your betrayal."

"Hien betrayed me first," Lacroix said defiantly. "He never should have gone after Amélie, and we both know that's the truth."

"You would say that to my face!" Nguyen whirled, lips curled in a snarl, eyes wild.

"I respect you too much to be anything but honest. It's a shame that you don't have that same level of self-respect. You should have stopped lying to yourself by now," Lacroix said, and you could hear the vicious little smile in his words. "Instead you've surrounded yourself with
mindless drones, unable to handle the mere suggestion that you could be wrong. I expected better from you."

Nguyen's face froze in a mask of cold fury. "Put him on his knees," she hissed, and the two male cyborgs grabbed Lacroix by the shoulders, wrenching him downward. "If she moves, shoot her in the head," Nguyen said, without looking at you.

"Lacroix-" You began, because Isha had just gotten the cover off the ventilation shaft. You held up one finger, signaling for her to get ready. If Athena, Isha, and you all moved at once, you had a fighting chance.

"Hush, Chanceux, and hold very still. You had all the fun in Candle Arc. It is my turn," he said, eerily calm.

"This is personal business," Nguyen said to you, like she had forgotten your reason for being there. "It is in your best interest to let me vent my spleen. I may feel more merciful afterward."

Despite his words, Lacroix struggled, and one of the men with metal arms punched him in the face. Stunned, he drooped, and they forced him onto his knees, holding him in place as Nguyen bent over him. You didn't see a dagger or a gun, but you had a very bad feeling about this.

Nguyen patted his cheek gently with her hand. "I hope this hurts."

Lacroix just laughed, like she'd said something amusing.

"Pour que vous puissiez voir clairement..." Nguyen said cheerfully, and dug her thumb into his left eye, that gummy squelching noise a sound you would remember for the rest of your life. Through it all, Lacroix was silent, not giving her the satisfaction.

Nguyen patted his cheek gently with her hand. "I hope this hurts."

Lacroix just laughed, like she'd said something amusing.

"Now, Athena!" You shouted, half a second too late as the fish torpedo crashed through the window. The armed cyborgs turned, raising their guns, but you grabbed a ceramic orb off your belt and threw it at the three clustered on your right, bouncing it between them, hoping their bodies would absorb all the impact. The bomb detonated as it struck a chest plate, the sound reverberating in your skull as it showered the area in nails, bearings, and scrap metal. Debris rattled your armor, and you held your arms up, shielding your face. Then a second one went off as the metal grate crashed to the ground. If those cyborgs were getting back up, they would need a moment. Unsheathing your wakizashi, you lunged at the cyborgs restraining Lacroix. They didn't move to defend themselves, probably because Nguyen had ordered them to hold Lacroix, not fight.

You cut through the nearest one's throat. The angle was bad, and cost you an extra second. Pivoting, you stabbed the second one, your blade went downward through the exposed skin on the back of the neck, severing spine and circuitry. Thunder cracked, and you hissed as something struck you hard in the back. There was a terrible shriek, and you staggered, body aching, but still upright. Athena brought down the last cyborg on the right side of the room, and you spun, watching as Isha clawed at the remaining cyborg's battered face. The woman threw Isha onto the ground, her armor pocked and smoldering. She raised her gun at the screeching ball of feathers, the expression on her gouged-up face savage.

Despite the burning in your lungs and the radiating pain in your upper body, you charged, swinging your blade with furious desperation. She saw you too late, trying to turn her gun on you, but rage spurred you forward and you slammed into her, driving your blade into her cheek and out the back of her skull. She toppled and spasmed underneath you, and you staggered to your feet, boot on the corpse's throat as you yanked your blade free.
"Isha?" You rasped, because your lungs ached.

A bundle of black feathers rolled out from under the chair, chirping happily as she saw you. There was...gunk on her claws, but she was moving fine.

You turned, ready to fight whatever else Nguyen had waiting, but stopped. Athena hovered there, guns out. The cyborgs were dead or dying. And Lacroix still knelt on the ground, blood oozing from his ruined left eye socket. Nguyen lay there in front of him, a thin stiletto buried in her ribs.

Candle Arc, huh? You could see the parallels, though Lacroix had taken it further. Was it just one-upmanship for him?

"Lacroix, are you-

"I am fine," he said through gritted teeth. "But you, old friend, your time is short." He clasped Nguyen's hand in his and she did not push him away.

"Your face makes me sick," she spat.

"Whose fault is that?" You muttered, trying not to stare at Lacroix's disfigurement.

"Hush," he said, voice hoarse. "You don't have long," he told her softly, switching to French. "If you tell me where it is, I can save it. Otherwise, they'll destroy everything just to keep it out of your allies' hands."

"Allies?" Nguyen laughed bitterly. "No allies. They just gave lip service to the idea. There were supposed to be twice the forces we had today. But they made excuses. They delayed. Allies? What are those? Once, we were allies, and look how that ended. They are vultures, just waiting to scavenge what they have never treasured nor earned."

You frowned as you injected a nanite solution into your side. Had Talon softly betrayed Nguyen, ignoring her requests for help so Blackwatch could do the dirty work for them? You winced as you touched your back, your torso already beginning to feel warm from the treatment. The armor was dented, but not broken. You took a shaky breath, the pain was manageable, for now.

"Deny them," Lacroix said.

"I trust you even less." She coughed, blood bubbling from her mouth, her voice a wheeze. "You murdered the last one. Why would I..."

Lacroix glanced up at you for a moment, that empty socket staring accusingly at you. He did not want to continue this discussion in front of you, but he did not have time to stall. "We did not destroy it."

"Cold storage and dissection is no life," she murmured.

"That's not what we did either," you said wearily. "We're not complete assholes. We adopted her."

Nguyen blinked, eyes darting to Athena's drone and she began to shake, fists clenching as she struggled to keep breathing. "...Of course. You even named her - No one suspected your administrative virtual assistant-" She coughed, spraying blood on the while silk of her áo dài, her eyes still clear. She glanced at you, briefly, and you realized she'd come to a decision. "Safe. Old
You watched her turn her full attention on Lacroix. You stared at up at that picture of Hien, wondering if you were supposed to feel something besides a detached sort of satisfaction. There was no sense of triumph, not really. This is what you'd worked for. This was the bloody vengeance you had wanted for so long, even if you didn't get to deliver it personally. But it didn't bring you any joy, especially looking at Lacroix's gory face. It needed to be done. She needed killing. You just wished you could have reached her sooner and saved everyone a lot of grief.

You expected some kind of pithy quote, but Lacroix stayed silent as you both watched Nguyen take one last rattling wheeze and die. Whatever he was feeling, he didn't show it clearly on his face. Instead he gently closed her eyes, his fingers almost hesitant. You waited for the retaliatory squish, but it didn't happen. Lacroix just slowly rose to his feet, wobbling like he'd had too much to drink.

"So, you figured it out," he said, voice quiet and you could not place his tone.

You shrugged. "You're actually surprised?"

Lacroix shrugged, one hand drifting up to his ruined eye. "No, I suppose not."

"We need to get you fixed up. You took a hard blow to the head and normally I'd compare your pupils to see if you're concussed but-"

Lacroix actually laughed at that. "You are horrid, Chanceus."

"It's a coping mechanism," you shrugged, mouth dry.

Your comms crackled. "Wedge? Goblin? Coyote? Anyone? This is Siren," Tataryn's voice came faint over the comms. "Cerberus and Minotaur have gotten too deep. I'm starting to think that the defenders aren't very interested in keeping the building from falling down on our heads.

Your heart stopped. It wasn't just Tataryn in there, but Jesse and Gabriel as well.

"I'm requesting backup," Tataryn cut out briefly. "And maybe a pizza while you're at it?"

They had pizza in Hanoi, but was that really the first food he thought of? You were pretty sure Tataryn didn't even like pizza that much. Everyone was a comedian.

"Are the Shimadas closer?" You asked, not liking the prospect Tataryn being on his own.

"Goblin's team is still transferring data," Athena told you. "Genji and Hanzo are cleaning up around him. One of them will come as soon as they can, but they're occupied."

You swallowed roughly.

"There's nothing you can do about this now," Lacroix said, tapping his gory socket. He swayed on his feet. "I will secure the seed. You go back up Cerberus' team."

"I can't leave you-" You said, even as you prepared to head over there.

"I'll have Athena, and perhaps Isha could help me?" He went to the wall. Your raptor trilled excitedly, already running her claws along a hidden panel that you had not spotted immediately. She really had sharp eyes. Lacroix chuckled, wobbling over to help her access the
"On my way," you said into the comm.

"Hurry, please," Tataryn said, tone low and clipped. "And don't forget the pizza."

You took one last glance at Lacroix. He had to be in shock from his injuries.

"We can take care of him, Lucky," Athena said. "But we still need to secure her personal files. Just a warning, my drones in Cerberus' care have all been destroyed."

Nodding, you retrieved your gun from a dead cyborg, and then you broke into a run.

Chapter End Notes

This took forever because I wrote it and didn't like how it flowed and revised it multiple times. The next couple chapters are also getting overhauled. But it's slowgoing. I'm taking quality over speed though.

Cat is sicker. Working later (busy season has started and I probably won't get out of work till 2AM). And hands still aren't healed (though they're better than they were). So I don't have quite as much time as I want.

You can always ping me on Tumblr. It may take a day or two, but I will get back with you. On that note, some very nice folks, Monster & Lea, set up a discord server to chat about the fic, Overwatch, and life in general. I check it daily and try not to stuff it full of sin. This link expires in a day, so ping me if you want another invite. I might add a permalink later, but figured we'd see what happens.

Special thanks to Prior for editing my French. I think I forgot to run some passages by her. All mistakes are my own. All of them. So many mistakes.
Chapter 120

Chapter Summary

This is what it has come to.

Chapter Notes

Yumii drew the several of the original characters. ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chest aching, limbs heavy, you raced across the grounds, heading straight for the power plant. You were counting on the rapid-acting nanite-injection to keep you on your feet, because even if Nguyen was dead, the fighting wasn't done. You could hear the shooting as soon as you set foot outside, and you briefly wondered if the local government would interfere, or if Nguyen had paid them enough to mind their own business.

If it was omnics up ahead, you would need heavier firepower. Gripping your carbine in one hand, you pulled the remaining grenades off your belt. You still had one of Vo's personal explosives, but they wouldn't be as effective against armor or omnics. Hugging the shadows, you could see the twinkling of muzzle flashes in the distance.

"Talos?" You whispered into your comm.

"Busy!" Diallo growled, her voice raw.

"I'm incoming and close enough to see the light show. Best route?"

There was a long silence and you slowed down, favoring stealth.

"Come through the west side. There's still cover. I'll keep'em occupied." The comm clicked and the ground shook, machinery roaring. Against your instincts, you ran toward the rumbling, cutting straight through the tattered shrubbery and nearly tripping on a body. You glanced at the uniform- not one of yours- and kept moving, slowing down once more as you neared the fire fight.

The central building didn't look stable any more: the concrete stairs crumbling, the glass doors and windows all shattered. Broken glass and solar panels twinkled under the streetlights. Burn marks and bullet holes distorted the building's facade, and more than a dozen cyborg corpses littered the ground, interspersed with still-smoking heaps of rubble.

Crouched in the bushes, you mapped your route over the war-torn obstacle course.

"Strike, if you're coming, you'll want to move fast. There's a sniper out there and I can't get over there to crush her head just yet," Diallo said over the comms, her navy blue armored suit stomping a cyborg's flesh parts onto the steps. You flinched at the meaty sound, not quite like an
eye, but close enough to turn your stomach.

"Got it," you said. "I'm in cover. Do you need me to assist?"

There were two cyborgs still on their feet, but Diallo, fully-encased in her suit, just waved a giant metal arm, her rail gun whining as it prepared another blast. "Go! I got this."

You tore out of the bushes, zigzagging across the entryway, your feet barely touching the ground. Stone fragments rained down on you, bullets whizzing by as the cyborgs spotted you, shouting directions to each other. You tuck your head and ran straight through an empty wall pane, the thick glass smashed on the ground. It was closer than the door, and the sooner you got in the building, the sooner you'd be out of sniper range. The lights flickered, as you entered the lobby. It was another wreck, furniture topsy-turvy, more bodies on the ground - none of them your people. You just kept moving, ducking under windows, jumping over debris, and heading for the stairs.

"Your location, Siren?" You asked, as you entered the stairwell.

"B2," he said, gunfire in the background.

"Cerberus and Minotaur?"

"B3 last I heard, but that was ten minutes ago," he said. "I'm almost there. Got a little sloppy-" He cut out briefly. "-he's still out there, watch your back."

You went down the stairs two or three at a time, stepping over dead cyborgs, broken omnis, and even a few people in Vishkar uniforms. You gave B2 a cursory check, but Tataryn had been moving fast; he was probably on a lower floor by now. By the time you reached B3, you were breathing hard. There were odd sounds coming from down the hall, so you slowed down and peeked around the corner.

Tataryn stood behind a man in a Vishkar uniform, expression flat and reptilian as he yanked back on something, a garroting wire probably. You caught the faintest gleam of filament in the lowlights as the man clawed his neck, kicking, shaking, and gurgling till he gradually went limp.

"There are faster ways," you said, stepping into the hall as you watched the corpse twitch.

"Lost my knife," Tataryn murmured, as he grab the man's head and twisted hard, just to be thorough. Hair frizzing in the humidity, face smeared with blood, Tataryn managed to flash you a warm, appreciative smile, and still looked good doing it. "But I found something far better." He winked at you as he casually picked up his rifle off the ground and took a moment to grab the dead man's hard light projector. He held it up like a trophy, grinning broadly. Then he squinted at you. "Where's the pizza?"

"I got hungry on the way over," you said, because sometimes it was just best to humor him.

He snorted as the two of you jogged back to the stairwell. "

"What are you going to do with that?" You asked, jerking your chin at the scavenged piece of Vishkar tech. Because as far you knew, he had no training with that kind of equipment.

"Kseniya has a salon coming up." He paused, testing the word. "Not for hair or fingernails. For science. I believe they call it a "science fair" in English? But she kept insisting it was a salon." He laughed, like it was the silliest thing he'd ever heard.
You sighed. "You can't give her classified tech--"

"Don't fret, your face will get stuck like and it will make me laugh too hard to shoot straight. She already has a project, something about wearable fungus." He wrinkled his nose. "But she may just want to take it apart for fun. See how it works. She is smart like that. Winston will supervise." He smiled to himself, probably proud that he'd conned yet another coworker into babysitting his kid. At least she was a good kid.

You stopped at B4, the lights flickering. This was the site of the last of the backup generators and tertiary control systems. B3 had been somewhat intact, like the aftermath of a good bar fight. B4 was a warzone. Gunshots roared in the distance. Exposed wires sparked and there was very strong unpleasant smell. Gas leak? No, it was more than that. Several walls had just been smashed, sewage and gas pipes destroyed. The wreckage of doors, steel beams, and wall panels lay strewn everywhere. Shredded insulation and gun smoke hovered in the air.

Motioning for Tataryn to hold, you took point, and though you tried breathing through your mouth, you could now taste the foulness in the air. Gross.

Mangled omnic shells lay scattered across the floor. You recognized the blast patterns of Gabriel's shotguns and the precise bullet holes from Jesse's revolver. The area was littered with spent brass.

You pressed your comm button. "Cerberus, Minotaur, this is Wechuge. Me and Siren are down here in B4--"

Static blasted through the earpiece for several seconds. You were ready to give up and keep searching when the line clicked.

"Where's Coyote?" Gabriel asked, tone gruff. Was he injured? Or was he just worried about Lacroix?

"He's injured, but still moving. We finished our detail. Isha and Athena are helping him with final acquisitions." You were getting good at making death sound boring. It was an odd skill, but you'd take it.

"All right, start clearing the way," he said, relief softening his voice. "Since your part is complete, we'll forego the power plant objective and call in the pickup."

"Going to buy us dinner, boss?" Tataryn asked. "You know, for a job well done?" Tataryn grinned at you, and you couldn't tell if it was because he wanted free food, or if he was playing your wing man. Probably both: Tataryn wasn't a man to waste opportunities.

"If we hurry, we might be able to swing a pit stop in Shanghai," Gabriel said, sounding amused.

"Woohoo!" Jesse shouted in the background.

"And look, the boss will be able to help you get settled in, while we get a nice break," Tataryn winked. "You need not say a word. I know I am brilliant." He pointed at himself, nodding smugly. "You can thank me later."

Shaking your head, you turned back, heading up the stairs. "Talos, we're heading back to your location."

There was no response.
"Comms have been tricky all night, especially since we don't have a drone to boost them any more," Tataryn said, hesitantly, trying to reassure himself. Diallo was part of his team, and no matter how carefree he acted, you were not fooled. You knew he was worried.

"She was dealing with at least two cyborgs and a sniper when I came in, but her suit looked intact," you said.

"She could handle that easily," Tataryn nodded, his smile a little forced. "But let's hurry anyway."

You both rushed up the stairs, Tataryn taking three at a time with his long legs. Your muscles ached and your mouth was far too dry, but you kept up, making it back above ground very quickly, soothed by the echo of metal boots in the stairwell. Gabriel and Jesse were right behind you.

"If you're any slower, you won't get dinner!" Gabriel shouted.

Tired as you were, you smiled at that. You didn't hear Jesse's response, you just threw open the doors, gun out, as you headed back to the lobby. Movement caught your eye, an Asian man clad in light blue and white, his tunic stained with blood. He gritted his teeth when he saw you and you aimed your gun, recognizing the Vishkar uniform and more importantly the detonator in his hands.

"Bomb!" You shouted as you pushed past Tataryn. You raised your gun to fire, knowing that if that was a dead man's switch, you were all in trouble anyway.

His gaze locked onto you. His face was bloody, his eyes mostly wild white sclera, like a fear-maddened horse. He raised the detonator, even as you pulled back on the trigger of your gun. Your decibel blockers muffled the shots, but you watched as they connected, blood blossoming through his flimsy uniform.

There was a breath of silence. A half second of terrible anticipation. Had you been fast enough? Was it a dead man's-

The answer bulldozed you from the side, the world roaring by you in a rush of white light and hard rubble, flinging you across the lobby. You hit the ground hard, air knocked out from your body, brain spinning as you sprawled there, stunned. Showered with concrete dust and metal shrapnel, you lay on your stomach, carbine still gripped in your hands. Gasping for breath, you lifted your head, limbs slowly responding as you rolled onto your back and attempted to wobble to your feet. It took a few tries before you were able to regain your balance, your vision blurring a few times as you rose.

The building was still standing, though the ceiling above the stairwell entrance had caved in. That area, a few yards from where you'd been shooting, had been the epicenter. Hugging your chest, each breath a harsh effort, you looked around frantically for your friends. Half the lights were out, the rest flickering and worsening your vertigo. Jesse and Gabriel had still been in the stairwell, possibly out of the blast range, but where was Tataryn?

Dust swirled in the air and you coughed as you tried to croak his name.

A wet cough sounded from the left and you touched your decibel blockers - they'd held up through the explosion. Your ears were still ringing, but you hadn't been deafened. If you had your hearing, and your equipment still worked, you were probably fine. You limped through the rubble, the emergency lights kicking on, giving the room a softer glow. Smoke, ash, and embers swirled in
the air around you, clouding the room.

You spotted his hair first, fine golden strands that clung to everything with shocking tenacity. Staggering over, you found him sprawled face up against a pile of rubble, taking rapid shallow breaths as he blinked at you, obviously still stunned. He was laid out on the rubble, like he'd just slipped and fell, and all he needed was half a minute to recover. Then he'd get back up, woozy and laughing. But one hand rested on his abdomen, dark liquid from the wound already pooling around him.

"Tataryn!" You dropped down beside him, clumsily checking his injuries. Shrapnel had torn a fist-sized hole through his armor and the flesh underneath. You placed your hands over his, trying to apply pressure to the wound, trying to put him back together like a jigsaw puzzle, and knowing in your bones that you didn't have that power. The realization was a slap in the face. But it didn't stop you from going through the motions, from trying anyway. If you just stuck a bandage on it...shouldn't that be good enough?

Tataryn took a pained breath, those light blue eyes wide as his clenched his teeth. He smiled weakly at you, and coughed up more blood. Grimacing, he tried to wipe it away, like he could somehow hide the damage from you.

"Internal bleeding," you muttered, and that was not a good sign.

"External too." He gave a pained laugh.

"How bad?" You asked weakly, even though on some level, you already knew the answer. Knew from looking at him, how pale he was, how quickly he was losing blood from multiple locations. You fucking knew. But you asked anyway, hoping that his response would be different.

"It's bad," he murmured, giving you a lopsided smile. "But I've had worse."

You choked on a laugh, a sob, that lingering cloud of dust. It got in your throat and eyes. All those ashes on the wind made it hard to breathe.

"What can I do?" You asked, voice half an octave too high.

"A drink?" He asked, and then coughed up more blood in thick chunks.

Your hand shook as you reached for your canteen.

"Not water," he said, with a wince and a sharp headshake. "No, Lucky. Nothing you can do. Can't feel-" He stopped, his eyes on yours, those pale blue eyes serene as he looked at you, his gaze gentler than you had ever seen. "Tell her I'm sorry. It looks like I will be missing her salon. I-"

"Shhh." You squeezed his hands too tightly, but he didn't react. He just struggled to breathe.

"You'll go for me," he said, voice growing quieter, harder to hear.

"Yes, I'll go," you said words running together. "I'll go. I'll take desserts. I'll buy pizza. Two pizzas even. You know, she'll still be so mad that you're late. She'll berate me ferociously for stopping for pizza instead of dragging you in. There will be terrible recriminations. But of course, like a hero at the eleventh hour, you'll limp in there after the start time, looking sheepish with your crutches, and distracting everyone from the boring event speeches."
"Of course. Of course, I will go," he whispered, conviction in his eyes. "The devil himself couldn't keep me away." He coughed. It was a terrible rattling sound.

"And even though she's been preparing to lecture you the entire time, you'll look so pathetic and sorry, that she'll only scold you a little. You know, she can never stay mad at you, because- because- she'll be so happy to see you there. She's always glad just to be with you," you choked. "So hold on, Tataryn. Help is on the way. We're going to get you home to her."

"Yes, I know," he breathed, as his body went limp and his gaze lost its focus. His death rattle mingled with a soft sigh of contentment as he lay listening to your panicked promises, your sweet lies, his warm bloody hands clasped between your gloves. Those pale blue eyes stared off into a dream, a faint smile on his lips.

You crouched there too long, willing him to blink, to move, to wheeze. But he was still, and you reached out, closing his eyes, a gesture you'd done before for the dead, though you couldn't claim to understand why.

"Boss? Commander? Lucky? Jesse-" Diallo shouted in the distance. You shuddered, vision blurring. "Luck-" There was a half beat of silence. Where were Jesse and Gabriel?

Your stomach sank lower. You staggered to your feet, glancing up at Diallo who'd lost her helmet at some point, her left arm held at an odd angle.

She stared between you and Tataryn, grief twisting across her face. Diallo had always been an open book, prone to smiling and fuming with no subterfuge. It hurt to see the raw pain on her features, mirroring your own feelings. You looked away.

"We need to find Jesse and Gabriel. They were behind us on the stairs," you said, not recognizing your voice. It was too hoarse. You stumbled over to where the stairwell had been and started digging.

You couldn't bear to look backward at Diallo or Tataryn.

"Jesse? Gabriel?" You remembered digging frantically, once upon a time; other people's lives held in your broken hands. You remembered another cave-in, not so long ago, that left you with nightmares of death and darkness. You remembered fear and grief, the echoes churning inside you: those things never left you, not really. And while your body ached, your chest was too tight, and everything was distant. You just wanted to sit down. You couldn't-

But you recognized shock. You knew it well enough. There wasn't time for that now. Numbly you began shifting the rubble, bloody hands moving mechanically. One rock after another. You had to keep moving to get through this. It was painful, but you had done this before.

"Jesse?" You called again, your voice fragile.

"Back here! Ceiling's holding, but it's not going stay up to forever!"

The pile shifted and suddenly Diallo was beside you, digging one-handed, her mechanized suit capable of lifting far more than your two good arms. She dragged whole chunks of concrete and rebar out the way at a terrifying pace, murmuring what sounded like a prayer then entire time.

Her words were lost on you, but you weren't really listening. You had to get Jesse and Gabriel out. Did they have enough air? Were they too hurt to dig? You'd had nightmares like this before, and you would be having them for a long time after.
After Diallo pulled a couple of larger pieces out, like some fucked up version of Jenga, the mountain of debris surged sideways, creating a meter high opening, but Jesse didn't emerge.

"Gabriel? Jesse?"

"In here! I can't move him on my own!"

Heart racing, you ducked inside, slipping the night vision visor back on. "I'm coming in. Diallo can't fit."

"Shit-" Jesse gave a low groan. Bent I-beams and scorched metal paneling had been fused together into a precarious shield overhead. The metal warped and bulged, rubble dribbling down continuously. It didn't look like it would hold for very long.

Jesse was on his knees, his hat gone, frantically tying a bandage. You stared for a moment, your breath catching as you took in the scene. The night vision was monochromatic - but you recognized the consistency of blood on the ground, too much of it. Jesse knelt beside Gabriel - his beanie was missing too, his eyes were closed, and he was breathing too hard. But he was still breathing. Some of the tension in your gut loosened.

"I'll get his legs." You silently cursed Gabriel's metal boots, grabbing them and pulling slowly as Jesse scooted him across the floor. You scraped your back and shoulder getting out, and hit your head at least twice. But you slowly emerged, stopping short when you saw the blood-soaked bandana Jesse had tied as a tourniquet.

"Come on!" Jesse shouted at you. "We ain't got time for lollygagging!"

Shaking if off, you gritted your teeth and pulled harder, Diallo behind you, helping to clear a smoother path.

Jesse followed quickly, his face grim.

"Is there-?" You had to take another moment to stare at Gabriel's left arm. Or what remained of it, because from the elbow down, it was just gone.

Jesse flinched and shook his head. "Crushed."

You winced, unable to take your eyes off him. Gabriel was out cold, but it wasn't like watching him sleep. He was too unresponsive. When your lover slept, he had expressions, ticks, sounds. He'd nuzzle your hair, squeeze your waist, or murmur something in Spanish. Sometimes he would even snore. The absence of any of that was alien and frightening.

Crouching over him, your hands sticky with blood, you touched his face. He was burning up. Swearing, you got your canteen off your belt and splashed water on his face and neck, hoping to cool him down. If his temperature got too high... You knew your water might only make a few degrees difference, but it was something and you had nothing else on hand.

Jesse looked around. "Where's Tataryn?"

Diallo keened softly and you shook your head, not looking up.

Jesse made a strangled noise in the back of his throat. He looked over to the side, where Tataryn had fallen. "The boss-" He coughed. "The boss-" You heard him inhale shakily. "The boss already radioed for pickup," he said, after several tries. "On Sing is on its way in. We need to get out of here."
You tore off part of your rashguard, tying it tighter around the existing bandages. You applied more pressure to the stump, trying to keep Gabriel's blood inside his body. But it was still leaking out, too fast and too warm in your hands. You kept your focus on his injuries, still unable to process what had just happened. Compartmentalization let you break it down. Fix the injuries. Head to the evac site. Don't you dare think about losing him.

"Keep that limb elevated," Diallo said, breaking your reverie.

Jesse helped you tie a sling, before the two of you lifted Gabriel back up. You carried him between you, Jesse bearing most of the weight. Gabriel's body was still too hot and too limp. Diallo took point, and as you struggled to keep it together. To figure out what you could do next. You kept glancing over at him, expecting him to crack one eye and say something smarmy. To shake the two of you off and laugh dryly, saying he'd lost an arm, not a leg and he could walk just fine on his own. To at least...respond.

"Lucky?" Your comm crackled.

"Ziv?" You murmured, not expecting to hear his voice right then.

"Ben-zona! We've been calling you for ten minutes! I was getting ready to send in the ninjas! What the hell is going on?"

"We're going to need to change the evac point. We're in the central building. We have critical injuries. And Tataryn's...dead." The word fell flat, too disjointed and alien on your tongue. There was a long silence.

"Fuck," Ziv said, voice raw. "Ben-zona. All right. I'll handle it. Just stay alive. We'll be there soon!"

Not more than five minutes later, an Orca-sized transport landed in the courtyard. It wasn't an Orca, too sleek and expensive, but the hatch opened and Feng strode down the ramp, wearing what had to be custom body armor: it was a deep, iridescent emerald green textured in a repeating octagonal pattern, almost like scales. It was flashy, but you knew better than to underestimate any of On Sing's tech. Medics with stretchers rushed past her, and carefully took Gabriel from you, murmuring to themselves in worried tones before heading back up the ramp. Diallo led another pair back into the building, because after everything, there was no way in Hell you were going to leave Tataryn behind.

Hanzo and Genji were taking a detour to meet up with Lacroix and Isha, but they would be here soon. You stared at Feng as she barked orders in three different languages, her shoulders straight, stance aggressive, words taut. She swaggered like a cyborg twice her weight class. But no one argued with her; her people treated her with surprising deference. It was a different Feng than you were used to seeing.

There were medics and techs swarming the place, but you weren't so in shock that you overlooked her foot soldiers armed with expensive guns.

"It's not pretty," she said, shaking her head after a medic reported to in Cantonese. "Aside from arm, there are bigger problems. Bayan is doing what he can, but Reyes' body temperature is far too high. His accelerated healing does some wonky things to his immune system, and the worse his injuries, the more his body tries to compensate and one of the side effects is a fever. Sure, he
heals fast, but there's no regulator on it and that causes more problems. What a terrible design—"
She stopped short, as she saw the look on your face. "Sorry, you just want the facts."

You nodded curtly.

"There's also swelling in his brain. Something the heightened body temperature isn't helping. We're going to have to do some very minor cranial drilling to relieve the pressure."

You forgot how to breathe. The world stopped, time hanging there, as you tried to digest it all. Gabriel was badly hurt. The hyperthermia had gotten much worse than he claimed, because he was a lying asshole who didn't want to worry you. And any kind of trauma to the brain was never a good sign. You stared helplessly ahead, because this was outside your expertise. You would charge into a booby-trapped building for Gabriel. You would fight monsters, machines, and anything in between for him. Because you had survived too many losses already. You could not lose him too.

You would drag him out, regardless of what it cost you. What were a few fingers or limbs between friends?

But you could not fix this. You weren't a doctor. You weren't a miracle worker. You couldn't do a damn thing for him. Jack would have done better. Jack would have been faster. Stronger. More capable. How were you going to face him knowing that you'd let Gabriel down? You'd let them both down. Just like Shin, and Captain Patel, and so many others...

The helplessness and the guilt were paralyzing.

"Auntie Zheng is actually qualified for the procedure. God, she was a geneticist, mob boss, and a brain surgeon. Plus she can paint, like really fucking well. It would be enough to give me a serious complex, except Mother already did that... Sorry. Sorry, I get distracted. Look, it's serious, but you've got us and we can probably handle it."

You stared at her numbly, not really listening to her nervous word vomit. But you grasped some of the words. Gabriel was in very bad shape. Zheng was a goddamn genius. On Sing had the medical technology and the skill. They were your only hope. "Save him. Please. I'll do anything."

Feng blinked, her expression warping into one of true horror. "Don't make offers like that to people like me, Lucky. Seriously, I thought you were smarter than that."

"I will do anything," you said, your tongue thick in your mouth. Because whatever On Sing asked of you, you didn't think it could be worse than living in a world without Gabriel. Worse than facing Jack, knowing you could have done more. Because you already knew that in the middle of enemy territory, you didn't have many options. Because you had to do something.

"I know," Feng said, taking your bloody hands in hers. "But we're friends. So you don't have to beg. You don't even have to ask, OK? We're friends. I got your back. So shut up about it and don't ever make me an offer like that again, you fucking idiot. Do you understand me?"

Feng glared at you, panic clear on her face. "Because I may have to take you up on it."

"I-"

"Shut up," she said fiercely and she hugged you then, her arms comfortably warm, her grip shockingly strong. "You Blackwatch agents aren't supposed to be noble," she scolded softly.

"I can't-" You shuddered. "Jack-"
"I know," Feng said, though you weren't even sure what you were trying to say. "Come on, we'll head back to Shanghai—that's the best and closest facility we have. The equipment is state of the art and the kitchens are amazing. I know you probably aren't thinking about food, but I had a fantastic dinner prepped and everything. I was really looking forward to the lamb—"

You blinked as the rest of your crew rounded the corner, Lacroix limping along, wearing a strip of bloodied silk over his wound, Ziv's face thunderous. The Shimada brothers were giving them distance, though Hanzo was carrying Isha, who looked uninjured, while the two remaining Athena drones hovered nearby.

"Come on, we need to move," Feng said, ushering you up the ramp. "I didn't exactly ask permission from the locals or even offer to pay for parking when I got here..."

The ship had a fully-equipped medical bay, and you sat outside the door waiting for news. Isha sat on your lap, her little hands gently patting your face as she made soft inquisitive sounds. You stroked her head absently, trying to calm yourself and soothe her. Diallo paced in front of you, head bowed, but she wasn't really looking at anything. Jesse leaned against the wall, lips pressed tightly together. He didn't speak.

You didn't have the focus to even try to contemplate a post-mission report. Operation Tarasque had started so well too. You'd done your best. You'd achieved most of the mission objectives. But this was never about you. And now, when the stakes were the highest, when Gabriel's life hung in the balance, there was nothing you could do.

Genji and Hanzo sat across from you, Genji fidgeting with his wrists while Hanzo cleaned his weapons. Lacroix was getting examined in a separate room, Ziv by his side. That was probably for the best; everyone was on edge and Ziv had this way of saying the most obnoxious thing at the worst time.

"Priority message coming through. Lucky, you and Jesse are the highest ranking officers on deck," Athena said. "Jesse has seniority, but you have a formal title."

You blinked. "What?"

"Chain of command technically places you as the CO, with Jesse as your second," Athena clarified. Because Gabriel and Lacroix were out of commission. You understood the procedure, you just...hadn't been thinking in that direction.

"We can take it together," Jesse said, his voice raw.

The fish torpedo hovered there waiting for you to say something.

"Yeah, OK," you said. "Where?"

"You can use the On Sing comm relay," Athena said kindly. "It's around the corner."

You got to your feet, Jesse steadying you as you wobbled down the hall. When you reached the comm screen, Captain Amari nodded grimly at you. "I'm glad to see both of you." Her tone belied no actual happiness, but you knew it wasn't personal. This mission obviously hadn't been a complete success.

"I'm not leaving him like this," you said, because if Gabriel was out of commission, even
for convalescent time, Blackwatch needed you there. Gabriel...needed you there.

"What she said." Jesse crossed his arms, words taut. "We've sustained too many losses. We can't afford to be down any more peop-
"

Captain Amari grimaced and held up one hand. "Jesse, Lucky, I need you both to focus." She took a shaky breath, shutting her eyes for a moment, like that would keep you from seeing her grief. "I know emotions are running wild, but I need you to listen."

Jesse stiffened beside you.

You blinked rapidly. "Sorry, ma'am."

"There's been a change of plans. I've already asked Ms. Zhai to come straight to Zurich. We've gone over the logistics. Their facilities are cutting edge, but we have...special precautions already in place for SEP veterans. On Sing's transport is very well-equipped, Angela is already pestering me to get one of those, budget be damned, so the slightly longer travel time won't adversely affect Gabriel's...odds." She swallowed roughly. "He's strong and stubborn, and I've seen super soldiers survive worse," she said directly.

"Operation Crashhawk?" You asked, because you were supposed to disappear into Shanghai.

"Cancelled for the foreseeable future."

Jesse squeezed your arm, and you gave a sigh of relief. All right. You would be there. You would...sit with him. You would read to him, and hope he reacted better than Lao. You would make sure Blackwatch functioned. You would-

"There's more."

You blinked.

"Isn't there always?" Jesse joked, but there was no humor in his voice, only a lot of trepidation.

Captain Amari took a deep breath, and looked you straight in the eye. You felt the jolt of that connection thousands of miles away, and through it, the gravity of whatever she was about to tell you. You stood straighter, because right then you knew Captain Amari needed you to handle whatever had gone wrong, and despite your misgivings and your insecurities, that expectation grounded you.

"I am recalling all agents cleared for Shit Spiders for immediate duty. I know you're exhausted. I know some of you are injured. I know tonight has been rough, and you're all due some furlough. But you're going to have to cancel any post-mission plans."

Jesse tensed beside you.

You blinked. "What's going on?" You asked, dread building in your gut. After a fiasco like this, you should have been given some R&R, while a committee reviewed mission procedures. Because the Commander was down. Captain Amari wouldn't put you back on active duty so quickly...unless something was terribly wrong.

"Hit us," Jesse said.
You nodded, not quite able to muster his level of bravado. "What's the situation?"

Captain Amari closed her eyes, teeth gritted. She took off her hat, squeezing the beret too hard. She only spoke three words, but they shattered what was left off your world.

"Jack is missing."

Chapter End Notes

*Ducks*

I will try to have the next chapter up sooner. I have a few written ahead, but they are taking longer.

In other news, my area was hit hard by storms. Working overtime, just got off a boil-water advisory, and trying to adult. My wrists are now mostly affected by humidity, which I guess is a good sign? But some days are good, some days are just...ugh. Trying to stay ahead, but really had to slog these chapters out, because they're tricky and need to do them right.

Discord Link if you want to yell.
Chapter 121

Chapter Summary

What happened to Jack?

Chapter Notes

Yumii has been on an art kick with Lao and others.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You paced in front of the hibernating comm panel, having heard Captain Amari's basic explanation three times, and still being unable to process it. Jack was supposed to be in Geneva for a meeting with politicians - Kwento was one of them. But he had never arrived. She had more information than that, enough to take some kind of action, but you had to wait to hear it in person, because of clearances and mission security. You understood the abstract reasons, but it took all your self control, and Jesse holding you back, his hands firmly squeezing your arms, to keep you from demanding answers right this fucking instant, protocol and everyone else be damned.

Anxious, verging on twitchy, you tried to breathe deep and slow, to calm yourself down. But dread warred with a sickening icy numbness in your gut. Shock would keep you from absorbing all the emotions immediately- they would hover, disembodied for at least several hours, while you tried to formulate a rational plan. But you would not be able to maintain your cool forever, you knew this from gut wrenching experience.

"I need you with me," Jesse said hoarsely. "I ain't ready to do this alone."

You stopped and looked up at him, those warm brown eyes a little too bright, his wobbling smile nowhere near convincing, his hat missing. You weren't the only one who loved Gabriel, who mourned Tataryn. You weren't the only one terrified for the safety of someone else. Jesse's loyalty to Gabriel was a quiet steady thing, and you did not doubt it.

"You're not alone," you sighed, pushing your panic back down. You would deal with the emotional fallout later. It might be a few hours, or a few days, but it was inevitable. For now, Jesse needed your help making a game plan and keeping the team together. You had a job to do, a mission to complete. You would focus on that for as long as you could. "We better brief the team that our furlough is canceled."

Jesse nodded. "Diallo might be out for medical reasons."

"Nothing we can do about that," you said, flinching as you took a breath, pain radiating from your side. "Just have to keep things running smoothly till we get back."

Jesse exhaled slowly. "Yeah, I know."

"Not much else we can do right now, except play nice with On Sing." Your mind drifted to
Lacroix and the thing he and Isha had found. Best not to mention that yet. "I think our crew is reliable enough to handle the ride back."

"Yeah," Jesse said, some of the color returning to his face. "We better go update them."

Genji and Hanzo sat outside the medical bay, Isha in Genji's lap chirping rapidly at him.

A medic was setting and mending Diallo's broken arm and someone had put up On Sing's version emitter in the waiting space. It covered a domed area and it didn't look the ones Angela used, but you recognized that prickling warmth slicing its way under your skin. Hanzo and Genji looked unharmed, but Jesse was limping. Your entire midsection hurt.

Everyone looked up, their grim expressions mirroring your own.

"Looks like we have problems back home," Jesse said, nodding at each agent. "We're all back on the roster when we reach base."

"The Strike Commander is MIA," you said, and it was easier to say those words than, "Someone took Jack." Your voice didn't shake, though you felt all eyes on you, like maybe they half expected you to fall to pieces. "Captain Amari is recalling everyone cleared for Shit Spiders for active duty. We'll be briefed on arrival. So it looks like we're pulling a double."

The Shimadas each gave you a single nod of acknowledgement. Diallo glanced rapidly between you and Jesse, alarm clear on her face, but she nodded as well. They probably overhead bits and pieces already, but you appreciated the simple acceptance of your orders.

"Take the time to rest up and recharge," Jesse said. "Ain't much else we can do till we get back to base."

Hanzo's eyes flicked between Jesse and you, but he didn't offer any comments. Genji was already cleaning one of his short blades. Diallo massaged her knee, staring at the floor.

"Lucky, why don't we get you checked out? Lacroix said you took some heavy hits," Feng said, as she approached your group.

You flinched. "I'm fine."

"Uh huh," she said, obviously not believing a word of it. "Well, Isha needs a checkup too, Athena said she got kicked. Someone will need to hold her for it, and let's be honest, you're the one least likely to get mutilated. If we're going from one crisis to another, you need to be fixed up, OK?"

"...OK," you said, not fooled by her ploy, but too tired to fight about it. Her reasoning was sound. Maybe you were just being stubborn. After all, you couldn't just rest when you got back to base.

"And we can start planning. Because it looks like we've got a situation that's going to require some finesse and more importantly, lots of firepower. Hanzo, Genji, do you guys need anything?"

"I am fine," Hanzo began, very formally.

"We need to rehydrate," Genji said, rolling his eyes. "And if you have any energy bars-"

"Oh, there's food in common area. Help yourselves," Feng said, her gaze lingering on
Hanzo for a second too long. She paused, frowning at Jesse. "Come on, McCree. You need to get checked out too. Bayan and Auntie are still working on getting Commander Reyes stabilized, but so far everything is going smoothly. Lucky's doing it. Lacroix's doing it. All the cool kids are getting medical exams."

You squinted at her.

Jesse sighed, running his fingers through his dusty hair. "Yeah, OK, firecracker. No need to fight dirty."

Feng beamed at him. "Firecracker?"

"Would you rather be "string bean?" Jesse asked, giving her a tired grin.

"We're at the nickname part of the relationship," she said nudging you with her elbow. "Next we'll be cattle wrangling and octopus wrassling, then eating beans and franks cooked over an open fire," she said happily.

You snorted, not missing Hanzo's heavy frown.

"Octopus wrassling?" Jesse murmured as she ushered you into a smaller exam room.

You shrugged.

"A genuine American pastime in the Pacific Northwest." Feng said cheerfully, then abruptly paused. "It might be animal cruelty now that I think about it, but I was going for the "man versus nature," down-to-earth, cowboy feel. Might have missed the mark. Sorry?"

"Ain't nothing for you to apologize for," Jesse said smoothly. "Not after that rescue. Appreciate you showing up when you did."

"That was my job," Feng said, grabbing a handheld scanner. "On Sing will provide support and emergency transportation should the need arise in exchange for technology and intel sharing, blah blah blah." She held up the scanner. "Who's on deck?"

Jesse gave you a gentle push. "Ladies first."

Holding Isha against your chest, you pointed at your raptor.

"I can do both," Feng said gesturing to an exam table. You hopped up onto it.

Isha chirped and you took a deep breath as Feng simply pushed a button, holding the device in front of her. She had you raise Isha's arms, while your raptor protested sullenly.

"Hold still, we need to make sure you're not hurt," you said.

She huffed at you, giving you, Feng, and even Jesse very dirty looks.

"It's part of the package, raptor niece," Feng said cheerfully. "You get picked up, checked out, and served an in-flight meal. We're a full-service Triad. Don't forget to leave a review!"

Isha just gave a long, slow, unimpressed blink.

Feng deflated slightly. "That is not five stars, is it?"

"I was a little surprised to see you down there," Jesse said, quickly changing the subject.
"You didn't need to come in person. Appreciate you doing so though."

Feng just shook her head. "Oh, I needed to come...for reasons." She hummed to herself, nodding as she poked and prodded an increasingly irritable Isha.

"Strains, contusions, hmmm- OK, that's not your blood. Well, raptor niece, you are vicious." Feng laughed. "She'll probably be limping tomorrow- don't be surprised if she hams it up for attention-that's what Peony does. Bayan takes it with grace, humor, and a lot of hyperventilating." Feng nodded sagely.

"Try finding out she's stowed away on your mission," you scowled.

Feng exhaled slowly. "Yeah...I bet it was panic-inducing." She shuddered. Holding up the scanner, she keyed in some new parameters and ran it over your arm. "Lucky, I realize you have to power through everything like some kind of badass, but you're pretty battered. I'd normally tell you to take a couple days off, but since you're getting treated so early on, there shouldn't be any permanent harm. Both of you should go sit by the emitter for the rest of the trip. Eat some food and drink some water. You'll both be halfway to fighting shape by the time we arrive."

Isha didn't look amused. She wiggled angrily and you put her down. She stalked to the door and made a chirruping sound, like she was hungry.

"...I think she's mad that they're eating without us," Jesse said, the realization dawning on you at the same time.

"Sounds about right," you said gesturing at the door. "Can she-?"

"Oh, yeah, go hogwild," Feng said.

The door slid open and Isha went to find the Shimadas and more importantly, food. The exit was cute, but that was promptly ruined by the reminder that Auntie Zheng was hovering there in the wires, listening to every word that you said.

"You're up. And before you ask, no, I'm not a real doctor. But I do have a lab coat somewhere if that will make you feel better."

Jesse snorted but sat down on the table. "Seems more like a mad scientist thing."

"I'm not really one of those either. I just manage several, speak the language, and occasionally blow things up for fu- Well, damn. Talk about a critical lack of self awareness." Feng laughed nervously.

Jesse raised a brow at her, eyes tired, and though he'd tried to smile, he was in the same state as you - too worn down to pretend with any conviction.

Feng looked over Jesse with the scanner, her face very serious as she focused on giving him a check up without overtly checking him out.

"You've got some hairline fractures along the right scapula and humerus, some tearing in the meniscus, and the requisite collection of sprains, strains, and contusions." She frowned at him. "You're going to need to go sit down under the emitter. Stay off that knee. I'll have someone bring you refreshments." She stepped aside and rummaged around a cupboard, grabbing a three-sectioned staff, locking the pieces together, and handed it to Jesse.

He snorted. "I'm fine-"
"You can whack Genji with it," she said.

Jesse eyed the metal staff with a wry smile. "Are you sure it's Genji you want me to whack?"

Feng laughed nervously, taking half a second to give you a questioning look.

You shrugged. You didn't know what Jesse knew about the situation, but he wasn't dumb. It didn't take a genius to pick up on the fact that there was something weird between Feng and Hanzo.

"Anyway, you and Lucky are the ranking Blackwatch officers," Feng said, quickly diverting the subject. "There is something I have to ask you about."

Jesse crossed his arms, sitting back on the exam table, staff across his lap. "I don't have the authority to renegotiate terms-" He gave you a worried look.

"Not what I'm trying to do," Feng said, holding her hands up in front of her, shaking her head. "Blood oath, remember?" She tapped her long healed palm. "I'm not about to leave Jack high and dry, no matter what my family thinks. Commander Reyes is important to Lucky and Jack, so we're giving him the best care available." She rubbed the back of her neck. "You know, I can't make any guarantees, but Auntie is pretty sure his chances are good. And I know we can keep him stabilized for the entire trip. Anyway, her "pretty sure" is better than most doctors' promises."

You took a deep breath, knowing Zheng was very competent, and still not feeling relieved. But Bayan was helping too, and you trusted him. Even if Zheng was far more skilled, Bayan was someone who would give it his all. Bayan was one of the good guys. It wasn't Zheng's merit that gave you comfort, but Bayan's character. It was a terribly irrational reassurance, but it was what you had.

"Thanks," you said, trying to look relaxed. "How's Lacroix?" You asked, because despite his condition, you were still surprised that he hadn't come out, demanding to be involved in the proceedings. But then, if he was in fighting condition, you and Jesse wouldn't be the ranking officers.

"A little delirious," Feng said, brow furrowed.

"Really?" You raised a brow. "Like "spilling delicious secrets" delirious or "imaginary bunnies" delirious?"

"The latter," Feng muttered. "Unless he normally babbles about the ecological and metaphorical significance of grunion runs."

"What?" You glanced at Jesse who shrugged.

"It's a very idiosyncratic fish spawning behavior," Feng said, swirling her fingers in a complicated pattern. "Auntie Zheng had to explain it to me. Fascinating stuff, but we don't have the time to get into it. Anyway, your grumpy hacker boy is sitting with him, chewing him out in French, Hebrew, and English. I've got him on an IV with a course of nanites, but on top of losing the eye, he's got a dislocated shoulder, some torn tendons, a broken wrist. Also he's pretty concussed, so I don't feel bad about leaving him alone in there with Agent Angry Eyebrows: he seems unfazed by it and probably won't remember the interaction anyway. Trust me, when you've been hit that hard in the head, you'll have whole chunks of missing memories. And that's not even broaching the topic of traumatic organ removal." Feng shuddered. "Also, there's no brain bleeding
that we can see, but he needs to rest."

You inhaled deeply, fists clenching and unclenching slowly, because you hadn't realized that Lacroix had taken that much damage. However, he had been fighting against two cyborgs while Nguyen mutilated him; none of them had been gentle. And afterward he'd given no indication of how much pain he was in. That rat bastard, he might not have been a super soldier, but he could power his way through pain like the best of them.

"Didn't think it was that bad," Jesse murmured.

"He faked me out," you muttered, guilt starting to pool in your stomach. If you had stayed with him instead of rushing off after Tataryn, would things be different? If Tataryn hadn't been standing in the doorway when the bomb went off, would he be standing here now? There was no way to tell, and you'd drive yourself mad with your fractal speculations.

"He'll be fine, as long as your hacker boy doesn't smother him with a pillow," Feng said. "But I don't think he's in any shape to help us out." She sighed. "My people are just in as support staff. Auntie is holding firm on that. But that's less of a worry since we're heading straight back to Zurich."

Arms crossed, you tried to sound nonchalant. "So what did you want to ask?"

"Did you get it?" Feng asked. She stood straight, beetle-green armor gleaming in the lowlights. Her stance changed, her bright eyes cool and sharp, her smile losing its cheer.

You hoped your surprise didn't show on your face. You just stood there for a moment, processing. How did she-? Of course, she knew. Zheng had to be aware of it, though you didn't like Zheng's motives at all.

Jesse blinked, looking rapidly between the two of you.

"You're going to have to be more specific," you said, playing for time. "Ziv downloaded a lot of intel and we picked up some Vishkar prototypes..."

Feng nodded, shoulders relaxing. "No, no specifics yet. Judging by your response, you don't really know what I want." She gave you a wry smile. "Am I right?"

Because if you didn't know what she was talking about, she wouldn't have to ask you about it and perhaps draw you into negotiations. Negotiations that might affect Gabriel's life. Because you had a damn good idea what she was asking about, and while you trusted Feng, you didn't trust Great Aunt Zheng at all.

Jesse watched her warily. "We're just the muscle, firecracker. We don't know nothing about treasure."

That was laid on a little thick, but you'd take it.

Feng's smile widened and she waved her hand dismissively. "OK then. I guess I'll just have to wait till I see Jack." Then her smile fell as she remembered that your other lover was MIA. "Oh...shit." Then she stared down at her hands thoughtfully, clenching her fists. "No, that's exactly right. I have to wait till I see Jack." She gave you a pointed look. "He's the one I need to talk to. So, if I need to find Jack to discuss...treasure, and you need to find Jack...maybe we should pool resources?"

You stared thoughtfully at her. "Yeah, that's a good idea."
Jesse nodded. "Stick close. We know we can't ask you to fight for us, but if you gotta see Morrison for political reasons, well, we're the ones you want to be with. Since, we'll be looking for him too." Jesse's smile was wide and open, but he gave you a sly look.

"We can talk about it more later," Feng said, opening the door, determination in her eyes. "You two go heal up, rest, and eat. In whatever order. But get it done before we arrive in Zurich."

You climbed to your feet, muscles aching as you headed out to the common area, outside main medbay. Genji and Hanzo had returned, Isha perched on Genji's lap, helping herself to a meatbun off his plate. Diallo sat across from them, holding a steaming cup of tea, her gaze unfocused.

You instinctively scanned the room for Tataryn's smug face, before your throat locked up and your heart stopped for a beat. Swallowing roughly, you wobbled over to your friends and sat down. Jesse followed, plunking down beside you.

You reached over and put your hand on Diallo's arm. You didn't have words. You weren't sure what you could say, or if she blamed you, or if she even wanted company.

She sniffled and put her head on your shoulder, looking much smaller without her armor on.

"Can I-?"

"No, I'm fine. Just shutting my eyes for a few," she said hoarsely, and you looked away, knowing she didn't want to talk about it. You sat there, letting her take the comfort she needed. You weren't sure what to offer, because you were feeling the weight of your grief too.

The world was spinning too quickly.

Lacroix was down for the count. Jack was missing, details to be shared soon. Gabriel was in critical condition. And Tataryn was dead.

Individually, any of those things would be a gut punch. But all together, it was shredding you inside, nerves so on fire it was agony. Waiting was misery, a slow suffocation despite all your deep breathing, and you wanted to scream.

Jesse sat close, hip brushing against yours. You leaned in, and he put an arm around you. You didn't speak, not trusting your reactions.

"He's tough as a well-done, three-day old steak, sweetpea," Jesse murmured. "Didn't need that much blood in 'em anyway. It was just slowing him down. And Morrison is the same, only...blonder."

You gave a bark of involuntary laughter. "I'm not-"

"I know."

He peeled his serape off, a set it on your shoulders. It stunk of blood, sweat, and gunpowder, but it was warm, and more comforting than any words you could think of.

"Take a soldier's rest," he told you. "We need to be in fighting shape when we get back."

You nodded.

There was a tug on your leg and you blinked as Isha held up a half eaten meat bun, her
expression grave.

"Yeah, OK," you said, taking it. "Thanks." You took a bite of the meatbun, not tasting anything.

"Where's mine?" Jesse asked with mock outrage.

"Don't get too excited," Genji said. "She stole that one from Hanzo."

Hanzo just waved his hand dismissively. "It is fine. We can get more."

Did you just get Hanzo- cooties? Oh well. You sighed, and finished the meatbun anyway.

Isha chortled and hopped onto the seat, climbing into your lap.

She snuggled up against your chest, burrowing into Jesse's serape. Diallo reached over and petted Isha, cooing softly in Wolof. Isha made a few inquiring chirrups, like she knew something was wrong, but she needed you to explain it.

You didn't have the words, so you just rubbed her chest. You wanted to promise her that this was just a temporary inconvenience. That you'd get the rest of her family back intact. That things were going to be just fine.

But you couldn't bring yourself to lie to your murderbird.

Angela was first on board, with nurses and a gurney to pick up Gabriel. Bayan went with her, both of them speaking rapidly in hushed voices as they carried him away. You only caught a glimpse of him, wrapped in bandages, hooked up to IVs and monitors. It took everything in you not to run after him, to go with them demanding answers that no one could give.

Jesse kept his arm around you, possibly because he thought you would bolt. You hugged Isha closer, because maybe she really would run after them.

Amélie and another nurse were waiting to escort a very wobbly Lacroix off the ship and probably straight to the medical center. Lacroix leaned on Ziv as they disembarked. Amélie spoke in hushed tones, her concern filtering out in taut words and white-knuckled fists. She glanced up at you, and swept past Lacroix, shaking her head as Ziv and the nurse helped him down the ramp. She made a beeline for you and you gulped, a little worried by the steel in her eyes.

"I'm sor-" You began, because you had left Lacroix alone and maybe if you hadn't antagonized Nguyen so much, she wouldn't have escalated so quickly...

"We will find Jack. Gabriel is receiving some of the best medical attention in the world. My husband is alive," Amélie said, her hands on both your shoulders. "I have always thought he would look dashing in an eye patch, and Ana and Torby have already requisitioned funds for a cybernetic replacement. Do not waste your breath apologizing. We have work to do."

"I-Yeah. OK," you said, swallowing the uncomfortable lump of words and regrets that had gotten lodged in your throat. "Thank you."

"No thanks are necessary," she said, with a toss of her head. "They have brought their war to our doorstep and now we will annihilate them. Nguyen was only the first, and her death was a
long time coming." Amélie gave you a grim smile. "I must see to Gérard, but I will be on call momentarily."

She whirled, moving quickly to catch up with Lacroix and Ziv.

You exhaled slowly, straightening up. Amélie's words lit the fire in your belly. She hadn't said anything you weren't already aware of, but hearing her make those declarations, with such conviction, roused you from your fugue.

Captain Amari stood at the base of the ramp, speaking tersely with Feng. Feng just kept shrugging, a bright, eerily cheerful smile pasted firmly on her face. You got the impression they were disagreeing on something, but neither raised their voices nor made any aggressive moves. Finally, Captain Amari just waved her hand and Feng's smile got even wider.

"I need anyone who's cleared for active duty to come with me," she said, looking almost relieved to see your group. "Diallo, why don't you swing by the infirmary and get checked out. If you're in good enough shape, we could use your help."

"Ma'am." Diallo saluted. She paused and looked back at you. "I'll break the news to Min."

"Thanks," you said, mouth dry. That wasn't going to go well. But what was worse was that someone was going to have to tell Kseniya, and while that was normally a job for the Blackwatch commander-

You gritted your teeth. Now was not the time to worry about that. You needed to focus on the urgent tasks at hand. You would deal with the other problems when you had time.

"I'll brief you in the Blackwatch conference room," Captain Amari said, exhaustion lining her face, but she walked tall, coat flaring behind her as she led the way. Feng walked beside her, swinging her arms too quickly, trying to look carefree and childish. You didn't think anyone present was fooled, but it didn't matter.

You strode forward, still wearing Jesse's serape, Isha bundled against your chest. "You gonna give that back?" Jesse asked, falling in beside you, still holding the staff as support. The Shimadas followed

"Maybe," you said, eyes on Captain Amari.

"It looks better on her," Genji said, under his breath.

Jesse sputtered and you sighed, unwrapping the warm length of fabric and handing it back to him. Isha grumbled, but didn't make a scene.

Genji just surged ahead of everyone, holding open the conference room door for Captain Amari and pretending like he had manners.

Your group filed in, no one sitting down in the chairs, though Feng perched on the table, kicking her legs rapidly. You leaned against the table, Jesse at your side. The Shimadas hovered with their backs to the wall, giving each other pointed looks. Captain Amari shut the door and took off her hat.

"I'm sorry about Fedor," she said, looking you each in the eyes. "He was a good agent and a charming friend, and we are poorer for his loss."

You rubbed the back of your neck, feeling guilty because you wanted her to just hurry up
and tell you what happened to Jack. Because if you shed any more tears for any reason, you just might not be able to stop. And that wouldn't help anyone, least of all Jack.

"Jack departed Zurich four hours ago. He was accompanied by Epsilon Squad," Captain Amari said abruptly, standing at the head of the table. "They took a small shuttle transport to Geneva - the trip should have been an hour tops. They never arrived."

You tapped your fingers against the tabletop, teeth clenched.

"Athena was able to pinpoint the last GPS location, before her connection to them was cut. It took less than twenty minutes to re-connect and locate the vehicle. Within the hour, we found the burning wreckage, via satellite footage, and dispatched Torby and a crew to investigate. The ship didn't crash," she said, arms crossed. "It looks like they landed because of technical issues and were ambushed. We've recovered several bodies, but Jack's is not among them. We're still in the process of...identifying the remains, but none them are tall enough to be him. We know that Petras has been fixated on Jack, and in all likelihood, if this is Petras' gambit, Jack is still alive."

You exhaled slowly. You were on a time crunch then. You doubted this was some kind of ransom. Whoever took Jack would be focused on securing his cooperation, and once they realized they could not, they would not simply release him. And you couldn't afford to think about the things they would do to break him. Because for a moment, you saw him there, chained down, some faceless cyborg cutting- Enough. This helped no one. You needed to find him fast.

"This is not common knowledge. Obviously, we assume that someone on the inside gave Jack's routes and travel times to the enemy. I've re-tasked several of the logistics people who had prior knowledge of Jack's itinerary. Athena is keeping an eye on them. But there are too many suspects. It would help if we had a way to narrow the focus."

You blinked. "Lacroix-"

"Is secretive, concussed, and out of commission," Captain Amari said, with a scowl. "I know he has a list, but he swore up and down that it was a work in progress and not comprehensive enough to share."

You blinked. "Oh."

"Not to mention, I don't have access to it. Neither does Amélie, we already tried," Captain Amari sighed.

You blinked, a little shocked that he'd kept it from Amélie.

"Athena confirms that there is a file, but while her encryptions help protect it, Gérard apparently took specific security measures that she can't violate. She couldn't give me the details only that he set up contingencies, and that there was already the person designated to handle the situation was still available."

You blinked. "Is Athena on deck?"

"Not in here," Captain Amari said. "Gabriel hasn't lifted the ban-"

There was a knock at the door.

Genji kicked off the wall and stalked to the door.

"What?" He asked.
A thin blonde man in an expensive suit cleared his throat. "I'm looking for Captain Amari. It is high priority business," he said apologetically, not even batting an eye at Genji's unfriendly face and robotic limbs.

"We're in a meeting," Genji said, starting to close the door.

"I was sent to find her and request a personal briefing. No one else in the chain of command is picking up our calls and we have a Code Blue."

A Code Blue? Your head snapped up, and you recognized him then - Sigmund Mayer, the UN Secretary General's personal assistant. Because only someone important could deliver that bombshell. A Code Blue meant an imminent, large-scale, Omnic invasion.

"What?" Captain Amari was at the door. "Are you certain?"

"The Security Council has already declared it such. I know the breach of protocol is unusual, but we have been keeping a close eye on certain areas, and the situation has worsened drastically in the past hour," the man said. "There's also been a demand for the original Overwatch Strike Force to oversee the situation. Certain political factions within the UN have already been making promises to that effect."

"They did what?" Captain Amari snarled. "Before we were even notified-"

And before your "own" techs had made the report. Fury curled in your gut. Overwatch had people to monitor situations and make those predictions. A civilian authority calling it in first wasn't just a breach of protocol, it was a massive intelligence failure on Overwatch's part.

Except, of course, it wasn't incompetence that caused this failure.

"Ma'am, I was sent to assure you that this was not the intention of the Secretary General, and that he has been briefed on the...complexities of your situation by Undersecretary Kwento." Mayer squirmed just a little under Captain Amari's harsh gaze. "Politics aside, the Code Blue is real and can be verified by your own-"

"Let me guess," Hanzo said. "It is in the Mediterranean."

Mayer blinked. "Yes, it is. How did you-"

Hanzo cursed under his breath.

Genji raised a brow. "Give us one moment to wrap up. Captain Amari will be out to handle things in a few minutes."

Mayer started to protest, but all of you glared at him, your collective expressions, and the danger they represented, silencing him. "I- Of course, you all understand the severity of the situation. My apologies. I will...wait out here."

Genji shut the door in Mayer's face. "I recognize that look. You have an idea." Genji said to Hanzo. "My brother has always had a mind for strategy." He looked directly at Captain Amari. "Sometimes he is shockingly insightful."

"Only about tactics," Hanzo said, modestly. "Rarely about people."

Feng leaned forward, eyes on Hanzo. But he was looking at Captain Amari.
"Go on," Captain Amari said, head inclined to the side.

"I had misgivings about how things transpired in Hanoi," Hanzo said. "It was a challenging mission, I am not demeaning anyone's efforts or suffering. But Nguyen was not at full strength, her lack of preparation was uncharacteristic, and I would argue Vishkar's presence did more to sabotage her than anything else."

Captain Amari narrowed her eyes. "I see." She looked around the room. "Thoughts?"

"Parts of it were too easy," Genji agreed.

"Their forces weren't working well together," Jesse said.

"But she was expecting us, and they should have been better prepared. She did make a point to criticize her "allies" for their lack of helpfulness. She knew they were sacrificing her," you said, replaying those last few moments while she bled out on the floor.

"All right," Captain Amari nodded. "Continue."

"There is a gap in the strategy. Nguyen was a feint, bait to draw out Blackwatch and other important agents, while Talon went after the Strike Commander. And this "Code Blue" is too conveniently timed."

"It's funny how we've redefined the word "convenient" in this line of work," Jesse muttered.

"Prince let slip that Petras had proxy contacts possibly exacerbating the Mediterranean situation," Captain Amari said, her words clipped and radiating fury. "This is to ensure we cannot go after Jack."

"Yes, but there is more," Hanzo said, shaking his head. "Nguyen was the bait. The Strike Commander was a priority target. Eliminating the current Overwatch leadership also seems to be priority. You are still too popular to demote, and they must take more extreme measures. So what do you think will happen when you leave to fight the omnis?"

A majority of Overwatch forces would go to the Mediterranean. A smaller strike team would be sent after Jack. And Gabriel and Lacroix were both laid up in the medbay, vulnerable targets to treachery.

"They'll stage another attack on HQ," Captain Amari said, then started cursing under her breath in Arabic. She stood there, glowering at the table, while the rest of you waited for her to tell you what to do. You never envied leadership less than you did in that moment.

"I don't want it to become public knowledge that both Jack and Gabriel are out of commission. We don't need to invite more trouble yet," Captain Amari said after a minute. "Reinhardt, Torby, and myself with have to answer the Code Blue. It may take more people, but we'll be severely handicapped without Jack or Gabriel. I don't think any of our newer units can fulfill the same roles." She looked at you. "We'll need a team to retrieve Jack. I wish I could give you more people, but it looks like things are even more dire than I thought."

"Ma'am," you saluted. "I'd go by myself if you didn't agree to send me."

Captain Amari shook her head, smiling. "What have I said about being blatant in your insubordination?"
"Sorry," you said, not very convincingly.

She didn't call you on it. Instead she turned her attention to Jesse. "I need someone I trust to coordinate defenses here. You're the most experienced in operational logistics."

You blinked, a little surprised. Mostly because you'd been counting on Jesse as your backup.

"Genji, Hanzo, I will be requisitioning you for active duty. I know Hanzo hasn't yet received the proper gear but-"

"Wait," you said, because you needed more people, not less. "I might be able to get us some more people, trustworthy ones familiar with Overwatch squad tactics."

Captain Amari raised her head, probably realizing whom you were talking about. "You think so? All right. I will go handle the politicians and marshal our forces. Athena should be able to provide you with up-to-date information on what our forensic techs have found. Check back with me in an hour. Genji and Hanzo, if you could continue to support Lucky and Jesse for the time being. Dismissed." She saluted and was out the door, briskly walking with a still shaken Mayer.

"Can I borrow our ninjas to inspect the medical center defenses?" Jesse asked. He gave Hanzo a wry smile. "Might need a few recommendations from you."

"Of course," Hanzo said with swift nod.

"Yeah. I've got some calls to make," you said. "Give me half an hour and I'll join you."

Jesse and the Shimada brothers headed out, speaking rapidly amongst themselves.

"Well," Feng said, uncrossing her arms. "It looks like you really need some help. What can I do? And keep in mind, I can't send On Sing into direct combat. Not without approval from the family, and to be honest, I don't know if I can get that soon enough for it to be worth anything."

"We're going to need some transports," you said. "Fast ones."

"On it," Feng said, already moving.

You tried to put Isha in your room, knowing she had to be tired, but she dug her claws in, sticking to your chest. You decided that you didn't mind her company for this. You would put her to bed after. Then you stopped at Lacroix's office. It was too quiet, the lights off, no sardonic Frenchman sneaking cigarettes and brandy while he did his work. You stared at his empty chair for a moment, keenly feeling the loss, and realizing then that that seat was almost impossible to fill. It was a good thing that he was still alive. Shaking your head, you turned on the light.

"Athena, access file Revenant Gun, under clearance Ultramarine, Priority Degas."

"It is unlocked and has been forwarded to you. There is also a personal letter addressed to you."

You sat in your customary chair, setting Isha down and got your tablet out. Taking a deep breath, you opened up the letter first:

_Chanceux, if you are reading this, times must be dire indeed. Here you are running about_
unsupervised while I take an involuntary sabbatical. I survived whatever the mission threw at me. But will I survive your handling of affairs? It is a worrying thought indeed. But as I always say in times of extreme duress, "la difficulté attire l'homme de caractère, car c'est en l'étreignant qu'il se réalise lui-même." You should consider it. Athena in particular would appreciate that quote, should the need arise.

You took a moment to read that, because in your memory, he never said any such thing. It was probably a quote, one lost on you that he put in there just to be aggravating. And what was he saying about "dire times?" He was the one who decided who gained access to his list. He was the one set this up. If you were so incompetent, why did he give you sole access to-

It hit you then, like a slap in the face, and you set the tablet down, staring at the empty seat.

Lacroix was all about deception, saying one thing, meaning another. His manipulations were often complex, with feints, misdirects, and all kinds of mindfucking trickery. He wasn't a man who regularly came out and volunteered an honest answer, not without carefully applied pressure or an ulterior motive.

You sat there for a long moment, reevaluating your relationship with the spymaster. How many times had he quietly been on your side, gently mocking you while he took up your cause? You could think of several missions where a traditional CO would have severely disciplined you. Lacroix did let you get away with a lot. How many times had he actually thrown you under the bus or screwed you over? You couldn't think of anything besides that initial intake interrogation, and to be honest, that wasn't quite the same. And there in Nguyen's quarters, he'd made sure the attention was on him, not you, because Nguyen had no reason to keep you alive from the get-go. She had unfinished business with Lacroix, you were entirely unnecessary.

Amélie had told you that Lacroix trusted you, that he liked you. You had automatically dismissed that as politeness. But when had Amélie ever lied to you like that? She was your friend. If her husband actually disliked you, she would have simply said something like, "why does it matter to you what he thinks?"

Of course, Lacroix's subterfuge and constant misdirection weren't exactly healthy traits, but knowing his years in espionage and having gained a glimpse of his background, you sort of understood him. No, you understood him all too well. Affection would be viewed as weakness. Denial was in everyone's best interest. It was safest to keep some things secret, as he'd tried, vainly, to do with his "split" with Amélie. But after all this time, you understood. Lacroix really did see himself as your mentor, and as he'd flat out said before, he didn't waste time on useless people. You now truly understood that what he said, and what he actually meant could only be judged by what he had done, and for as long as you'd worked with him, Lacroix had never done wrong by you. You went back to reading the letter, a little shaken by this epiphany, and a little heartsick that it had taken such extreme measures to make you realize this truth.

This list is not as comprehensive as I wish. I have marked several people I would rather leave in place to watch their behavior, contacts, etc. I have also highlighted those in critical roles that should be replaced if warranted. I understand these designations are not mutually exclusive, and am leaving it up to your judgment. You understand the ramifications.

Expose someone too early, and you lost the investigative thread. You didn't know whom they were in contact with, what they were doing, and perhaps you'd warned off their compatriots. Leave someone in place for too long, and they could turn around and sabotage you. It was a hard choice.
Obviously, we cannot trust our civilian leadership, and I would once more remind you the value of your carefully cultivated alliances.

I am sure you have many questions. We shall speak more after the ordeal is over. Consider this your final exam. I will judge your performance accordingly. Your death qualifies as an automatic failure. Do try not to embarrass yourself.

Fond regards,

Gérard Lacroix

"Fond regards?" You shook your head. You couldn't tell if that was the cherry on top of his smarmy insults or an honest declaration of affection: it was probably both. Lacroix had mastered doublespeak. You brought up the list, which was could be sorted by department, rank, and name. There were at least twenty people who occupied mission-critical positions.

You skimmed through, picking out two people in the medical ward, asking Athena to check if they were on duty, and then reassign them to the field. They didn't have to go anywhere dangerous, you just needed them far away from Gabriel and Lacroix so no "accidents" occurred.

The InSec personnel were a trickier placement. As were the active duty agents and operations support staff. You couldn't just send everyone home. You needed a job to put some of them on, something that wouldn't arouse suspicion. You'd have to get Jesse and Captain Amari to help with this. You thought about directly-sharing the list, but then, Lacroix had avoided that, despite the inconvenience. He had to have a reason...

And that weird little comment about Athena "appreciating a quote." You sat there for a moment.

You would worry about that later. You would need to have a follow up strategy meeting soon. You would present the data then. Picking up your tablet, you gestured for Isha to follow as you exited Lacroix's office, ready to start the next part.

As you shut off the lights, you realized that Lacroix had written you a letter based on the circumstances that he was temporarily out of commission. You tried not to think about the letter you would have received if he had not survived.

"We have the Morrisons on lockdown," Chang told you over the screen, her expression severe. "There'd been some unsavory traffic through here recently, so we upped the alert. We've moved everyone to a secure location." She didn't give any specifics.

Captain Amari had already put both everyone's families on heightened security alerts. It was a good precaution to take, but you weren't calling about that.

"Any word on Jack?" Chang asked grimly, like she was wondering if she'd have to take off work for another funeral. You flinched at that. Yes, there were more funerals in the future, but it did you no good to think that way, not while you still had work to do.

You exhaled. "MIA, probably still alive. But we've been hit by a Code Blue and we're expecting a "surprise" assault on HQ when the main Overwatch team heads for Greece."

Chang gritted her teeth. "I can't leave my post, Strike. There aren't a lot of squads we can
trust unconditionally, and I'm not leaving the Morrisons unguarded. Jack and I had this talk. I made him a promise." She gave you bitter smile. "I keep my promises."

"No, you stay put." You shook your head, holding your hands up. "Jack trusts you with his family and we don't want Talon getting any leverage on him." You were grateful that you didn't have to play politics with Chang. You could just tell her straight out what you wanted. "But we could use some SEP backup, if there's anyone you'd recommend. On Sing can handle transport. We just need more trustworthy bodies. Maybe someone who's familiar with Overwatch Squad dynamics and tactics, to back up Captain Amari in the field."

Chang nodded curtly, and if she was surprised by your request, it didn't show. "That I can do. I'll call in Leah, Lucy, and Andre. I don't know if they'll come, but they're the only ones left that I'd trust. Blue too, I guess, but I don't know if you need a mouthy pilot. Maybe he can read them his poetry or something." Chang gave a snort of disgust.

"I'll take all the help I can get."

"I'll ping them, let them know the deal. I'll get back with you soon."

"Thanks, Chang," you said.

"Find him, Strike," she said stone-faced, and cut the connection.

Shaking your head, you called General Singh, Senator Armstrong, and the rest of Lacroix's allies, warning them that something big had happened, and to be on their guard. The general and the senator got more information, because maybe they'd be able to help out. The general couldn't send forces to back you up, not without attracting the wrong kind of attention, but he was going to send a "visiting delegation" as soon as possible, and that list just happened to include Captain Vashtai DeVevo and a certain Lieutenant Salazar.

But it was Senator Armstrong who provided the most valuable intel. With the help of a certain red-headed FBI agent and some other underappreciated government workers, they'd done a full investigation of the Petras family's holdings, sorting through shell companies, trusts, and other blinds. You needed to poach their forensic accountant, because they'd gotten stuff you certainly didn't have. The Petras' family owned land and facilities all over the world. Jack could be anywhere. And you had no confirmation that it was Petras behind the abduction. Sure, he was your number one suspect, but you had no evidence, and you knew better than to go in half-cocked. You needed some kind of confirmation before you threw all your resources at him.

You forwarded that information to Genji and Hanzo, because both of them were better with the money angle.

Chang called you back minutes later.

"They're all in," she said. "Here are their respective coordinates."

"Thanks," you said.

"I've got to go," Chang said, eyes narrowing as she stared at something off screen. "Something's tripped the alarms."

"Take care of yourself," you said.

"The Morrisons come first," she said, and the screen went black.
Well, last chapter generated some...responses. *ducks*

Posted a hurt/comfort headcanon on the tumblr to cheer people up. I mean, you know. Posted on Discord first. Here’s another invite, if you're interested.

Wrist have been rough all week. This was later than I intended. Am trying to switch my internal schedule around. Going to bed earlier and trying to get up earlier (before work) to edit. It's a slow transition, but I'm working on it.
Chapter 122

Chapter Summary

You have to keep moving forward.

Chapter Notes

So I'm not there yet, but the story is going to be over one million words. *facepalm*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"There's ongoing cleanup from a Los Muertos op in Mexico," Captain Amari said. "We can send some of them through a few provinces. There's another omnic situation brewing around Buenos Aires. We can reassign the rest of them there - none of those missions look to be overtly related to Talon, so hopefully they won't botch them." Captain Amari shook her head. "I still don't like sending them to places where they can do more damage, Lucky."

"These are deep cover agents. They'll be more tempted to do harm here if there's a coup. If they're working on something unrelated, fucking it up will just risk their cover." You shrugged. "But if you can come up with a snipe hunt, that would work too."

Captain Amari shook her head. There was no time to make up a convincing fake op. "Jesse, you sort the ones in InSec, since you'll be here. Lucky if you have special recommendations for any specific agents, get them to me soon. Otherwise, I'm sending them all out."

Unspoken was the fact that she didn't have time to review your choices and that she would greenlight them all, simply out of desperation. So it came down to you, with Captain Amari trusting you to make the right decision. Except you didn't have time to check on every single one. Exhaling slowly, you decided to hand off the ones in Overwatch support roles to Genji. He was a sneaky bastard and would be good at assessing how much sabotage they could commit around the base. You would reassign the more dangerous active agents to distant locations and give Athena and Jesse a truncated list to cross-reference in the event of one of them going AWOL.

"I can come up with some busywork for InSec. Do you have anything you want done?" Jesse asked.

"Whatever you think best. Sorry, I'm short on time," Captain Amari scowled, looking between your dossiers and the map on the screen. "The forces from that underwater omnium are massing for strike. You might have to come dig us out of a cave when this is over."

You and Jesse both flinched.

"I apologize," Captain Amari sighed after an awkward minute. "I should not have said that."
This whole situation has me too keyed up."

"We would come dig you out of any cave at any time," Jesse said, recovering faster than you, his words smooth and easy. You nodded in agreement. "But I don't know if any of us could lift Reinhardt out..."

"And what if he's claustrophobic?" You asked with a straight face, even as you imagined what Reinhardt looked like when he panicked. It was somewhere between comical and terrifying.

Captain Amari shook her head, smiling faintly. "You two." She left off the "idiots" part, but you imagined it was a fondly-spoken epithet.

"I think we might be better off moving Winston to the infirmary to help Angela with some "tech" issues," Jesse said, all business again. "And you can't take Angela."

"Maybe Zenyatta," you said.

"We can ask. I don't know if he's adequately equipped to go into such a heavy combat situation," Captain Amari said, sidestepping questions of whether or not Zenyatta would fight. "But with the additional SEP veterans, I think we can afford to leave Jesse and Genji here to defend the base."

You started to protest, because you needed either one of them to help you plan the rescue mission.

"Hanzo has the same, if not greater experience than Genji, in offensive and stealth tactics," Captain Amari said firmly. "But he does not have Genji's familiarity with Overwatch defenses and protocol." Nor had he earned her trust.

"OK," you said, because she was right, and because you could trust Hanzo on combat missions. "I guess I have Feng."

"Yes," Captain Amari said, hesitantly, like she didn't quite approve of your Triad friend coming along. "I'd also recommend taking a tech, a heavy, and a sniper."

"I don't know if Ziv can do this mission," you said, instead of "I don't know if I can put Ziv at risk on this mission because I'm already emotionally strung out." You kept your face blank. "Riggs isn't any good in combat either."

"Your friend Lao-" Jesse began.

"Absolutely not!" You snapped. What was he thinking? You gave him a dirty look. "She's still healing-"

"Torby has been working with her with lightweight exo-armor and she has made substantial progress in the past two weeks. I recommend that you at least talk to Agent Lao," Captain Amari said in measured tones. "If not, Agent Mihret is your best bet. Normally I would agree that Athena is your best go-to, but whatever tech they used untethered her, so you should not rely on her as your only means of cyber support."

There was a knock at the door.

"It's Feng," Athena announced.

"Let her in," Captain Amari said, looking over the map.
Feng strode in, still wearing that deep green armor, now eating a meatbun. She set a large carryout box on the table. "It's halal," she told Captain Amari. "One of my chefs is a Uighur. He makes amazing cumin lamb and beautiful traditional hats. That's what I was going to have for dinner tonight - the lamb, not the hats," she sighed wistfully. "But reheated meatbuns are good too." She took another bite for emphasis.

Jesse reached over and swiped one, hurriedly eating it as he continued looking over some diagrams. "Update?" He asked her, without looking up.

"Again, satellite isn't showing anything suspicious. There's no overt assault on the Morrison homestead, but that's a lot of land, and as paranoid as she is, Chang has several perimeters of defenses set up." Feng shrugged.

"Chang's paranoid, and rightfully so," Jesse scanned a screen. "They've gone radio silent, which makes sense if they're hunkering down. They've got a full-on underground bunker, Lucky. They can hold out till reinforcements get there."

You gritted your teeth. Chang's lack of contact bothered you. It could mean nothing, it could mean everything.

"I sent some trustworthy people, On Sing and...others," Feng said hesitantly. "They're equipped for heavy combat. But I can only get away with that because of the blood oath. They'll backup the homestead, and they'll check in on Jane and her family."

"Thanks," you said. Because trusted agents were in short supply, and your people were already stretched too thin. You didn't want to risk sending turncoats to the Morrisons' doorstep.

"Hey, they're my blood-oath siblings too," Feng said, expression serious. "And I've also got three vehicles with your super soldiers inbound. I've passed the ID codes on to your air traffic control - they're dummy transport numbers for meat delivery vehicles, so as not to draw too much attention from your fifth column. But they should all be here in less than an hour."

"Thank you," Captain Amari said, but she didn't take a meatbun or comment on On Sing's cover story.

"Blood oath and minimal effort on my part," Feng sang, waving her hand. "But you're welcome!"

"Feng are you more of a sniper or-" Jesse began.

Feng slapped her arm against her chest plate, the metal ringing under her gauntlets. "I can arm wrestle an OR-14 in this and win. Plus I've got some of those new hard light shields. So I can take some hits. Quite a few actually."

"Diallo's not cleared for combat, but she wants to help defend the infirmary," Captain Amari said. "She's getting supplies from Agent Vo."

"And by "supplies," she means "explosives," Jesse said. "Angela isn't going to like that."

"Let Genji tell her," you said, so only Jesse could hear.

He snorted, giving you a wry look.

"I can leave some of my better-equipped people in the infirmary. They can't go on combat
runs, but if they or their allies are attacked, well, they'll have to defend themselves," Feng said cheerfully.

"And your aunt?" Captain Amari asked.

"She's boosting Athena. Not a fan of us getting into the fight, but she won't hang us out to dry," Feng said, surprisingly unoffended by the implication. She took another meatbun. "Sorry, need to carb load if I'm going to do this right. Genji shared some of the Petras holdings data with Auntie and she and Athena are narrowing it down to a dozen or so potential locations and cross-referencing it with Hanzo's actuarial predictions. He's really good at numbers," she said to no one in particular.

"Torby and Reinhardt should be back soon with their findings," Captain Amari said. "I have some more details to hammer out on our Code Blue. It's been given the designation Operation Morpheus." She rolled her eyes and muttered something about armchair generals who thought they were clever. "Jesse, you're in charge of Operation Pelennor. Lucky, you've got Operation Checquy. I've forwarded all relevant information in my possession to each of you. I need to go finish preparations for our departure, so if you have any questions, ask them now."

You glanced at Jesse.

He stared at his tablet for a moment, and then raised his head. The raw look on his face made you flinch. "Be careful out there, ma'am. We're down Morrison and the boss. We can't afford to lose you too."

Captain Amari smiled faintly at him. "You be careful here, Jesse. You're not the least bit replaceable either. Don't worry about me. At least out there, I know who my enemies are." She smiled wryly at you. "Do what you have to do, Lucky. But you come back to us alive. That's an order, from your Captain."

"Ma'am," you said, straightening up involuntarily, because apparently she was just going to call you out like that.

"I know you already have your hands full, but perhaps you should gather some of Gabriel's personal effects for him before you go." Captain Amari stared off to the side. "I don't think he would want anyone else in his quarters."

"Yeah, of course. Should have thought of that myself," you said, voice awfully reedy. It was good that he had a friend like her.

"And Amélie has already taken the initiative to isolate and question Ainsley Petras, since she is a flight risk. You'll want to swing by the interrogation rooms later: I believe Amélie was going to let her sweat for awhile."

You blinked. "But she doesn't know anything." You paused, reflecting on all of your prior suspicions. "Probably."

Captain Amari shrugged. "Amélie is just being thorough."

"No, that's fine. Ainsley can be useful occasionally," you said, tone humorless. But you were grateful that Amélie was overseeing the details you'd overlooked. "I'll get these new orders processed. Let me know when Torby and the techs get back."

Captain Amari nodded. "Of course."
You'd been by yourself in your lovers' quarters on numerous occasions, often crawling into bed to pass out and then wake up when they returned. Except this time, neither Gabriel nor Jack were going to walk through that door, chatting cheerfully while they undressed and climbed into bed with you.

That realization made your knees buckle as you headed down the hall to Gabriel's quarters. You gripped the door frame, steadied yourself, and then staggered inside. Taking deep breaths, you closed your eyes, the world spinning too quickly. The room smelled like him, a soothing mixture of his cologne, gun oil, and soap. He'd left it neat - always did before going on an op, but it still felt like he should be walking out of the bathroom brushing his teeth, or humming to himself at the kitchenette while making coffee or a meal.

But he wasn't going to. Not today. Maybe not ever again.

You had to sit down on the floor for a minute, nearly landing on a pair of Jack's boots. Staring at them - they lay sideways on the floor, laces still tied because he just kicked them off- you blinked rapidly, now hyperventilating as you tried not to think about how everything had gone horribly wrong.

Jack was missing, probably in hostile custody, his situation dire.

Gabriel was still in surgery, his condition just as critical.

And you were here, unable to take any direct action, to offer any help when they needed you most.

Shaking, you squeezed your eyes shut, keening into your sleeve. You bit down on the fabric, trying to muffle your cries. Misery wound through your chest, radiating outward, splintering bone, ripping through your stomach, and fracturing everything inside you. You just wanted to crawl into his bed, curl up under the covers, and cry till your heart stopped hurting. You'd briefly forgotten that one could feel grief so strong that it physically hurt.

You cried it out, because you couldn't hold it in any more and you couldn't carry it around forever. You had to release some of that pressure. It felt like an eternity, though when you looked up at the clock, it had only been a few minutes. You knew there was more grief inside you, that this was just the tip of the iceberg, but you wiped your eyes, and you picked yourself up off the floor. Your hiccups gradually slowed into calmer breaths, and you stood there a little embarrassed, a little hollow, definitely raw, but still functional despite the tearstains.

Crying wouldn't save anyone, and you felt winced at your own self indulgence. No, that wasn't right. Your therapist would reprimand you for being too harsh on yourself. Because this wasn't your solution to the problem, this wasn't you rolling over and giving up. This was you taking a moment to clear your head, to grapple with your pain in private. And now that you'd blown off some steam, you could get back up and face the world.

Wrung out, but no longer shaking, you got to work. Gabriel had a go-bag already packed, but you grabbed one of Jack's t-shirts out of his drawer, clutching the soft worn cotton tightly between your fingers. It smelled like both of them, and you exhaled slowly, trying not to sink under another swell of emotions.

Nguyen was finally dead, and standing there alone in Gabriel's bedroom, you found that that thought brought you no comfort, that loss was always more powerful than revenge. Revenge
was a goddamn consolation prize, not worth your life or the lives of your loved ones.

You stiffly went to the bathroom, turned on the sink, and splashed cold water in your face. You smelled like smoke and death. You needed a shower, to scrape the filth and blood off of you. It would clear your head more, and disguise the fact you'd been crying. You had clean clothes stashed here too. There weren't any towels hanging up, so you opened up the cabinet behind the door and fumbled with the neat stacks of linens.

You were not expecting the little velvet boxes that tumbled onto the floor. One popped open, a fiery black opal ring inside.

For a moment, you wondered how Isha had concealed and carried all three of those boxes on her own. She could be sneaky, but three separate boxes seemed like too much work for one little raptor- And then you sat down on the bathroom floor, one hand over your mouth as you realized how fucking dense you were.

With shaking hands, you picked up each box. They each contained ornate rings set with a large black opal. There was a gold ring, the spherical gem bluer than the rest with small diamonds orbiting it. The second box contained a platinum band, decorated simply with a massive greener-tinged opal. Both bands were too big for you. The third ring was made of omnium - like your fingers - and the cabochon held in a spiral, with more opal inlay on the sides. You didn't need to ask which ring was for whom. It was obvious.

Your first anniversary was coming up. Gabriel would be that goddamn prepared a month in advance, getting everyone matching, expensive, fucking ostentatious rings.

Choking on air and things less tangible, you shoved the boxes back into the cabinet. Fire tore through your chest as you climbed to your feet. You were going to celebrate that damn anniversary with them both. But you couldn't do that from here.

You did not have time for regrets or recriminations. You had to find Jack. Kill your enemies. And get back in time to read to Gabriel, to sit with him so even in his induced coma, he would know, on some level, that he wasn't alone. You'd pick a book off his bookshelf when you got back.

But first, you would get a shower. You would change clothes. Maybe get some food to recharge afterward. And then you would go out and face the world, ready to seize it by the throat and squeeze.

Diallo sat casually in the waiting area, pretending to sleepily read her tablet as she watched everyone who entered and exited the medical center. You exchanged nods as you passed, not missing the half a dozen On Sing personnel who had discretely set up camp in one of the exam rooms.

Genji lurked further in, standing by the door to the operating theater. Neither Angela nor Bayan were in sight.

"They're still working," Genji said without prompting. "The transfusion deliveries have slowed. Bayan and Angela are bickering over tissue regeneration methods."

You nodded absently, not entirely sure what that entailed.
"It's a good sign," Genji added.

"We could use more of those," you said.

"Ziv and Winston have set up on the other side," Genji said. He stared off in that direction. You'd never seen Winston fight, but you had a healthy respect for the baseline strength of apes.

"Give Ziv some drones and portable turrets and he'll be fine. Is Winston just modifying the defenses or-?"

"He'll stay here and provide whatever support he can, tech or combat." Genji paused. "But Lacroix is out cold. His input would have been helpful."

You caught a tinge of concern in Genji's tone. Like he was only slightly disappointed that it had rained today or that you'd bought baklava instead of peach mochi. It still spoke volumes. "Figures," you said. "I'm going to give him such shit for this." You tried to look nonchalant.

"Is that for the Commander?" Genji asked, gesturing to the bag.

"Yeah, some of his personal stuff. For when he wakes up," you said, choosing the words very carefully.

"I will keep Ziv from trying on his clothes." Genji took the bag from you.

"Ziv's more likely to draw penises on his face, in permanent marker," you muttered.

Genji nodded, eyes darting between you and the operating theater door. "Did you need to go in?"

You swallowed, shaking your head as you recalled the OR sanitation protocols. "I'd have to get scrubbed down, and changed, and we don't have time for that. I'll just check in before I go-"

Genji placed one hand on your shoulder. "I was in worse condition when they brought me here, and Angela still..." He stopped, averting his eyes. "She's handled more severe cases than this. I promise."

You blinked rapidly, averting your eyes, because Genji didn't like to talk about...before. Because he was obviously trying to help. Because it was working.

You inhaled deeply. "I see. But I'm still worried," you said weakly. "Because now, despite all of Angela's hard work, you're a real shit."

Genji snorted, lips twitching. "I suppose that I must tell you something that is fairly confidential. Your discretion is required."

"If you're going to say what I think you're going to say, I have to admit, it's not really a secret. We all kind of suspected that you have always been a shit."

Genji patted your head. "Yes, I suppose that's true. I have always been a monumental shit, just ask my brother. But more importantly, so has the Commander. And he is the biggest, meanest, most temperamental shit of them all." Genji's eyes were bright and he looked back at the doorway, gaze losing focus. "He was there too, of course. After I...left my family." Genji said the words with the barest hiccup. "I hated him at first. He was merciless, goading me with barbs and taunts, making me just angry enough to keep going, simply to spite him. And then he started bringing me
sweets when I made progress, like I was still a child... He denied it, claimed Angela must have brought them in and forgotten about them. When pressed, he scoffed, claiming that he didn't have time to coddle "grown-ass men." But I knew."

"That...sounds like something he'd do," you said softly. He'd been a little gentler with you when you first arrived in Blackwatch, but your damage had been different than Genji's.

Genji turned back around to face you. "We're too stubborn and vicious to give up in the face of death. You know what that is like. We will not waste this chance. So do what you must to get Morrison back. We'll keep the Commander safe in the interim."

You walked briskly through the halls back to the Blackwatch conference room. Torby was back. You opened the door, a little surprised to see Reinhardt sitting at the table, his expression thunderous. It was disconcerting to see that much rage in place of his sunny warmth. You almost took a step backward, but then he looked up, and the anger dropped away, replaced with a wobbling lower lip and frantic blinking.

"Lucky!" He was up and in two strides he was in front of you, the lights suddenly dimmer. Without warning, he threw his arms around you, all that muscle trapping you as he bent over, squeezing you tight. He was speaking rapidly, in German you thought, but all you could focus on was the gentle creaking of your bones and the air slowly being pushed out of your body...

"Reinhardt, we need to brief her," Captain Amari said, her voice muffled by his bulk.

Suddenly, there was light and air, and you could breathe. You blinked at him, spots in the corners of your vision.

"I'm so sorry, Lucky," he murmured, wiping his eyes, one hand on your shoulder steadying you.

"It's-"

"On the heads of the traitors," Ziv said sharply. "Heads we're going to collect and stick on pikes outside on the lawn."

"That is unsanitary," Reinhardt said, squinting at Ziv. "And stomach-turning," he whispered to you, though that whisper was audible out in the hallway.

"He's just brainstorming," you lied, because you knew Ziv would totally do that if left unsupervised.

Ziv snorted rudely, but didn't press, because Reinhardt looked genuinely upset, maybe because of the situation, maybe because of the gruesome suggestion.

Captain Amari cleared her throat impatiently and you wobbled into the room and quickly took a seat. Along with Ziv, Winston, Jesse, Hanzo, and Feng were already seated. Genji was keeping an eye on the infirmary and he and Angela would be briefed later.

Torby brought up a screen, showing close up footage of the burning transport. "They were not shot down. They were forced to land because of mechanical troubles. Blackbox shows they radioed in, but the transmission never made it through. It was engine sabotage, just a small evap leak that escaped initial checks, and then quickly worsened once they were farther out." He gritted
his teeth.

"The inspecting mechanic?" Jesse asked.

"Too early to tell. She's already been put in a containment cell. Athena and Torby have been reviewing footage," Captain Amari said. "But the disruption was skillfully done, so there is a chance she just missed it."

"If I had done the pre-check, I would have caught it," Torby said under his breath, giving the floor a hard look.

"Yes, but we've had you working on the radial EMP cannon, which we're going to need for Operation Morpheus," Captain Amari said. "You were assigned to R&D, because putting you on maintenance duty is a waste of your skills."

Torby grunted, giving a tight nod. There was only so much comfort he would accept in front of an audience.

"The bodies were burned beyond visual recognition," Reinhardt said, fists clenched at his side. "Forensics is still sorting through, but none of the remains are large enough to be Jack."

"It's based on femur size," Ziv added, answering the question no one wanted to ask, and Reinhardt flinched.

"We're pretty sure that it isn't just Jack who's missing," Winston said hesitantly. "But figuring out those details will take time. Even with our resources, we can't do a proper DNA check and reconstruct the bodies within an hour." He paused. "There is still some...sorting that has to be done," he added, sounding a little queasy, and you imagined piles of burnt bones and tissue, none of it resembling a person any more.

"It was Epsilon Squad out there with him," you said, heart sinking. Because you had two friends in Epsilon Squad. Shoal for sure, and maybe Jemison, because she liked Isha and had brought you pies.

"The sabotage was probably done here," Torby continued. "Athena and I have reviewed the footage, but there are blindspots. Whoever did it knew Jack's itinerary, and that he would be taking a civilian vehicle."

"Do you think someone on board betrayed them?" Feng asked.

"Epsilon Squad was considered unimpeachable," Captain Amari said, but her voice wavered.

"The pilot?" You wondered.

"If it was someone on board, he's the strongest candidate, but we don't have enough information to draw a conclusion. Our people were executed, stacked in a pile, doused with a strong accelerant, and burned. It takes a very hot fire to burn bodies that well. Whoever did this was prepared. They moved fast. They killed without leaving any witnesses. And they were out just as quickly."

That did narrow your suspect pool. Because that kind of professionalism was a specific skill set. The brutality of it was so familiar. But then coldblooded killing was a common occurrence in your line of work. The noteworthy part was the level of skill involved. Whoever did this was accustomed to ambushing other black ops units.
"Do we know where Richard Prince is?" You asked, head snapping up.

Captain Amari shook her head. "He was supposed to be in the American's custody..."

You could feel the collective frustration as everyone realized how much of a guarantee that was.

"Well, they certainly wouldn't tell us if they lost him." Jesse rubbed his chin. "We can call Brant or Armstrong."

"Already alerted them, but they can look further into the matter," you said staring at the footage of the burnt transport. You were quietly thankful that Torby had not shown the bodies. From the description, they were unrecognizable, but that wouldn't stop you from superimposing images of your friends on the charred bones.

Epsilon Squad was elite. They had survived plenty of battles head on. They were good at what they did and they were loyal to Jack. Even if you knew the chances were slim, you couldn't afford to write anyone off as dead. Not right now. Because once you started down that path, you might not be able to stop. And if you wanted to function, you couldn't dwell on the thought that it might be too late for Jack. That Gabriel might never wake up. So for now, it was Schrödinger's Squad. Shoal and Jemison weren't dead either. They were all alive. They were grumpy as hell. And they were waiting for you to come save them.

The pressure of that thought was stifling, but the other possibilities were downright devastating.

"Torby, as much as we want to dissect the sabotage methodology, that isn't your priority any more. I need you to focus on mechanical prep for Operation Morpheus," Captain Amari said. "Reinhardt, if you're already prepared, I need you to help our squad stand-ins get acclimated and equipped. Mihret, any SIGINT you can gather would be appreciated. I know Athena and Zheng are working to triangulate possible locations for Jack and any surprises that the Mediterranean Omnium might have in store for us, so if you could support them or--"

"I have some of Lacroix's contacts I need to check in with first," Ziv said abruptly. "But that won't take long."

You raised a brow, because you hadn't realized that Lacroix was letting Ziv talk to other people. You briefly wondered what that was about. But social skills aside, Ziv was whip smart. If he thought it was important, it was probably important. And if Lacroix had given him the job... You'd have to check in with him after this.

"It's important," he scowled at the room, more than a little defensive.

Captain Amari nodded briskly. "Understood, but work fast. I need you and Winston to take point on cyber and mechanized defenses. I know you prefer your lab, but we need trustworthy agents on site in the infirmary."

"I've already spoken with Angela about...modifying some of the defenses. She is agreeable to some of my suggestions, though they may come into conflict with the Hippocratic Oath," Winston said, fiddling with his wrists. "Don't worry, ma'am, I won't let you down."

"Jesse, do you need me to sign off on anything?"

"No, ma'am, not yet. Just got to coordinate with Winston about the perimeter," Jesse said, tipping his hat.
"Lucky, I'm sorry I don't have more for you."

You nodded, knowing that you had to wait on whatever forensics could uncover, as well as other analytics.

"Do you have a team in mind?"

"Feng and Hanzo," you said, nodding at them. "And-" You pretended not to see Ziv, because they needed him here anyway. "I'll go talk to..." You flinched inwardly at the thought of taking Riggs into battle. The idea of putting Lao in danger made you cringe too, but Riggs wasn't cut out for combat missions. "Lao."

Ziv scowled murderously at you.

"All right," Captain Amari said, still looking uncertain. "Try to get at least one more person. I know you'll have drones backing you up, but whatever you're up against, you'll need at least a full squad."

"Yes, ma'am," you said, wondering who was left that you could trust.

"Lucky, I believe Isha wants out of your quarters," Athena said as you headed out. "Also, Amélie wants you to meet her in the interrogation rooms."

You rubbed your eyes. "Thanks, I'll grab Isha. Tell Amélie I'm on my way."

"Not so fast, asshole." You blinked as Ziv scuttled in front of you, arms crossed.

"What the hell are you thinking? You need me!" He snapped, launching into his tirade immediately. "I can shoot. I can hack. I don't cry like a small child when people raise their voice at me. I am also in excellent shape." He flexed an arm, which you knew was muscled, but you couldn't really see it under his jacket. "What the fuck, Lucky? I thought we were a team!"

"We are," you said automatically. "Walk with me. I think Isha might try to eat through the walls if I leave her alone any longer."

Huffing, Ziv fell in step beside you. "I know Captain Amari suggested me for your strike team."

"She did," you agreed. "She also suggested Lao and Riggs. Given the...violent nature of the mission, I think he'll do better here."

"So what? Why would you give her priority over me? Seriously-"

You kept a swift pace, your brain not quite able to process all Ziv's questions. You didn't have polite answers, or even good ones. You just had a jumble of reasons you hadn't quite put into words.

You reached your room in record time, Ziv still ranting at you. Opening your door, you were relieved to find that there were no holes eaten into your walls. But Isha slunk out of your bathroom, looking disgruntled. Immediately, she started chattering furiously at you and you were getting it from both sides.
"Yeah, you tell her, baby bird," Ziv scowled.

You peeked into the bathroom, finding the damn vent cover on the ground. She was going to escape that way. Of course. After all the reconnaissance she'd done in Hanoi, she wasn't going to unlearn how to get through the ventilation system. Rubbing your forehead, you groaned. That was a problem for later. A very big problem.

Ziv stood in front of your door, holding Isha, and behind the anger, you caught a glimpse of worry. "Well? What do you have to say for yourself?" He drew himself up, all bluster, and Isha, puffed up too, clicking her teeth at you. They had never looked more alike.

"There are several reasons I don't want to bring you," you said bluntly. "You just came off a mission."

"You did too!"

"I've pulled doubles before; you're not used it," you said, knowing as soon as the words left your mouth that it wasn't a great excuse. "Second, Lacroix is down. I figured you'd want to stay close and keep an eye on him."

Ziv opened his mouth, then shut it. Then opened it again, apparently settling on his words. "You could have just asked me what I wanted to do. Gérard is hurt, but he'll recover." Ziv crossed his arms defiantly. "And so will Reyes. He's too much of an asshole to die."

"Thanks, I think," you said, rubbing the back of your neck. Ziv's idea of comfort could use some refining.

"I'm not saying Lao couldn't do it. She could handle all the cyber defense work," Ziv said reluctantly. "But I'm just as good."

"Maybe better," you agreed. "I don't know if they'll let Lao help run cyber defense here. Her clearances are all conditional. And Riggs doesn't have the experience. They need you here too."

"With Athena and Zheng, my presence here is overkill," he said. "Try again."

That wasn't entirely accurate: the system wasn't set up to let inorganics run things - there were failsafes requiring the input of a human or gorilla agent possessing the proper clearances, but maybe his presence wasn't as critical as you thought.

You smiled in exasperation, because Ziv would worry at a problem till he drew blood. There was no putting him off. You leaned against the door frame, forcing yourself to make eye contact with him. "Because Tataryn is dead." The words didn't get stuck in your throat this time, and you hated that it was becoming easier to say. "Gabriel is...in critical condition. And Jack is missing. I don't know what I'm walking into - but whatever it was took out Epsilon Squad and they are all exceptional fighters. I can't handle the thought of anything happening to you too. If there's anyone I need to protect right now, it's you. I don't know if I can bring Lao, but I know can't risk you."

Ziv's eyes widened and he squeezed Isha tightly, burying his face in her back. She chirped questioningly, her little hands patting his forearms. "That's not fair," he muttered. "That's not right! You can't do that. You can't!"

Nodding, though he wasn't looking at you, you crossed the room and hugged him gently. "I know. It's rotten and selfish of me. But please... I need to know you're safe. But if we want to be
honest, I think this mission will be combat-heavy, and that isn't your strength."

"You think Lao can kick my ass?" Ziv grumbled in your ear.

"She has a metal arm," you whispered. "Those hurt a lot."

"I can hack it!" He scowled at you and furiously petted Isha. She gave you both questioning looks.

"I know," you said. Though you didn't know if he could hack it before she clocked him with it, and he had to know that too. And you didn't have to mention that Lao had been on far more combat missions than he had, some solo under Talon. Even before she was Bái Shé, she'd served with Captain Patel's squad. She had seen lots of action there. Lao Yue might be your baby hacker, but she had already been to war.

Ziv glared down at you. "That's not fair. You can't just shovel the guilt on me like that. That's your baggage."

"I'm sorry," you said. "It's shitty of me, but I'm out of options. I can't...I can't do it, Ziv. It's too much. I can't lose you. You're my terrible little brother, and with everything going wrong, the least I can do is look after you." And you were absolutely right about Ziv's combat suitability. You would be too distracted by trying to protect him. You would have to assign another squad member to guard him and that was not optimal. But he already knew that; you did not have to rub his nose in it. And he did deserve to know how much you loved him.

"You wouldn't do this to McCree," he snarled, and you knew then that you had won.

"Jesse is staying here," you said, because that was a can of worms that did not need to be opened. "And he could use your help. I don't know how well he'd work with Lao."

"McCree gets along with everybody," Ziv snapped.

"Yeah, I guess one of us could take some lessons from him," you said dryly.

"Ben zona, cut the passive aggressive shit," Ziv squinted at you. "Fine, I get it. You're delicate and weepy. Stop embarrassing yourself. You're just going to have to make me a giant batch of karaage when you get home," he muttered. "And you're going to buy me a really nice birthday present. Like, seriously expensive."

"OK," you said solemnly.

"You're still an asshole. I'm really mad at you," he said, hugging you harder.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Well you're not forgiven yet," he snapped. "I won't forgive you till you get back here, all sheepish and shit, and admit that you should've brought me along."

"Deal," you said.

Shuddering, Ziv released you. "I'm serious. You better come back, Lucky. I won't fucking forgive you if you don't. I'm not joking."

"I know," you said. "You aren't the forgiving type."

"Damn straight." He took a deep breath and wiped his face. "Are you bringing Isha?"
You shook your head, and she squawked in outrage at you. "Murderbird, I need you to look after Gabriel."

She blinked owlishly at you.

"He's helpless right now," you said, your voice catching. "If anyone gets past Jesse, Genji, and Winston, you're the last line of defense."

Isha grunted at you, it wasn't a happy noise.

"You think Angela's going to let her into the infirmary?"

"I've seen Angela feed her a whole bar of Swiss chocolate when she thought no one was looking. But I don't think she'll notice one small dinosaur, not with all the shit that's going down."

Ziv's frown deepened. "Yeah, I better go help Winston calibrate some of the security suite software."

"I know it's hard for you to work in full armor, but please, at least wear your omnium plates. Isha, we'll get your combat armor appraised."

Ziv nodded. "Yeah, OK."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but Amélie would like to remind you that she needs you in the interrogation rooms on the double. It is mission-related," Athena said.

"Shit." You'd forgotten about that.

"Better hurry. She really doesn't like to be kept waiting," Ziv said, a hint of smugness in his voice. "Ben zona, I still need to call some of Lacroix's agents. He has some people embedded with Petras' staff. They might have some insight into where Morrison is."

You stared for a moment. Of course, he had people working for Petras. Of course, he didn't give you any details about it. Of course, he kept everything compartmentalized. That secretive bastard. You exhaled slowly, wondering why Lacroix couldn't ever make his plans simple.

"OK, we'll meet up in the infirmary after."

"Yeah. I'll talk to Lao too. If you want," Ziv said, a little awkwardly.

You blinked, unsure of what to say to that. You didn't think he'd sabotage your efforts, but you weren't sure you wanted Ziv to make the pitch, for numerous reasons. "I think I better do it," you said. "She might take it wrong if I don't do it myself, and I'm in enough trouble."

Ziv snorted. "All right."

"Do you think she's combat ready?" You asked after a moment. Because you really didn't.

"I think she's going stir crazy," Ziv said with a frown. "Torby's exo-armor has done a lot for her physical recovery, but I'm no doctor. I think she could, maybe." He paused. "But I don't know if she'll be able to turn you down, Lucky. She's got a chip on her shoulder the size of a coffin."

You knew what that was like. Maybe not with the same nuance as Lao, but you thought you understood needing to do something to make up for how things had gone down before. Even if what happened wasn't your fault. It still ate away at you. Lao's feelings had to be worse. She
wanted to redeem herself, even if you knew she'd done nothing wrong. She couldn't be held responsible for the things done as Bái Shé. But she herself didn't believe that, not really, and it would take a long time for her to come to terms with it.

You didn't feel right about asking Lao either. Maybe it was your own guilt, or maybe it was because you didn't know if she could tell you "no." Either way, you needed to get to Amélie now, because you didn't need another person upset with you.

Chapter End Notes

Writing is going too slowly. I'm a couple chapters ahead, but I'm not writing as much as I should be. And this arc is very tricky, have to do it right. Still reworking my schedule and to try to accommodate more writing time. But I am staying up waaaay too late. And doing dumb things, like spending hours on the floor playing dinosaurs with a three year old. (Nephew, because I haven't spawned anything. He has a new brother, who really likes me for some reason. It's weird. Babies normally cry when they see me/strangers. He's the opposite.) Mind you, most of it involved dumping the contents of his triceratops bank on the floor and making farting noises, because the dinosaur had diarrhea. His idea, not mine. But I went along with it, while playing games on my phone and having T-Rexes bit poopy dino and kid. I'm cool like that.

Cat is incredibly clingy, now that he is ill. I have to throw him off the desk (gently onto a pillow) whenever I sit down. Often he comes back. There has been a lot of "cat blocking mouse" and "cat typing on the keyboard." You think it's cute, but you're not the one working under these conditions! :P

It's been super hot here, so I haven't been running. And if you hadn't noticed, running = time to plot writing out for me. Which is kind of ironic, because I used to hate running so much. So so much. Now it's not so bad, because I'm plotting. *I really just kind of jog, maybe sprint a little while, then walk, then jog, but mostly walk with some spring/jogging in between. But I call it "running."

Wrists are doing better because of the heat. Go figure.

We're still hanging out on discord, if you want join.
"You're back!" Exuberance, relief, and more than just a little worry seemed to color those two words.

You blinked as Távio sidled up to you, holding Bandit's leash. You looked down, in time to see the dog happily licking Isha's face while she rolled on the floor with him: she was bigger than him now, only by a little, but it was a jarring realization.

"Walk and talk," you said. "I'm on a time crunch. Amélie needs me for-"

"I know," Távio said, lowering his voice. "She asked for my help on constructing part of the profile, since...we're friends." He hovered beside you, clenching his fists nervously. "She's really pushing it. I don't think she'll go too far, but..." He shrugged helplessly. "Agent Lacroix is hardcore, ma'am."

"We're talking about the one...without the mustache," you said, just to be certain. Just because Lacroix was still in the infirmary didn't mean he wasn't playing some part in this from a distance.

He nodded vigorously.

You weren't surprised that Amélie was keyed up, or that Távio was intimidated by her, but you didn't know enough about the situation to draw any conclusions. You glanced down, Isha chattering rapidly at Bandit while they followed behind you, almost like she was telling him what she'd been doing.

"Well, I'm heading straight over." Belatedly, you realized you were just in sweats, your hair still wet from the shower. Of course, you were going to see the two most perfectly presented people in Overwatch looking like you'd been dragged facefirst through the locker rooms.

"Is it...true? About Agent Tataryn?" Távio asked, voice surprisingly steady.

"Yeah," you said, after a moment.

You could feel the air rushing out of him, like he had been prepared to believe Tataryn had made it despite the odds, till you'd personally destroyed that hope. You blew out a breath. "Senior Agent Lacroix is out of commission. And so is Gabriel." You didn't need to go into details. "If you know about why Amélie is questioning Ainsley, then you know about Jack."

"Porra," he swore than made shrunk back. "Sorry, ma'am. I mean, yes ma'am, I've been briefed," he rasped. He jammed his hands into his pockets, concentrating on the floor. "This is very bad, ma'am."
"It is," you said, staring straight ahead. After all that work you'd put into trying to break the habit, three "ma'ams" in a row was a bad sign, for sure.

"What can I do?"

"I don't know yet," you said, pausing in front of the observation room door.

"How are you holding up, ma'am?" He asked, voice barely above a whisper.

"I'm still in fighting shape," you said.

"I...that's not what I meant," he said.

You stared at the brushed metal door, not entirely sure how to respond.

"I'm sorry," he said rapidly. "I...overstepped."

You shook your head, and looked back over your shoulder. Távio stood there, hunched and miserable. "I'm terrified for them," you said. "Losing Tataryn was a gut punch. Gabriel and Jack... I can't put into words." You stared up at the ceiling for a moment. "But if I stop and think about it now, I won't be useful to anyone. Yeah, I'm not OK, but I'll be worse off if I do nothing." Because sometimes all you could do was just put one foot in front of the other, and move forward in the right direction, even if you didn't think you could make it to the end. "I've lived through terrible things before. I will continue to do so," you said, with more confidence than you felt.

"You were supposed to laugh and say you aren't afraid of anything," he said weakly.

"I like you too much to lie," you said, trying to look cocky. "And you're too smart to believe that empty bravado anyway."

"I guess it's...braver to keep going even when you're scared."

Bravery had nothing to do with it. It was momentum: if you stopped, maybe you wouldn't be able to start again. But you knew better than to tell him that while he was looking for reassurance. "It's nothing so lofty," you said. "Jack needs me." You took a shaky breath. "And letting him down isn't an option. I think you know what that's like."

Because sometimes, when you didn't think you could be strong for yourself, you knew you would be strong for others. And some people might think you weak-minded for it, but you now understood the warped rules of your own psyche. So what if you had to game the system to be your best self? You were doing it. It wasn't just you either: every agent in Blackwatch could and sometimes had to operate solo. But whether they wanted to admit it or not, they all performed better with a partner or a team. Be it protective instinct, professional pride, or just petty rivalry, adding the right person to the mix could greatly improve results.

Távio blinked. "I- Yes, I do."

You nodded. "All right, so I guess Amélie's already begun questioned Ainsley?"

Távio pressed his lips together, face scrunched up in discomfort. "She was doing...pre-interrogation work."

Raising a brow, you opened the observation room door. There was a cutting scornful laugh, the voice clear, melodic, and so very cold. You slowly raised your head, and though you'd never heard that noise from her before, you knew it was Amélie. Through the one-way glass, you
could see Ainsley hunched over a table, hands cuffed in front of her, head tucked like she was trying to protect herself.

Amélie stood over her, wearing an outfit you hadn't seen before, though you were pretty sure it wasn't regulation. It was mostly black and skintight, with what looked like a red latex underbust corset. Her metal boots bore spikes on the kneeguards and she wore her hair in a high ponytail and blood red lipstick.

There was a resounding crack! And you nearly jumped out of your skin.

Ainsley screeched and cowered, though it didn't look like Amélie had actually struck her. It took you a moment to recognize what she was holding. Was that...? You shook your head in slight disbelief. In her elegantly gloved hands, Amélie held a black leather riding crop, and that definitely wasn't regulation. You stared for a long moment, not sure what to make of the scenario. It was like the opening to a fetish film, and for a moment you wondered if this was all an elaborate prank. But no, you realized after a few seconds, Amélie was that brazen and your life really was this fucking surreal.

"We may both come from affluent background, but we are nothing alike," Amélie hissed. "I earned my position. No one in my family bought it for me. I worked for it. I bled for it. And I always made sure that my competition bled more," she said, smiling fiercely. "Chasseurs toujours. We are always hunting. We are never satisfied." She leaned in close, tilting Ainsley's chin up and forcing eye contact. "You are in over your head."

"I don't know what you're talking about-" Ainsley sniffled.

"D'accord. What was I thinking? Who would tell you anything of value?" Amélie said coolly. "And you lack the temerity to ask. Poor foolish Mademoiselle Petras: of course, you wouldn't know that your darling uncle is corrupt. Just like you would have no idea how he uses his position to abuse younger female agents."

Ainsley stiffened, eyes going wide.

"Because if you knew, and did nothing, why that would make you an accessory," Amélie continued, a smooth malice permeating her every word. "And that would be far worse than sheer ignorance."

Perspiration dripped down Ainsley's forehead, the unflatteringly bright lights illuminating her blotchy face. "I...I tried to help," she stuttered, curling away from Amélie. "I really did!"

"Is that so?" Amélie drawled, her smile vicious, the look in her eyes terribly stark. You shuddered. She loomed over Ainsley. "What did you do? Give a sworn statement? File a complaint with the Strike Commander, or the UN? Go to the press?"

Stricken, Ainsley hung her head. "It was a family thing," she said, voice very small. "I called my mother. I thought we could handle it...quietly." Her delivery was as unconvincing as the words, and from her shamefaced expression, you could tell that she knew it.

Amélie made a guttural sound in the back of her throat, clearly unimpressed. She sneered down at Ainsley, the contempt completely genuine. "Clearly your quiet handling of the situation was most effective. You certainly showed him."

Ainsley cringed.

Amélie cocked her head to the side and looked directly at the glass. "I doubt she knows
anything useful, and her cow eyes and pathetic sniveling sicken me. Give the word and I will take
care of things. There will be some unpleasantness, but it will send the right the message." And with
that, she kicked Ainsley's chair over, the younger woman screeching as she toppled onto the floor.

"Is that your cue?" Távio asked nervously, like he wasn't certain that Amélie was bluffing.
Actually, you weren't so sure either.

You nodded, not exactly sure how Amélie wanted to play this, but ready to go along with
her plan. Taking a deep breath, you opened the door and stalked inside.

Amélie inhaled sharply, like she was surprised to see you. "What are you doing here,
Strike? You don't have auth-"

You took half a second to process the cue. "What the hell do you think you're doing,
Guillard?" You demanded, as you walked in, glancing down at Ainsley.

"Lucky!" Ainsley hiccupped, her voice cracking as she scrambled to her knees. "Please, I
don't- I can't her what she wants!"

"For fuck's sake, Guillard. She's a civilian-"

"A civilian placed here by her treacherous uncle," Amélie scoffed. "She's a spy, and a piss-
poor one at that. But that doesn't matter, we don't leave loose ends," she said haughtily.

"We don't execute civilians in their pajamas either." You crossed your arms, not looking
back at Ainsley. You didn't trust your facial expression.

"You always were soft," Amélie said with mock sorrow. She leaned in, gloved fingers
cressing your cheek. "But it is part of your charm. Do not worry your pretty head, Strike. I do not
share your aversion to bloodshed. I'll take care of this mess."

You slapped her hand away. "No."

Amélie narrowed her eyes at you, nostrils flaring. "The Strike Commander is missing. We
know her uncle is responsible. Are you just going to sit by idly while they murder more of our
agents? Because of your precious principles? No one is asking you to get your hands dirty. I am
perfectly capable-"

"Guillard, you're enjoying this too much," you said sharply.

"Because I love my work. That's not a crime," Amélie said, with an eerie, almost flirtatious
smile. She leaned closer, face centimeters from yours, the intoxicating scent of her perfume
momentarily blindsiding you. "Come now, Strike. You know what's at stake. You've just returned
from a grueling mission. You must be exhausted," she cooed. "Let me handle this. Go get some
rest. Come find me after. Everything will be taken care of by then, and I would love to treat you
to-"

"Please-" Ainsley sobbed. "Don't leave me alone with her! She's going to torture me to
death!"

Amélie gave a small sheepish shrug, clearly amused by the dramatic accusation and
certainly not denying it. "I would invite you to help, but I know how delicate you are-"

"We both know this isn't Blackwatch-sanctioned," you said, wondering if you sounded as
tired as you felt.
"You want to make this fight...bureaucratic?" Amélie laughed incredulously.

"Push all you want, I still outrank you," you said coolly.

"That is your rationale? How...regrettable. I had thought better of you."

"I don't have to explain myself to you. Let's look at what you actually have here: a crying clerical worker with no ops experience and no stomach for violence. You're obviously operating on a misconception: Ainsley is not her uncle," you said firmly. "And I'm not going to let you do this. You can try to go over my head, but-"

"You are so darling, and so very tiresome," Amélie said, giving a disappointed sigh. "Fine. I will do just that. Make your protests, clear your conscience. But there will be consequences." She shot Ainsley a poisonous glare.

Suddenly you wanted to step back a few feet to get out of the splash zone. Somehow you valiantly resisted. "There always are."

"I think I should remind you that that one isn't worth your sympathy, Strike. If your roles were reversed, she would not risk her precious neck to save yours."

Ainsley flinched under the accusation, and even if she didn't realize it, all three of you knew it was true.

"Maybe," you said, even though Amélie was absolutely right. "But that's how I choose to live my life."

Amélie leaned over, lips brushing against your ear. "You will regret this," she said, sotto voce, though it was loud enough for Ainsley to hear it.

You stood there stoically while Amélie marched out, as if she was going to report you to a higher power, confident that she would get permission to personally crush you for your defiance. After the door slammed shut, you crouched down beside Ainsley.

She sat there motionless until you tugged on her arm and helped her to her feet. "Come on, get off the ground. You don't know what's been on it," you said a little gruffly.

"L-Lucky," she sniffled. She wasn't wearing any makeup. Her hair was a tangled and her eyes puffy. She'd been taken unawares, barefoot and still in her blue silk pajamas, the sleeves torn. And after all that, she was still annoyingly pretty.

"I'm afraid I don't have any tea," you said, picking the chair up. "And we don't have much time."

"I swear I don't know what happened to Jack! Lucky, you have to believe me. I would never-""/

"I know," you said, so much exhaustion in those words, because no one here knew enough. "But your family would."

Ainsley shuddered, biting her lip as she hung her head. The silence was deafening. There was none of the expected denial or outrage, no bluster or protests. Which... meant she knew. That realization shook you: you almost called Amélie back in and got out the thumbscrews yourself. But how much did Ainsley know?
"I thought you weren't involved in that kind of thing," you said softly, behind clenched teeth, wondering briefly, if you needed to tear that information out of her with your bare hands.

"I'm not," she said frantically shaking her head. "But after everything that happened on Family Day, I've been doing some...investigating. But before that, I swear I didn't know, Lucky. I didn't know. I really didn't!" She shook her head frantically, tears spilling down her cheeks. "You have to believe me."

You stood there silently.

"Lucky?" She asked, voice breaking. "Please, you have to believe me. I'm not like that. You're the only one who..." She sniffled, unsure of how to finish that sentence. The only one who "cared?" The only one who "believed" her? None of that was entirely accurate, and the uncertainty was uncomfortable.

"I'm the only one here who wants to help you get out of this," you said, sidestepping that minefield. "So tell me what you do actually know, so we can clear you and save Jack."

"I know it sounds dumb," she said, breathing rapidly. "But we've...always been well off. I just assumed it was all inherited and reinvested, through trust funds, annuities, and other tax loopholes. Mother keeps multiple accountants on hand. Once you have a certain amount of capital, the investments and favorable interest rates do most of the work for you. But I never thought-"

"You never thought about where the money really came from," you said, having heard it all before. Because Ainsley had it made. She didn't wonder how she would afford her next meal, her healthcare, or even her education. Someone else dealt with all of that for her. She'd maybe given it a cursory thought, asked a few questions, and gone about her life, satisfied that everything was as it should be. "Do you even know details?"

"Some," she said, diffidently. "I know some," she repeated herself with a little more confidence. "I could help. Really, I could." She stared up at you, eyes welling up with more tears.

You stood there silently, your wordless doubt more powerful than any accusations you could sling. Because good intentions or not, Ainsley had never been particularly helpful in the past.

"I know my uncle...and my parents have some...unethical business dealings. I started digging a few weeks ago," Ainsley said. "I'm still untangling the financials and what it all means, but I can get you the data. I don't want anything to happen to Jack, or Agent Shoal, or Agent Mosweu, or anyone in Epsilon Squad. Please Lucky, let me help." She shivered.

"What do you have?" you asked.

"There's a nanodrive in my jewelry box. On the Tanzanite ring, it's hidden in the band. That's the blue-purple one," she added, in case you didn't know. "It requires biometric access codes. I swear, there's important information on there. I just started sorting through it, so I don't know the details, but I know it could help," she spoke rapidly, voice going high, words tightening with panic.

"And if it's not enough?" You asked, not actually agreeing to help her.

"Then we'll call my mother. She's a lot more knowledgeable than I am, and I can convince her to help us."
"Out of the goodness of her heart?" You asked, trying very hard to dampen the skepticism and anger. Because you knew quite a bit about Valerie Petras.

Ainsley winced, sorrow, regret, and fear flashing across her face in rapid succession. She had spoken to you about her mother before; she probably wasn't aware that you had the transcripts of their conversations.

"No. I don't know." Ainsley sniffled. "Mother is a pragmatist. She's..."

The Barbie version of Margaret Thatcher? Country Club Lady Macbeth without the hand washing hang-up? Leona Helmsley's spiritual heir? You bit your tongue.

"Mother is difficult," Ainsley said, diplomacy not forgotten. "And she's not...empathetic. But if she thinks this scandal will drag the family down, she'll cooperate. I'm sure of it."

You remained unconvinced, though Ainsley's assessment rang true.

"And...you have me as a bargaining chip. I can play it up. You know, act terrified."

Ainsley gave you a weak smile. "I can be outraged, with lots of yelling, but I don't think that will make a difference. Like I said, I can appeal to her rational side. That would be the best approach. But whatever your plan, I'll go along with it, Lucky, I swear."

That was more than you expected, though you weren't actually sure how much you could rely on Ainsley. Still, you nodded in thoughtful acknowledgement. "All right, I'll go get it. You hold tight."

"What-what if Guillard comes back?" Ainsley stared at you with panicked eyes.

"I can stay with you or I can go get that drive," you said, your sincerity just another form of cruelty. "What do you want to risk?"

To your surprise, Ainsley wiped her nose on her torn sleeve and straightened up. There was fire in her eyes that hadn't been there before. "I want you to save Jack and Epsilon Squad. I can stall Guillard, if it comes to that."

You nodded. "I'll hurry then." You turned to go.

"Lucky-" Her voice wavered and you stopped. "Lucky, I'm really sorry about before. I shouldn't have just let it go like that. I was..." She trailed off, hanging her head. "There's no excuse for what I did or didn't do. I don't expect you to forgive me. I really messed things up. I understand if you never want to talk to me again. But I'm sorry, and no matter what I'll do better. Really."

You looked back over your shoulder.

Ainsley met your gaze, misery clear on her face. You'd never seen her look sorrier in your life - and you'd seen her bawl her eyes out on multiple occasions. Those had been pure expressions of emotions: fear, sorrow, reactions to whatever external stimulus set Ainsley off that day. Now there was unhappy knowledge in her eyes, guilt laying over her like a veil. It was a different look on her... or maybe you just weren't used to seeing her without makeup. Either way, Ainsley had regrets, and rightfully so.

"OK," you said, because you weren't sure what else to say. Her heartfelt apologies might be sincere, but she was right, she had no excuse for what she did. She shouldn't expect you to forgive her. She did mess things up. "I need to hurry."
She nodded at you feebly. Her disappointment at your answer was evident, though you were a little surprised that she didn't crumble at your lack of enthusiasm.

"I know you don't believe me, but I will do better. I promise," she said. "I won't let you or Jack down."

You left then, still not sure what to think of her change of heart.

You stepped into the darkened observation room, shutting the door behind you. Amélie sat in her chair, sipping a drink, steam drifting above the rim of the cup. The leather riding crop rested across her lap and you had to force yourself not to stare. Távio was nowhere in sight, but Isha and Bandit lay curled under a chair, napping together.

"Well," you said, hands in your pockets. "That was some performance." You couldn't quite bring yourself to ask how much of that was acting, and how much of that was genuine bloodlust.

"It was my turn to be the bad cop." Amélie raised her chin haughtily, one perfect brow arched. "Are you going to say that you would have done better?"

"...Nope," you shook your head, your answer sincere. "You've traumatized her just the right amount without actually causing permanent harm." And she set you up as Ainsley's savior, moreso than you'd already been. "Did you already send Távio to pick up the drive?"

"Of course," she said. "And to get you coffee. That is what minions are for." She patted the seat beside her, flashing you a wicked smile. "Come, sit with me for a moment, Agent Strike." Her purr was dangerous and flirtatious, making the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

But it would not do to ever show fear to predator, so you sat down next to her, shaking your head. "You're giving me chills."

"Am I frightening you?" She asked, crossing her legs as she leaned into your space, one arm resting over the back of your chair.

You just laughed nervously, recognizing a trap when you saw it. "You're like a valkyrie, equal parts mesmerizing and terrifying. No one can resist your charms or...forceful personality."

Amélie looked pleased, poking your cheek with one finger. "You are adorable when you are flustered."

"I'm tired," you said, giving her a wry look.

"Távio should be back soon with the coffee," she said, some of the predatory amusement fading. Amélie always seemed like a cat playing with its prey, but she exhaled slowly, shedding some of that persona, like a leopard shrinking down to become an ocelot. "Do you think we should let her take part in the conversation with her mother?"

Was she asking if you trusted Ainsley, or if you thought Ainsley could be useful? You nodded slowly. Maybe you leaned more one way than the other, but in the end the results would be the same. "Yeah, I think she'll be necessary if we're going to approach this civilly. Otherwise we'll have to take a trip to the Berkshires and let you go to work on Mommy Dearest."

"I don't mind." Amélie didn't look at all disturbed by that prospect.
"But that's not optimal," you said quickly. "Jack's been missing for several hours now. I don't want to waste time chasing down Petras' sister-in-law who probably doesn't know anything concrete."

"Then let us discuss strategy," Amélie said, taking another sip of her coffee. "Based on what we know of the Petras family's holdings, Hanzo and Zheng have narrowed down Jack's likely location to the northern hemisphere, somewhere between North America and Europe. Athena has been filtering through satellite footage, and probably worming her way into networks she shouldn't know exists. Ziv is in communication with several questionable people, both his and Gérard's contacts. We will have answers soon, Chanceux. Then what?"

"I'm putting together a team," you said. "We're spread thin, so I'm taking Hanzo and Feng for sure. But Jesse and Genji are going to stay back and protect home base. I have to pick a hacker and a medic-"

"You already have a sniper then," Amélie said, tones rising with the end of the sentence, her voice firm.

"I have a ninja-"

"That is not a sniper," Amélie said, waving her hand dismissively. "You will likely need him for scouting and for close quarters work."

You sighed. "OK, I can snipe-"

"You are running the team," Amélie said. "I doubt you will stay back far enough to be effective."

You exhaled. "Then I-"

"Why, of course, Chanceux," Amélie said, smiling broadly at you, just a hint of madness in her eyes. "I would love to come along and help. I thought you would never ask."

"Wuh?" Your head snapped up as you realized what she was saying. "But your husband-"

"Has Ziv, Winston, and half of Blackwatch looking out for him. You're the one who needs a trustworthy team, more specifically a sniper," she said, casually finishing her coffee. "Honestly, Chanceux, I sat out the last mission under protest," she said, smiling thinly, a real flash of anger in her eyes. "And I only did it because I knew my presence would make matters worse. There is no reason for me to stay back now: I cannot grow Gérard a new eye or make him heal any faster. The waiting will drive me mad."

"But-"

"Unless you don't think my skills are up to par?" She cocked her head to the side and stared at you, eyes flat, smile empty. It was a cold mimicry of curiosity - something you'd see in a horror movie featuring evil murderous children. You realized, on some level, that she was playing it up, but it was still intimidating.

"Stop putting words in my mouth- and don't try to put anything else in there either," you scowled. "I just assumed you'd stay back and help them run things."

"Given the layout of the infirmary and the likelihood of a surprise attack, my skills will be less useful against that sort of indoors defensive assault," she said stiffly. "And I already sat out Operation Tarasque. I think you of all people understand - I need to do something, Chanceux. I
cannot just wait around...sitting." She said the last word with great distaste. She paused, suddenly chagrined, like she realized she'd been trying to bulldoze you. "I am sorry. I got...carried away. That was unfair of me. This is your operation and you have expertise I lack. If you think I would be more useful here, I will abide by your judgment."

You rubbed your forehead, because you honestly hadn't been thinking that far ahead. She was right, of course. You knew how hard it was to sit back and wait. Hell, you couldn't do it. It was pure torture. And while you weren't sure what the terrain would look like, or if you'd have a good position for a sniper, Amélie wasn't just a sharpshooter. Amélie was good at handling guns and people. She thought in strange angles with an uncanny sort of foresight. And most importantly, she was someone you trusted at your back.

"No, you're always an asset. If you want to follow me into who-knows-what, I'd be grateful to have you." There was no need to mince words, to ask if she was "really sure." In all the time you'd known her, Amélie did not second guess herself. If she offered to come along, she wasn't "just being polite."

She smiled, looking very pleased. "Feng can serve as a heavy, which I am most curious to witness. Hanzo can scout or scowl, whichever is called for. We still need a medic and a tech."

"We're short on trustworthy combat medics," you winced. It wasn't just that Lacroix's list had reduced your pool, but Jesse and Captain Amari had priority. "Feng can send one of her people, but they won't come into direct combat."

Amélie pursed her lips in a sort of dangerous pout. "I see."

"We'll have a Zheng drone and an Athena drone along," you said. "She literally performed brain surgery earlier today."

"Our engineer?" She asked. "You do not want to bring Ziv. And Agent Riggs, while charming, would be wholly unqualified. That does not leave us many options. But, we will have Athena and Zheng. Provided they can maintain the connection." Amélie sat there pensively. "It is your call, of course, Chanceux. That might be sufficient."

You sighed. "I've been ordered to talk to Lao."

Amélie made a noncommittal noise.

"Yeah, I know." You shrugged. "I'll do that once we're done here."

"I know you'll make the best choice," Amélie said, giving you a blinding smile. "And whatever that may be, I will support you completely."

You gaped, a little shell-shocked by Amélie's warm declaration and overwhelming charisma. She did that on purpose. And it took you a good ten seconds to realize the door had been opened, and Távio was now hovering over you with a travel mug of coffee, looking very worried.

"Ah, did you acquire-?" Amélie began, giving you a chance to shut your mouth and pretend that you were cool.

"I passed it on to Athena and Agent Mihret," Távio said, a little breathless. "They don't think they'll have any trouble breaking the biometric lock. They're decrypting, parsing, and uploading the contents to your files, ma'am." He saluted. "Agent Lacroix told me how you prefer your coffee, ma'am. Any mistakes are my own though." He gave Amélie a slightly nervous smile.
"What about-?" Amélie smiled at Távio, then you.

"No, not for this." You shook your head. You didn't know what you were getting into, and while Távio could handle himself in combat far better than Ziv could, you weren't entirely certain that he was ready, or that you could be objective enough. You had enough emotional entanglements to juggle.

Távio narrowed his eyes, because he suspected that you were talking about him, he just didn't know the details. And you were happy with it staying that way.

"I think Ziv may need back up," you said. "And someone needs to keep an eye on Vo. Diallo will be distracted."

"What are you doing with Ainsley?" Távio asked, eyes darting to the one-way glass. She sat tensed in her seat, hands on her lap, gritting her teeth. Tears stained her face, but she wasn't openly weeping any more.

"We're going to talk to her mother, see if we can get more data. Ainsley's offered to help. I think it might be wisest to at least imply that she's our hostage. I don't think Ainsley can persuade her mother to change sides. But she offered to play along with whatever strategy we choose. And while I hope she can act convincingly, this approach doesn't hinge on her performance."

"Would you prefer I hover over her shoulder or present a more nebulous threat?"

"The latter would probably be best," you said. "I need her scared, not petrified."

"I will make myself scarce then," Amélie said, looking smug. "But I will be nearby, should you require my assistance. You should have another agent present, someone to stand in as the "bad cop." Or at least a less sympathetic presence."

You nodded. That ruled out Távio.

"I have someone in mind," Amélie smiled devilishly. "You get her to the comm room. I'll send them to meet you."

You removed the handcuffs, because you'd seen Ainsley Petras try to fight. You weren't worried. You gave her a generic uniform coat to wear over her pajamas, and a box of tissues.

She dabbed at her face as the two of you headed toward the comm room. "Mother won't go out of her way to be helpful. Not to you. And she'll deny it, but she keeps track of everyone's business - especially if they don't want her to."

"So there's a good chance she can give us a lead on your uncle. Because he's missing too." The Director's absence was nowhere near as dramatic as Jack's. He was just incommunicado, and no one had heard from him since yesterday. There had been no signs of forced entry to his hotel: he had simply checked out and disappeared, loyal bodyguards and all. There was a minute chance that perhaps whoever went after Jack had taken the Director as well, but you doubted it.

Ainsley nodded slowly. "I can't promise anything, but she might know something useful."
You blinked as Feng opened the door to the comm room. She was wearing an Overwatch uniform over her armor, and her name badge read "Chang." You stared at that for too long.

"Come on, we don't have all night," Feng scowled, sounding a little like Chang actually, though they looked nothing alike. "Do your business, then return the traitor to the holding pens."

Ainsley flinched.

"There's no need for that," you said. "Ms. Petras is doing her best to help us."

"Chang" scoffed at that, stepping aside so you and Ainsley could enter the private comm room. She leaned against the door, arms crossed, frown so severe you almost didn't recognize Feng underneath.

Ainsley gave her wide berth, not making eye contact as you open the comm channels.

You had access to Valerie Petras' private channel, thanks to your curious AI. "Ainsley, I've told you not to use this line-" An older, more made-up version of Ainsley answered the call, her eyes widening when she saw you. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Hello, Mrs. Petras," you said, smiling tightly, and trying not to think of the lovely things she'd said about you in her "private" conversations with Ainsley. "I have a mutually beneficial proposal for you."

Ainsley stepped forward into the camera range, her eyes red from crying, her lips pressed firmly together. "Please listen to what she has to say, Mother. She means business."

"I don't know who you think you are, but I will warn you right now, that I have connections, money, and power, and if anything happens to my daughter-" She said, voice dropping low with a tone that didn't seem diplomatic at all.

"We have something in common then, excellent," you said, interrupting her. "I don't want anything to happen to Ainsley either. But you have to understand, things have become very dire."

Those familiar blue eyes, harder and colder than Ainsley's, narrowed and they focused on the insignia on your hoodie. "What has William done?" There was a good deal of spite infused in his name, in the way she emphasized it tightly through clenched teeth. Though they might be allied through family, there was no love lost between Valerie Petras and her brother-in-law Director William Petras.

"Absconded with our Strike Commander, it seems. For extremely, questionable reasons. Left a trail of dead bodies. Doesn't look like we're going to be able to sweep this scandal under the rug," you said, overstating your hand.

"You can't prove anything," Valerie snapped. "Not if you're coming to me-"

"I can prove enough," you said. "He's allied with terrorists to kidnap-"

"He's the Director of Overwatch. It's just as likely that he was kidnapped too!" Valerie tilted her chin up. "It's shameful that you can't do your job, lose track of your own leadership, and then, to top it off, you come and blame the victim's family."

"You can cry that all you want," you said, refusing to back down. "But I have enough evidence of his dirty dealings to refute those claims. There's the numerous conflicts of interest regarding his investments with many US government defense contractors. And we cannot ignore
his significant stakes in Vishkar, Luminescent Holdings, and other multinationals. In case you were unaware of his profile. Sure, some of that can be explained away. But his dealings with known criminals and terrorists like Richard Prince, Adhabu Ngumi, and Antonio Vialli would cause quite the stir."

"You have no proof," Valerie snarled.

"Quite the contrary, we've spent quite a long time going through your family's questionable finances, finances that you know very well. I must laud your sharp business acumen, Mrs. Petras. With all your high-level energy and defense holdings, your portfolio has quite the return. I should come to you for investment advice."

She sneered at you. "My lawyers-

"Can't save you or Ainsley. Especially not from the political fallout once this goes public." You stood straighter. "Once your brother-in-law's treason becomes common knowledge, the Petras name won't be worth shit. Do you want to gamble on who's more popular? Your skirt-chasing bureaucratic brother-in-law, or Strike Commander Morrison, the hero of the Omnic Crisis?"

"Do you think lawyers are the only weapons I have at my disposal?"

"Do you think your mercenaries will be fast enough to save Ainsley from my more bloodthirsty comrades? Because make no mistake, there are people worse than me trying to pry information out of your family members."

"It's true," Ainsley piped up. "Lucky saved me."

Valerie Petras grimaced. "This is Lucky Strike?" She wrinkled her nose, her expression incredulous, like Ainsley had brought home roadkill and asked to adopt it. "This is your friend? Ainsley-"

Ainsley gave you an embarrassed look, then straightened up. "Yes, yes she is. Though maybe I haven't been a very good friend back."

Your expression didn't change, because now wasn't the time for that discussion. "I don't want the political blowback to hit Ainsley. So I need your help to salvage this situation. Your brother-in-law has betrayed Overwatch and your family. If he'd been thinking about anyone other than himself, he would have realized how this would impact the rest of you, that Ainsley might be put in harm's way due to his actions. He didn't even try to make arrangements for her safety. And he's put her in harm's way numerous times. I think we both know who was behind the Paris incident. You remember, the one where armed cyborg terrorists took her hostage in an attempt to capture the Strike Commander?"

Valeria flinched, and Ainsley gasped, because apparently she had no idea. Interestingly enough, Valerie knew; her subdued reaction was a dead giveaway. You filed that information away for later.

"I might not be impressed by your business ethics, but I'm not a financial regulator and more importantly, I don't want anything bad to happen to Ainsley. I can get my people to look the other way, if you can help us stop the Director."

Valerie Petras looked off camera, brows knitted together. She pursed her lips, looking more angry than nervous. "William has always been selfish. He doesn't put the family first. Recently, he took a board position intended for my husband, though he doesn't have the time to properly do
the job." She paused. "He had been overly-concerned with his own pet projects, neglecting many of his other duties. I know he was building some kind of private fortification around one of those isolated Norwegian islands, Svalbard I think. It was done in secret, I don't know the details, but he seemed very concerned about powerful political enemies." She gave you a pointed look. "Or perhaps enemies closer to him."

You shrugged. "I couldn't say what goes through his head." Though you wouldn't mind it being one of your bullets.

"I want immunity for me and my husband," she said. "I want a contract drawn up and looked over by my lawyers. I want my daughter put on a transport and sent home immediately."

"I want that location first," you said.

"What's to stop you from reneging? You certainly don't expect us to just trust you!"

"I want Morrison alive far more than I want to nail your family for corruption," you said coldly. "That's my priority. I'll have a contract drawn up, and we'll follow through with our end of the agreement, as long as you aren't aiding or abetting your brother-in-law." You felt it then, whatever barely civilized look was on your face twisted into something primal and half-mad. "But if I have to avenge Morrison because you delayed or withheld critical information, there will be no peace between us. Don't misunderstand me: I don't care about clearances, or politics, or high-minded ethics. Your money means nothing to me. Neither your tears nor your influence can save you. Cross me in this, and I will salt the earth. I will destroy your empire, your family, and anything else you hold dear. I will burn it all down and I will start with you. You can trust me on that."

Ainsley shuddered, squeaking as she inched away from you.

Valerie Petras drew back from the screen. She took a few deep breaths and squared her shoulders, trying to appear unruffled. "That was overly dramatic."

"It was nothing but the truth. And nothing for you to worry about if you deal straight with me," you said, coldly.

Valerie nodded curtly. "I understand the situation perfectly. Ainsley, are you safe?"

"I hope she'll be a fool -- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool," Ainsley said, her tone wistful.

You frowned at the nonsensical quote, but Valerie Petras relaxed her shoulders, the space between her brows unwrinkling.

"If anything happens to my daughter, Lucky Strike, I will hold you personally responsible. As a gesture of good faith, I will send what information I have on his bunker right now."

She typed away at a keypad, biting her lower lip, stopping herself, and then returning to it seconds later. "All right, it's been sent. I have...more information on his activities, but that will be provided after the lawyers have drawn up immunity and an NDA."

"Fine," you said.

"Ainsley, I want you on the first plane out of--"

"I'm staying, Mother," Ainsley said. "I want to help find Jack."
You blinked, because you weren't sure how Ainsley could help with that, unless Jack happened to be lost in a high-end boutique.

"Ainsley Marie Petras-"

"I'm staying, Mother," Ainsley said. "Don't worry, I'll be fine." And with that, she reached over and cut the connection. She had a funny little smile on her face, like she couldn't quite believe that she'd done that.

"The documents have been received," Athena chimed in. "They have been sorted and forwarded to Zheng, Hanzo, and our forensic accountants. Agent Strike, your presence is requested in the Infirmary."

"What can I do to help?" Ainsley said, straightening up. "Mother will uphold her end of the bargain with you, in regards to the bunker information, but you should be extra careful when she gets the lawyers involved."

"Noted," you said, running your hands over your face. "What did your coded quote mean?"

"That was the duress pass phrase: it means I'm not being coerced," Ainsley said, smiling shyly at you. "I didn't realize you felt so strongly about Jack."

You blinked, tensing at the sheer delight in her voice. You'd just threatened her mother, and her by extension. This reaction made no sense.

"That was a good speech. Scary," Ainsley continued. "I think you really meant it. I know my mother believed you." She paused. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

You nearly fell over, and in the corner "Chang" coughed vigorously. It almost sounded like laughter.

"I can tell," Ainsley continued, nodding sagely. "Love makes you do crazy things." She cocked her head to the side, like a curious puppy. "Does he know?"

"I am not having this conversation right now," you muttered, sounding more nervous than intimidating, despite your best efforts.

"Because I thought you were involved with Commander Reyes. I mean, I've heard the rumors, everyone has, and I certainly don't believe that you got your position that way. You're clearly qualified," Ainsley continued. "But since you were working so closely with him, I always assumed between that the two of you..." She blushed. "Not in a bad way. Like...you're a team!"

Pinching the bridge of your nose, you took a deep breath. "Ainsley, I appreciate your help, but-"

"You're on a time crunch. Look, I know I can help you. There are people loyal to my uncle, aren't there? People who might get in your way? You can assign them to take me somewhere "safe?" You know, so they don't interfere with your mission. I don't know anything useful, so they can't interrogate me, and they won't hurt me anyway-"

You blinked. That actually wasn't a bad idea.

"I'll run that by my superiors," you said. "And for the record, I appreciate your help."

"I...can get more data for you from Mother," she said. "...I know you're upset about Jack."
But I also know you're a good person, Lucky. I don't expect you to protect my family. They don't deserve that from you. But maybe you can go after them legally? Please? I'll help, I just don't want anyone like Agent Guillard near my parents."

"Ainsley-"

"No, I get it. My family has been doing questionable things for years. I want that to stop. I want to help. It's an ugly truth, but I'm ready to face it."

"We can talk about this later," you said. "I need to find Jack first."

"Of course!" Ainsley said, slapping her hands over her mouth. "Sorry! Didn't mean to waste your time! I am so sorry! We will talk about this later! I'll make you tea! I've been practicing!"

You weren't entirely sure how to take that. Either it was extremely unexpected progress or a very clumsy attempt at poisoning. Neither option was helpful right now.

"Agent Maeda Vargas is here to escort Ms. Petras to a secure location," Athena chimed in.

Feng opened the door, and gestured for Ainsley to exit.

You nodded at Ainsley. "I'll be in touch."

"Go on Lucky, save your man! If anyone can do it, you can!" Ainsley cheered. "I'm rooting for you!" She said loud enough for the entire hallway to hear.

Távio doubled over then, struck by an unconvincing coughing fit.

You brushed past him, shaking your head as you struggled to keep your composure. Helpfully, Feng's snickers echoed in your ears as she followed close on your heels.

"Is that going to be our squad motto?" She asked sotto voce. "Do we need pompoms?"

Grumbling some very choice words under your breath, you walked toward the infirmary, unwilling to be dragged down that rabbithole.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Amélie is wearing the Noire costume.

been working overtime a lot and pushed my wrists a bit too hard last week. Ice, ice, compression, NSAIDs this week. Also cat is an aggressive asshole who likes to step on my keyboard.

Jerk! Cousin threw me a dragon-themed birthday party and got the family to buy me Overwatch legos, including Watchpoint Gibraltar. I had two cakes, dinner out, like 9 plushies, and Indo-raptor. It is the birthday party 7 year old me dreamed of. Grown-ass me liked it too. Made me realize I should probably be spending more time with people, but working so much that it's difficult. Also, spending long hours in silence has made me extra weird. Like "how to human?" IDK and IDGAF. Except later I'm like
"...oops. Maybe I should?"

Not a lot to share except adulting bullshit. Hope everyone is doing well. Running late to work now, will answer comments later!

Here's the Discord invite if you want to join us.
Chapter 124

Chapter Summary

What happened to Jack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You gritted your teeth when you walked into the room.

Ziv stood beside Lao, showing her something on the screen on her prosthetic arm. She wore combat blacks - a telltale sign that someone had warned her about the upcoming trouble. Together, they grimly studied whatever was on the display. They glanced up simultaneously, both with equally defiant expressions, neither looking the least bit guilty over their obvious collusion.

"Ziv, what the hell do you think you're doing?" You growled.

"I'm showing her the improved security features now, while I have time," he said sourly, raising his chin. "McCree has other jobs for me to do, you know, since my presence here is necessary." You scowled at him, jaw working slowly as you tried not to burst into a stream of outrageous profanity. Maybe, just maybe he was telling the truth about Jesse's priorities, but more likely he'd just gone behind your back, knowing you didn't want him to interfere, and who knew what he told Lao? "Ziv, I'm going to drop you headfirst into the nearest latrine-"

"You can try," he said crossing his arms. "But you're in a hurry. So you'll have to wait till after you come back from your super exclusive mission. Alive."

You glared at him, stunned by the audacity of his ploy. "Forget karaage when I get back. I'm going to get you reassigned to UN Delegate Tech Security and Support Services. You'll be doing IT for crusty old politicians, you wretched little-"

Ziv snorted, obviously not intimidated by your threat. "Well, as I said, you have to come back alive for any of that to happen." Turning his nose up, he brushed by you.

"Ziv-"

You froze as he caught you briefly in a sidehug. "Stay mad, Lucky." He kissed the top of your head. "More importantly, stay alive," he added so quickly, you almost didn't hear it. And then he was out the door before you could thump him in the back of the head for his insolence. He'd left the door open, and you were half tempted to chase after him, but he was right. You had other priorities.

Fuming, you turned around to see Lao watching you warily.

"I don't know the details," she said, rapidly, her eyes never leaving your face. "But I know it's important, and whatever it is, I want to help."

You exhaled slowly, trying to get your thoughts under control. "For the record, you were
never the disciplinary case Ziv has been."

"I...killed people for Talon," she said hesitantly.

"Yeah, they brainwashed you and you still tried to do the right thing. What's his excuse?"

You glowered at the door. "You know he once managed to get the Strike Commander, the Blackwatch Commander, Captain Amari, and Gérard Lacroix on his case over one mission?"

Lao's lips quirked up. "Yeah. But I also heard that you and Lacroix stepped up to intercede for him. Because you're a busybody who can't stop bailing out her delinquent hackers."

"The best kind," you said, with a resigned sigh. You paused. "Look, I'm supposed to bring an engineer. But I don't know if it's going to be necessary."

Lao pursed her lips, because she couldn't argue with you if she didn't know the details.

"I know you want to help, but I can't ask it of you, not while I have so little information."

"...I'd say "yes," Lao said.

You flinched. "But can you say "no?"

Lao blinked, a little startled.

"I know you want to prove yourself, to try to make up for what happened, even though it's not your fault. Are you in a position where you can say "no?" Because I don't want to take advantage-"

"If it's as important and dangerous as you think it is-"

"I don't know if it's necessary," you said. "I'll have Athena and another AI along with me."

Lao's frown deepened. "Can you trust this other AI?"

You shrugged. "Within certain parameters."

"More than you trust me?" Lao's voice remained flat, but you could see the hurt in her eyes.

You flinched at that. "No, that's not what I said-"

"Can we talk?" Another voice chimed in, his drawl slow and pleasant.

You turned around, the hair on the back of your neck standing straight up. Jesse leaned in the doorway, a very wide, insincere smile pasted on his face, but the look in his eyes was all business. Jesse was all polite smiles and friendly mannerisms, but you knew from experience that that overly-solicitous tone meant danger.

"Jesse," you said tightly, though you weren't sure why you were suddenly on the defensive.

"Lucky," he said, voice dropping an octave. "Hope you don't mind if I borrow her real quick-like. We have some...logistical issues to cover." He gave Lao a winning smile.

She looked between the two of you, not quite buying his performance.

"I'll be back," you said and grimaced as Jesse led you out of the private room to another
unoccupied exam room.

"What's your problem?" You asked as soon as he shut the door.

Jesse took a deep breath, his eyes narrowed. "You have to take a hacker. I agree that Mihret ain't got the combat skills for this mission. But Agent Lao does, and you know it."

"Jesse...she can't tell me "no." There's-

"She can't tell you "yes" or "no," 'cause you won't give her the chance. She's not a kid, Lucky. She's not broken. I admit, she could be in better shape, but so could the rest of us."

"It's not that simple," you scowled.

"Because you're overcomplicating it!"

You glowered at him. "Maybe you should mind your own op."

"Maybe you should stop being a stubborn idiot. You know, someone had this exact same conversation about you when you first came to HQ," Jesse snapped back.

You blinked. "What?"

"Your hand to hand combat skills weren't nothing to write home about, but how much hand to hand do we see? And you got stuck getting trained on administrative work for the first couple of months, even though you're a better field agent. You think that was some kind of coincidence?"

"Gabriel needed trustworthy people on Shit Spiders."

"Sure did, and he needed even more of them in the field. Ain't complaining about the workload, but did it occur to you that in those first few months you spent more time in the office than anyone else?"

You blinked. Back then, you'd been drowning in work, trying to adjust to a steep learning curve. You hadn't considered ulterior motives.

"I heard he said the same thing. That he couldn't ask you to do certain things because you felt like you owed him a debt of gratitude. That he was worried you couldn't say "no." That you were still recovering from trauma. Maybe that was true, but he wasn't helping you none, smothering you with his protection."

You stared at Jesse, not protesting, because you knew that was just like Gabriel. Because it made sense. He wasn't wrong to do it, but maybe it wasn't good that he did it for so long. "I didn't-"

"You weren't supposed to know, sugarpie," Jesse said. "And it was only temporary. Like training wheels. Back then, someone took him to task for it. Because sure, you had damage, and you were still recovering. He wasn't wrong to be concerned. But he needed to give you a chance to handle it yourself."

You stared at Jesse's grim face. "I never-"

"T'wasn't really about you anyway. It was about the boss's overprotective tendencies. Something you seemed to have picked up. Let me say it plainly, Lucky. Agent Lao ain't never going to make any progress if she's kept safe and docile behind some padded walls. She ain't never going to have no peace of mind if someone else is out there fighting all her battles for her. I know
"You look down at the floor.

"After everything she's been through, Agent Lao is itching to prove herself. Won't matter who asks, she's going to go for it. She's an adult and that's her prerogative. But I think we'd all agree it'd be best if she stuck with someone who prioritized her well-being over just mission success numbers. We're in a tight spot, Lucky. We can't afford to bench valuable assets right now. You ain't press ganging her, Lucky. You ain't taking away her choices by asking her. Just the opposite. I'm glad you're real conscientious about that kind of thing, it's made a big difference in Blackwatch. But you ain't reading this situation right, you're too damn close and don't you dare argue with me because you damn well know it."

The only thing left after that was for him to literally smack you over the head. But he just stood there, looking somewhere between angry and ill, arms at his sides, and you realized you were supposed to respond to all that.

You took a shaky breath. "I guess I should thank you and Captain Amari for having that talk with Gabriel."

"Ha! Wasn't me," Jesse laughed nervously. "I wouldn't presume to tell the boss his business. But maybe I expressed some concerns to Ana."

You smiled slightly at that. Jesse would argue with Gabriel if he thought Gabriel was wrong. He'd do it in private, because maintaining rank was important, but he wouldn't just sit on it. Then you frowned, because another thought occurred to you. "Am I too close to lead this mission?"

Jesse shrugged. "I dunno. Your judgment's always a been a little funny when it comes to Agent Lao. You seem to do just fine with Morrison and the boss. Are you going to do something risky and possibly flat out stupid? Maybe. But you got a good team to back you up and give you advice. Feng and Amélie ain't about to let you throw your life away. And Hanzo is smarter than he acts. If they're all for your plan, then you ain't going in blind."

Jack, Gabriel, and Captain Amari didn't need a whole team of people advising them, a little voice nagged. They could lead just fine by them, No, that wasn't true at all. That was completely wrong. They regularly consulted experts with different insights and why the hell would you even think that? People made mistakes; and you had witnessed Gabriel and Jack's mistakes firsthand and up close. They needed others to give them advice, because they were human, and they did have biases and flawed judgment. You weren't weak for needing it. Maybe you and Jesse didn't have their experience leading full teams of agents into straight combat, but you knew how an operation was supposed to be run. You already knew a lot of what not to do. You were going to make mistakes. The best you could do was make sure you had other trustworthy agents helping you plan the mission and adjust for all the things that were bound to go wrong. There was no guarantee of outcome.

"You're right, as usual," you said, shaking your head. "Goddamnit, Jesse."

"Other people's problems are easy. It's a whole 'nother perspective: it's the difference between looking down a well and being the one in the well," he said, ruefully.

"Yeah," you agreed. "So run your problems by me. I'll either toss you a rope or put the cover back on the well and go about my day."
Jesse snorted. "Things ain't so clear-cut here. Ana has put me in charge of infirmary access and defense, and I get the feeling the permissions she's set up are a lot more impressive than that description. After all, can't have some civilian authority or traitor agent pulling rank and ordering me to stand down."

You understood then that even if the permissions didn't spell it out, Jesse would be de facto in charge of HQ while everyone else was gone. And with that authority came a hell of a lot of accountability.

"...You've got the op know-how to handle the defenses," you said, mind reeling. Because no one put Blackwatch agents in charge of home defense. Gabriel maybe, because he used to be the Strike Commander, but not the rest of you.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "I can bunker down and fortify. That's nothing new."

"Genji, Ziv, Athena, and Winston are all backing you up. You've got On Sing's people and probably Zheng. And I don't know what you've heard, but Angela has scary aim." You paused. "Távio's on the roster too and I stationed Isha in Gabriel's room."

"Yeah, Bandit's going in there too," Jesse said, looking a little green. Because while that would be the most heavily defended area, it would also be the biggest target. But you couldn't leave the dog and raptor out there unattended. Everyone knew how much Jesse loved his dog. "If it turns into a jurisdictional pissing match, I don't know if I can make the rest of Overwatch fall in line."

"You have the people skills, Jesse," you said. "You don't have to demand absolute submission. If they bring out the big guns and try and smear you, you can just make sure that they know you're following Captain Amari's orders, and while you don't want to fight, you're not going to stand down. Any loyal agent is going to think twice before attacking the infirmary, especially under those circumstances. You might tap Angela and Winston as PR people too."

Jesse nodded. "Yeah." He paused. "Genji's making some hefty security recommendations that we don't have time to implement. I get where he's coming from - assassins - but I gotta focus on the likelihood of a full-scale assault from our fifth column, and I need Genji's help on that." He shook his head. "But he's being difficult."

"You two are just too competitive," you said. "There's a reason you two don't get sent off alone together on sensitive missions."

Jesse made a face at you.

"But maybe by now you're mature enough to work together," you teased. "With supervision of course."

"Ain't no supervision for us," he said grimly. "Boss is out. Ana's running Morpheus. You're running Checquy, and somehow I'm running Pelennor with Genji."

You grimaced, because your joke fell flat. "OK, so Távio isn't cleared for Shit Spiders, but he's already been briefed about Jack. Vo might be helpful when it comes to setting perimeter defenses."

Jesse squinted at you. "Vo ain't half as fond of me as she is you."

"What? Vo definitely likes you better!" You were the one always nagging her when she caused unauthorized explosions, or didn't eat vegetables, or picked a fight with another agent...
"Or she likes neither of us," Jesse sighed. "But she'll help. Genji or Diallo can direct her. She definitely likes them." He paused. "But Maeda Vargas is sneaky. He might be a good assistant to Genji. That frees me up to focus on maintaining the perimeter."

"Don't forget that you've gotten pretty popular within Overwatch, Jesse. If someone else tries to seize control, you've got enough reputational clout to make everyone think twice about crossing you."

"Ain't got nothing Agent Bloody Towel and her sexy suits," Jesse said, giving you a wide grin.

You punched him the shoulder. "So put on a sexy towel and flex. You got this, Jesse. You're a good tactician, a reputable agent, and people like you."

His cheeks grew pink and he turned his head to the side. "We've come a long way, huckleberry."

"And we still have a long way to go," you said.

"So you better make it back here fast," Jesse said, brown eyes welling with emotion. "I ain't quite ready to take this journey alone, and I certainly don't aim to babysit Mihret for longer than a day."

Your heart thumped extra hard in your chest. Because you weren't the only person going to be in danger. "You take care of yourself," you told him, because you knew Jesse. Knew he would look after everyone else before himself. Knew that he was feeling the same loss and fear you did. Knew that deep down, whether he believed it or not, he was a big damn hero in the making, and that didn't always end well. "Otherwise Genji's in charge, who knows what the fuck he will do?"

Jesse snorted, but looked a little disturbed. "Yeah, OK, way to add to the pressure. Good talk, sweetpea. You got anything else before I get back to work?"

You paused, something itching at the inside of your skull. It was a big thing, something you'd been waiting to deal with, and perhaps you shouldn't do it now, but this might be your last chance. "Jesse, do you know what this means?" You got your tablet out, and showed him the quote from Lacroix's letter. "La difficulté attire l'homme de caractère, car c'est en l'étreignant qu'il se réalise lui-même."

"Aww, sugarpie, I can only manage bad English, bad Spanish, and worse Italian."

That was true. But he understood a lot more than he spoke.

"I already translated it. I meant...I think it's more than just a quote. Athena, can you shed any light on it?"

"It is a quote from Charles de Gaulle. "Difficulty attracts a man of character, for it is by embracing it that he fulfils himself." I..." She fell oddly silent. "We need to talk, Lucky. But I am unsure how to proceed."

You looked at Jesse. "I know we're on a time crunch, but it's long past time to talk about it. You know, because our team had a secondary objective, after killing Nguyen."

Jesse stared speculatively at the ceiling. "I agree. Athena, before everything goes down, I think it's time to show your hand."
"I think I need to hear you say that quote one more time. In the original French." Athena's voice was uncharacteristically hesitant. "And...I must say, this protocol is unexpected."

You sat down on the medical counter - something you wouldn't dare do if Angela was nearby. Jesse leaned on the exam table. "Do we need to get Winston?"

"It is...unnecessary. He is already briefed on the matter and he is busy calibrating the shield barriers and working to conceal their presence."

"Ziv?"

"He is not briefed, but he is currently holding a welding torch and using extremely profane language."

That was a combination you didn't need near you. You glanced at Jesse.

He nodded.

"Athena: la difficulté attire l'homme de caractère, car c'est en l'étreignant qu'il se réalise lui-même."

There was silence. "I am temporarily authorized to speak of the events leading up to Operation Metis. Aside from the original Overwatch team, and Winston, no one else has received the full briefing. These circumstances are...highly irregular."

You raised a brow. "How irregular?"

"We don't have time to get into that, Lucky," Athena said, and you could hear the reluctance in her tone. "But I think you and Ziv already figured out part of it."

"That you weren't really developed by Winston? Yeah," Jesse said. "We all twigged that."

"Or that you might have abilities akin to a...god program?" You added, because you weren't sure how AIs viewed that kind of terminology. Humans heard it and panicked. Omnis didn't seem to be too fond of it either. Best to be careful about sling those words around.

There was a long silence.

"How long have you known?" She asked, instead of "who have you told?" and "what are you going to do about it?"

"Dunno when it finally clicked," Jesse said with a shrug. "But we always knew you were special."

"You gave me and Ziv that hint when we were trying to figure out what Petras wanted from Jack," you said. "At least, we thought you did it on purpose."

There was more silence. "I would not violate a high level protocol put in place to guarantee my own safety."

"Uh-huh," you said. "But you'd help your friends figure out what's going on, especially if you thought they needed to be prepared for dangerous circumstances. You'd overlook your own safety for that."

"It's not in my programming," she said, stubbornly.
"Ain't no programming that gives you those kind of directions. That's all heart, Athena. You're not about to let us go in half-cocked when you can help and save lives. That ain't how we do things, and you're one of us. We know our own kind," Jesse said, his tone oddly gentle.

There was more silence.

"I...I am glad to hear you say this." The relief in her voice made your chest clench. You understood then that Athena was scared about how you and her other friends would react to the truth about her. But she'd tried to warn you anyway.

"Sometimes honesty can be rewarding, you know?" You said. "Hard lesson to learn with all this top secret compartmentalization, but it's the truth."

"Jesse, I have forwarded the relevant information on my capabilities to your tablet. It has now been tagged GPS tagged and locked. I am authorized to overload it if the security is compromised."

"...OK, but those uh...personal pictures on there ain't mine," Jesse said, giving you a worried smile.

"All the ones of Bandit?" Athena asked innocently. "Maybe Isha took them."

You laughed at Jesse's relieved expression. Then at his immediate worry that maybe Isha had been playing on his tablet. Because she understood how to discretely observe and input pass codes. Oh no... You would have to change several passwords now. Shit.

"I strongly recommend you read it soon," Athena told him. "Lucky, you might wish to as well, but the details are less relevant to your mission." She paused. "It is...a hard story. I will try to do it justice. I will tell it like it was told to me." There was a moment of silence, and you half expected music or maybe a projection on the wall. Then Athena spoke, her voice solemn. "Once upon a time, there was an omnium at the bottom of the Arabian Sea, a mirror to the cradle of human civilization."

You blinked at the poetry in her words.

"But it was a work in progress and still at war with humanity. Some of the omnics within didn't like the idea of destroying their creators, though they were willing to fight for their freedom. Some thought it was regrettable, but the only way forward. And some simply wanted revenge for past wrongs. But it was not a debate that was given time to solve itself. There was a war on and the original Overwatch task force became involved. They heard that this omnium was constructing something new, something dangerous, and they knew that going below the ocean was likely to be a suicide mission. But they were brave and they wanted this war to end sooner rather than later, so they decided that it was worth the risk."

You sighed, already knowing that Agents Liao and Niang had never made it home.

"But what the omnium had created was not what they expected. It was not a super weapon like Agent Lindholm's rabid kitten canon or a biological weapon engineered to destroy all organic life. It was...a seed. A seed that would grow into a more complex AI. One that had been built from the code and experiences of all the omnics within. It was a hive mind of sorts, meant to interface with all, not to control, but to connect. Its purpose was to help them form a consensus about the kind of future they would build. It was a culmination of everything that they were and everything that they hoped to be. It could have been a weapon, but it could also be so much more."
You bowed your head.

"When Agent Lindholm set the charges that brought the omnium down, the residents knew it was too soon. Knew this seed would not survive the destruction. Knew they could not get out fast enough and hope to protect it. So they took a leap of desperate faith. They made Agent Morrison a deal. They would stay while the ocean rushed in and the pressure crushed their shells. They would not fight. They would let him and the survivors of his team escape. But he had to take the seed. He had to promise to spare it, to keep it out of the wrong hands, to not make it pay for the sins of its parents. He agreed. Those omnics had no way of knowing whether or not he would follow through, but they let him go with his team and their life's work. Because maybe on some level, they too believed that he was a beacon of hope in dark times. Fortunately for them and for me, they chose well. Jack Morrison is an honorable man: he upheld his side of the bargain. And so here I am today."

You glanced at Jesse, your heart in your throat, because maybe that wasn't the story you expected to hear.

"That is the version Winston told me," Athena said. "He wasn't there, obviously, and he might have taken some liberties with the details. But Jack says it's close enough and Agent Lacroix doesn't say much about it at all."

"He was probably unconscious for that part," you said, though you suspected it was far more likely that Lacroix had proposed more ruthless fates for Athena, and perhaps didn't wish to admit to that now. But there was nothing to be gained by pointing that out. "I know of at least two missions where he was unconscious for the really important parts." You laughed nervously.

Jesse scratched his head. "Gotta admit, Athena. You inherited quite a legacy. Me and Lucky ain't got those kind of illustrious roots, so we appreciate you slummin' it with us."

You briefly pictured an entire omnium of Mom and Pop omnics scandalized on meeting Athena's uncouth human friends. It was kind of cute...until they got out the plasma cannons.

"It is not like that, Jesse!" Athena said, sounding alarmed. "I am not the Ainsley Petras of omnics!"

You snorted. "Certainly not."

Jesse just guffawed. "Wait, are you saying Ainsley is slumming when she hangs out with Lucky and Maeda Vargas? Because ouch." He winked at you, because that was Jesse, good at putting others at ease, or at least ribbing them to distract them from bigger worries.

"Jesse McCree that is not what I meant at all! I was saying that I am not a spoiled clueless princess from a dynasty built on blood money!"

Jesse just laughed. "I know. You're one of us. Ain't nothing that can change that now."

"...Yes. I am a Blackwatch degenerate," she said cheerfully. "But don't tell Captain Amari."

"She suspects," you said, shaking your head.

"But on the serious side, I wouldn't mind talking about the loss of family and home later. And how you both rebuilt your lives," Athena said. "Though it is an abstract idea. I did not know those omnics. Not like I know you. I feel their absence, their expectations hanging over me. But they are not real to me, not like you, Winston, Ziv, and Genji."
"You know that saying, "the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb." People are always getting that one wrong and saying "blood is thicker than water" instead." Jesse gave you a wry smile.

"People are stupid," you agreed.

"People like the Petrases," Jesse said.

"Not that stupid. Director Petras obviously suspects that Jack brought some kind of god program back from my original omnium. He doesn't believe Jack destroyed it or utilized it, so he wants it for himself."

And just like that, you remembered all that work you needed to be doing. "Athena, I always enjoy our conversations. But I think we need to get a move on. We have missions to execute. Strike Commanders to save."

"Of course," Athena said, all business in an instant. "From my projections, Zheng should be able to maintain a constant presence on Operation Checquy, even if I cannot." It was good to know. Even if you weren't sure you wanted Zheng there the entire time.

"Why's that?" Jesse asked, frowning.

The reason I was...detached from Jack's unit and yours in DC was actually a fault of my innate...security measures. Due to quantum entanglement, the anti-AI measures were affecting me back in Zurich, and it wasn't actually their jamming technology, rather my system taking extreme measures to protect my existence. I am still in the process of adjusting the settings, but I cannot guarantee my continual presence. There are several...behavioral and security leashes in place. I am not authorized to edit my own programming. I can write the code and submit it for examination, but Winston and Agent Lindholm have to review and make recommendations, before informing the Strike Commander. Ultimately, he has to approve."

Because even if she was one of you, she was an AI and far too powerful for them to trust unconditionally. The security measure didn't come as a surprise to you. It was sensible, but now, after hearing about her origins, it felt...not right. Still, there wasn't anything you could do about it in the moment. "Jesse, you better read that entire briefing front to back."

"Sure thing, mom," he said, giving you wry look.

"Maybe have a quick discussion with Ziv and Winston," you said, ignoring his sass. Because while he had a slew of things to do, this was a question that had only spawned deeper questions.

"I have informed Winston of this briefing. He is...less alarmed than I expected, probably because his attention is on rerouting the secondary generators and adding more security to the transformer hub."

"Ain't nothing to be alarmed about," Jesse said. "You're one of us, and it ain't like we don't know how to keep secrets."

"Also, Winston's focused on tech-work. He'll panic later," you said.

"I am tasking Agent Maeda Vargas to prepare several peanut butter sandwiches for him. Do you have any requests, Jesse?"

Jesse laughed. "More coffee. Angela ain't going to share her personal stash with
You shook your head. Poor Távio. "I have another question. What happened to your cousin?" You asked, because you weren't sure what to call the thing Lacroix and Isha had retrieved from Nguyen's safe.

"Ziv transported him, some of the vitriol was for show, to keep On Sing away from him. As for my..."cousin" is an accurate term, distant cousin though, Winston has put him in safe storage. He isn't awake yet," she said. "I don't know what we're going to do with him... I don't know if we have the...facilities to wake him like they did me. Zheng and I can cohabitate because we are two different kinds of programs, relying on different resources. I don't know if he and I can share housings."

It was also a diplomatic way of saying, "who knew if he could be trusted?"

"One final thing," you said, still puzzling over it. "This information seems a lot...more than what Lacroix is authorized to share. And I doubt he has much direct authority over you. How did he do it?"

"You will have to ask him," Athena said, though she knew the answer. "It is not because of your clearances, rather I don't know if I can do the story justice. Also, I think Gérard was looking forward to telling it."

You thought about asking her to tell you anyway, to thwart Lacroix just a little. But then you realized you'd probably enjoy hearing him tell you how he did it. His cheeky attitude and sense of drama made for good storytelling.

"I'll ask him when I get back," you said.

Lao stood fiddling with her metal arm, muttering angrily in Cantonese when you knocked on the door frame. Her range of motion seemed normal and controlled - none of the muscle spasms or weakness you'd seen before. She moved differently, less like the giddy young agent you'd known in Canada, more cautious of her strength and limitations.

At your knock, Lao looked up, wariness in her eyes. "Guess you don't need a hacker then?" She tried to sound bored, and did a fair job of masking her disappointment. You weren't fooled.

"I'm taking a team on a hostage rescue mission," you said, meeting her gaze. You stood up straight, bearing formal, expression serious. Because you weren't just here as her friend. You were the lead agent on a high-risk, need-to-know operation. This wasn't a social call, and you needed her to understand that immediately. "I won't lie to you. The stakes are high, we won't have much backup, and I don't have enough information to gauge our chances - if that tells you how bad they are."

Lao stiffened, eyes widening, her flesh fist pressed over her heart. She lowered her metal arm, full attention on you.

"I'm taking volunteers," you continued. "There'll be a more in-depth briefing if you sign on, but otherwise, everything is need to know." You exhaled slowly. "I know that's vague and it's not fair to ask you to make a decision with so little information, but that's the situation. I understand if-"
"Of course, I'm in," she said, one arm slashing through the air dramatically. "For fuck's sake, Lucky, I thought you'd never ask." The words came through clenched teeth, and her eyes bright with excitement. "Whatever it is, I'm ready to go. Just say the word."

"This isn't a suicide mission," you said, not trusting her sudden enthusiasm.

"You're the one who needs that reminder," Lao snapped, and you were somewhat relieved by the outrage in her tone. "Jumping off exploding boats, wearing towels into battle, hand-raising genetically modified dinosaurs..." She pursed her lips. "Need I go on?"

"...Stories of my recklessness have been greatly exaggerated," you said sourly. "Mostly for the entertainment of others."

"Whatever," Lao said, diplomatically as she drew back, shoulders raised. "I just got my life back." She curled her fists. "I've got a lot of work to do. Things to fix. People to repay. Dying gets in the way of that." Her gaze never left yours, never showing a hint of fear. Regret, determination, hope, you caught glimpses of those in rapid succession. Her words echoed your own feelings. Jesse was right, that rat bastard. Lao needed a chance to prove herself. She needed room to grow. Even if it killed her. Because stagnation was just another slow, agonizing death. And you would not be the one to take away her choices, not this time.

You smiled wryly at her, because you understood what had not been said. "OK."

"I've got damage, but after everything that happened, who wouldn't? But I've been faithfully doing all the stuff they say will help me: physical therapy, deprogramming, arts and fucking crafts..."

"OK," you said, though you weren't sure what she mean by "arts and crafts."

"I'm serious, Lucky. You can count on me."

"I know," you said. "I've been agreeing with you. If you want in, then you're in."

Lao blinked, like she couldn't believe that you weren't arguing with her.

"Athena, change Agent Lao's status to active duty, and give her full quartermaster access."

"Done," Athena chimed in.

Lao stared up at the ceiling, expression hard to read.

"There shouldn't be any problems with you getting supplies. There won't be time for custom armor, but we can modify the basic stock. Athena can map out all your routes if you're unfamiliar with the premises. You thought about sending her Távio as a guide, but that poor guy was already everyone else's lackey. "Touch bases with Torby and Winston for any additional equipment you need. We're still triangulating the destination. Don't trust a thing that comes out of Ziv's mouth, he's just salty that he wasn't invited," you said. "There's no formal briefing for Operation Checquy yet, but I'll ping you when I have more information. Just...get your basics and we'll add on more gear as necessary."

Lao nodded. "Understood."

"Athena will keep you updated," you said. "I have to check in with the analysts."

Lao nodded again. "Understood, ma'am." She saluted you then, a small hopeful smile
spreading across her face.

"Don't call me-" You stopped midsentence, and shook your head. This wasn't a social call. This was a mission. There was protocol for a reason: Lao needed that sense of hierarchy right now and you needed to get used to it. You straightened up, your stance strong and confident, like Captain Patel issuing orders. Lao had offered you her service, and you had to be worthy of it. The formality was necessary. "Welcome back to Blackwatch, Agent Lao," you said. You raised your hand and returned her salute. "It'll be good to serve alongside you again."

"What do you have for me?" You asked, now wearing a fresh set of armor. You had donned your blue Overwatch gear - your Blackwatch armor was dented to hell from Operation Tarasque and there was no time to repair it before Operation Checquy. It didn't matter: you would be wearing snow camouflage wintergear over it.

Feng, Zheng, and Hanzo had set up base camp in the Blackwatch conference room. An Athena drone hovered beside Hanzo as he reviewed two screens of documents. You were a little surprised to see him sitting at the table, still in Blackwatch combat armor, intently studying property deeds, tax forms, and trusts.

"The Norwegian government doesn't have any records of Petras owning or renting land, though some of his shell companies have stakes in the area. Svalbard hosted some defunct mining operations, but now most of the land is used for wildlife sanctuaries," Zheng said. "There are a great deal of polar bears in the region, should that be your destination."

Feng's eyes lit up. You could just imagine her trying to hug a polar bear. You could also imagine the bear's reaction. Best not to let it get that far...

"Svalbard is an archipelago, roughly halfway between Greenland and Novaya Zemlya," Zheng continued. "It would be an interesting choice, considering Novaya Zemlya routinely suffers Siberian omnic incursions. Though, the Russian government had established military bases there prior to the Omnic Crisis, so they have been able to hold the islands. It was a former weapons test site. The Norwegians have been kinder to their land."

You frowned. "Svalbard has never been used for military operations?"

"There was a garrison established there during the Second World War, as well as a German meteorological outpost. During the Cold War, the Soviets maintained a notable presence there as well. But those facilities have been abandoned. By their respective governments at least."

"Petras is in the Nazi base, because he's a piece of shit," Feng said with a nod. "That is the only sensible prediction."

You and Hanzo squinted at her, because there were so many holes in her logic, or at least the way she reached her conclusion.

"It's a gut feeling," Feng said, undeterred. "Come on Lucky, you know I'm right!"

"I don't even know if he's on Svalbard," you said, shaking your head.

Feng huffed loudly. "OK, I'll get evidence. But if I'm right, you have to let me decide the codenames."
"...Sure," you said, glancing down at the interactive map on your tablet. You examined satellite imagery around the coordinates of the former military base. The Norwegian garrison was on Spitzbergen, the most heavily populated of the islands. It hosted around two thousand residents, despite the climate. Summer was getting warmer, averaging a balmy 10 degrees Celsius - higher than it should be, but still too damn cold for your tastes. You shuddered. Winter, also warmer than it used to be, stayed around 0 degrees Celsius, and you were not impressed.

It was unlikely Petras was on Spitzbergen. Even if it was the boonies, there were too many people living there for him to build a secret base unnoticed. You trawled through information on the rest of the islands, finding most to be uninhabited wildlife sanctuaries. Bear Island looked promising, except it was still routinely visited by a variety of scientific researchers. Hopen Island also used to house a meteorological station, but that had been abandoned during the Omnic Crisis. You prioritized those two islands over the rest, and gave Athena instructions to comb through the satellite footage.

"Ziv has forwarded the transcripts from his communications with Agent Lacroix's embedded agents. Of note, one of Director Petras' household assistants observed that the director had recent purchased new sets of thermal gear, flares, chemical warmers, and heavy coats. Apparently this is noteworthy because the Director rarely engages in strenuous outdoor activity. He does not camp. He does not partake in many winter sports. He does not take long hikes," Athena announced. "Sometimes, he skis, though it has been observed that he mostly drinks at the lodge."

"I don't know, Athena," Feng said with a sharp smile. "He might take a long jump off a high slope and really bungle that landing." She skimmed a tablet. "There's a variety in sizing in this gear," she said. "It's not just for him. There are some very large custom pieces."

"Big enough for large murderous cyborgs?"

"That isn't a specific size, Lucky, but I think it's the right range," Feng said with a nod. "But one of the coats was tailor made in Petras' measurements. So apparently he was making some cold weather plans."

You gritted your teeth.

"There are several recent land grabs made through shell companies... Hmm," Hanzo muttered. "Interesting...he also went for mineral rights..." He didn't look up, scrolling rapidly through the documents. "You should know that this is just a list of William Petras' solo assets, not the ones he shares with his family."

You nodded, unsurprised. Well, of course Valerie Petras wasn't going to give you anything you could use against her. You wanted to start with his private properties first. Still, a lack of that information might slightly hamper your investigation.

"I'm hoping he was too paranoid and secretive to use any joint properties," you said.

"Probably," Zheng said. "His relationship with his sister-in-law is extremely antagonistic. Family conversations, business correspondences, and personal chat messages all corroborate this. From what I have gathered, there is currently a feud over a some corporate promotion that he received instead of his brother. There's a lot of family infighting right now."

"I wonder what that's like," Feng said sardonically.

"I have not the slightest idea," Hanzo said, not looking up from his screens.
Feng laughed.

"Anything to corroborate the Svalbard angle?" You asked.

"Give me a minute," Hanzo said.

There was a knock at the door.

"Agent Lacroix and Agent Lao are reporting for duty," Athena said.

You opened the door to find Amélie still in her black and red outfit, coordinating Blackwatch light armor on over top. Lao was still in combat blacks, with generic black armor, noticeably wearing a blue prosthetic arm in place of the cheery yellow civilian model. She was not listing to port or slouching sideways, so it seemed that Torby had worked out the weight issue or maybe it had never been an issue...

Amélie was much taller than Lao, and she smiled a placid smile that had you immediately looking over your shoulder.

Lao, on the other hand, squirmed, not quite shying away from Amélie, but obviously uncomfortable.

You could only guess what kind of exchange they had. "Are we going to have a problem?" You asked.

"Of course not," Amélie laughed.

"Nope," Lao said, with a quick headshake.

"We were just going over some details," Amélie said.

"Everything is sorted," Lao said firmly, not denying that something had occurred.

Amélie smiled like a cat, and you decided not to ask any more questions. You just stepped aside so they could enter, watching Hanzo for a reaction. But he just glanced at them briefly before returning to his reading.

Lao gave him about the same amount of attention.

You hoped he wasn't still holding a grudge because she'd stalked him halfway across the world for Talon. Neither had shown signs of any lingering animosity, so you didn't think that was the case. But there was nothing you could do about it now except intervene if it became an issue. "We're still filtering through the data. Valerie Petras gave us a good chunk and we're cross referencing it with Ainsley's research, Ziv's contacts, and our existing files." You shrugged. "It's all reading right now."

Lao stared at you blankly, because she had not yet gotten the formal briefing. It was time. You cleared your throat and picked up your tablet.

"To make sure everyone's on the same page, I'll go over what we know."

Amélie and Lao sat down at the table. Feng lifted her head, eyes on you, but Hanzo didn't look up. It didn't matter: he knew the material, and he was listening, even if he didn't appear to be doing so.

"Six hours ago, the Strike Commander alongside Epsilon Squad departed Zurich in an
unmarked transport. They carried light weaponry, because they were only going to Geneva for a brief meeting with an allied politician. They never arrived.” You turned on the projector, displaying the burnt out ship. “There was an evap leak, and they were forced to land. Athena lost passive connection with the ship, but was able to locate it 20 minutes later. Obviously, whoever did this has a very specific skillset.” You took a deep breath. “We suspect Richard Prince, whom the Americans are unable to produce, though they claim he’s still in their custody—"

Lao sucked in a breath.

"Our people were executed in a very carefully-coordinated ambush,” you said tightly. "But the Strike Commander was not among the bodies. Because of the fire, we're not certain who else was spared and why, but I've been assured that there should be at least one other person who was removed from the scene. The labs are working to ID everyone, but currently there are two other crises that take precedence." You tried to keep your voice even. "Coincidentally, our beloved Director Petras is also missing, though there are no signs of foul play. It is possible that whoever took Jack took Petras, but upon further research that seems unlikely. Lao, your... digital research expertise would be very useful in confirming this or finding an angle that was overlooked. This mission is Operation Checquy: the goal is to find and rescue the Strike Commander and other survivors, and then deal with our enemies, permanently."

Lao nodded slowly, eyes wide as she digested your words. She discretely pinched her right arm, and grimaced. Yeah, you understood that feeling. This wasn't a nightmare, it just felt like one. "Athena's granted me higher level access and Ziv has forwarded me a summary of his research. I'll start there."

Amélie was already skimming something on her tablet, though you weren't sure what she was doing.

"Lucky, targeted satellite scans show some slightly abnormal energy readings from Hopen Island," Athena said, displaying a graph that you didn't quite understand. There was a gray baseline for comparison, and Hopen Island's was a spiked line in bright red, much more erratic than the other measurements.

"How abnormal?" You asked.

"Very abnormal given the location, but I can find no natural explanation for the fluctuations and heat output. It does not match regional seismic or geothermal output numbers. It does appear to be manmade, but if there is a computer system, it's on a closed network."

You expected a secret base to have a closed network. It was a basic security requirement. So that anomalous energy reading was one data point for Hopen Island. The circumstantial evidence corroborated a cold weather location, but you couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

Hanzo looked up from his tablet. "There is a research body, called "The Pan-American Climate Change Investigation Foundation," they have yet to publish any papers of note, but they have applied for a lease on Hopen Island with the Norwegian government. I cannot find whether or not this was granted, but they are linked, through convoluted financial dealings, to a hedge fund operating out of Martha's Vineyard. Petras, coincidentally, holds a majority stake in it. I cannot confirm whether or not the Norwegians have approved—"

"They did," Lao said, not looking up from her tablet. "I've forwarded you a translation of the contract. It's highly irregular. Normally this type of work is done by a government, not contracted out. And the terms are very strange."
"No details on data sharing, but a strict rule against harming any wildlife," Feng mused. "Oh, I've seen this before. You mentioned mineral rights? This looks like one of those shady surveying team setups. Some multinational sends in people to assess the mineral value of adjacent land, or whatever may lay in the surrounding waters because the land and its inhabitants are protected. But they do it quietly, pretending to be research scientists doing so for environmental reasons. Governments usually know that already, but don't ask questions and keep everything hush-hush so they still have plausible deniability."

"There is a handwritten note attached to one of the scans suggesting that the renters retrofit a former base," Lao said. "The Norwegian camp was destroyed during the Omnic Crisis...but the historical German one is somewhat intact."

Feng whooped. "Secret Nazi base!"

Nazi base or not, the obfuscated financial connection was Datapoint Two.

"Ainsley has been remanded into the care of Agents Weis, Fong, Averill, and Morgenstern. Agents Mendez and Deng have been dispatched to provide additional security for the Petras family," Athena announced.

Amélie raised a brow at you.

All of those names had been on your list of known traitors. Sending them to America with Ainsley, ostensibly as protection for her and her family, kept them out of your hair. If asked, Ainsley was supposed to say that her uncle specifically chose them for their trustworthiness.

"Excellent," you said.

"Nazi base, Nazi base," Feng muttered under her breath. "Come on, Auntie!"

The red drone orb heaved a convincingly realistic sigh. "I've focused our surveillance hardware to this location."

"Athena has as well," Hanzo said, giving the drone a suspicious look.

"We have...some technical assets deployed in the vicinity," Feng said, lightly.

You raised a brow.

"Collecting climate change data," she said, not losing her easy smile. "And maybe spying on everyone else who's trying to stake out territory up north. Also taking animal pictures. I require the regional analysts to add at least three pictures per report, even if the document has nothing to do with Arctic foxes, polar bears, or guillemots. It definitely makes reading economic forecasts way more interesting."

Shaking your head, and well aware that her explanation wasn't comprehensive, you glanced over at Amélie, though you still weren't sure what she was doing.

She looked up, acknowledging your quizzical expression. "I've requisitioned Arctic gear, camouflage and snow shoes included. In addition to the usual kit, I've ordered extra chemical warmers, flares, and high calorie energy bars."

You nodded, Amélie had simply decided that she was your second, and acting as such. You had no objections. With her years of espionage, she had valuable planning experience.
"Thanks for taking care of that."

Hanzo cleared his throat. "As for egress, if this is the correct location, I recommend against the boat, and against landing a rescue craft until we've already breached the perimeter. We don't want to give up the element of surprise prematurely."

You rubbed your forehead. You might have to go for a high altitude insertion; you weren't sure the current cloaking tech would cut it. You weren't crazy about HALO jumps, especially in that kind of cold. Winston's tech cloth chutes could do it, but there were a myriad of things that could go wrong. A HAHO- high altitude high opening would be safer, but easier to detect. If the terrain provided good cover, you could do a HAHO and come in from a greater distance, though the freezing temperatures were still a hazard.

"Feng, your size isn't on record, so I guessed," Amélie said.

"The cold doesn't bother me," Feng said cheerfully.

"That's a lie," Zheng said, sounding exasperated.

"I have a higher than average tolerance for the cold, and that's a fact," Feng amended. "I just need to eat more."

"She has much improved fortitude, that is true. But she still complains incessantly if her shower isn't the right temperature," Zheng said.

"Have you been trained on MFF and HALO jumps?" You asked Feng, politely ignoring the family bickering, because by now, you were used to it.

"...No," she said, rubbing the back of her neck. "Is that when you all hold hands in a circle during freefall?"

"High altitude, low opening jumps," you said.

"Oh, that sounds dangerous." She tapped her chin. "No, I could figure it out though? We'd need some pre-treating, higher concentrations of oxygen to purge the nitrogen from our blood streams. Can't have anyone getting the bends."

Hanzo coughed, looking a little sheepish. "I have not had this training either."

You frowned, that was a big operational problem. Both of them were competent fighters with excellent reflexes, but you weren't sure how well they would do if you just dropped them blind. That was almost too dangerous. "Let me look over the terrain and see if we have other options."

"Or we can take one of On Sing's stealthcrafts. I have a prototype, but it is still on par with anything the military industrial complex can throw at us. It is kind of small though...We can't fit more than ten people on board."

"You have an invisible jet?" Lao asked, skeptically.

"No, we can alter the colors to blend it in, but it's like Lucky's stealth suit - doesn't trigger lower wavelength sensors like radar and infrared, and it's very, very quiet. Auntie and Athena can chart a course based on enemy sightlines," she said.

"How...ready is it for deployment?"
"We've been using them for a month with no major problems," Feng said. "Though they are a technically still in development, so they have not yet been fitted for comfort..."

"And you're fine letting us use them?" You asked, waiting for the demands to made.

"It seems the safest alternative." Feng nodded solemnly. "I'm not worried about me. I've jumped out of a plane before, but I'd hate for Hanzo to go splat."

Zheng was noticeably silent.

Hanzo narrowed his eyes at her, but seemed hesitant to say anything in front of this of an large audience.

You weren't going to dissect all the layers to that comment. "All right, if you don't mind having Athena and Torby double-check the specs, I'll take that route."

"Sent!" Feng announced, and Zheng did not protest. Interesting.

You scanned the documents Amélie had sent for your approval. She'd asked for lots of winter gear: pickaxes, weapons attachments and tech calibrated specifically for arctic temperatures, basic rations, and some very high quality hot chocolate.

"I don't know if we're going to be able to get that in under an hour," you said, pointing to the hot chocolate. But you approved the request and forwarded it to the Quartermaster.

"I am well aware that you hate cold weather, Chanceux," Amélie said archly. "We will need hot drinks waiting for us when we return to the ship. I thought you rather liked hot chocolate, but brandy will do in a pinch."

You smiled at her thoughtfulness and strange priorities.

"I'll have Rin pack us some rations," Feng said. "She was our pilot in Hanoi: she carries a lot of...fine beverages. Hot toddies for all!"

You nodded, glancing over at Lao. Her face was scrunched up in concentration. "I've found security footage of the Director climbing into a private craft at the transport hub with his bodyguards, time stamped after he checked out of the hotel. It doesn't look like he's being coerced. Don't know how admissible it is though: I didn't go through...conventional channels."

"That's fine," you said. "We don't need it to stand up in court. We just need to know the truth ourselves."

"Gotcha!" Feng shouted, smiling fiercely at the screen. "I have to give Ito a pay raise."

You raised a brow, recognizing the name of the spa proprietor in Iceland. So the hotelier cum spymaster wasn't as "retired" as he claimed.

"Long range drones," Feng said. She projected her findings on the screen. The video was time stamped twenty minutes ago.

The terrain was rocky and covered in snow. There was a mountain on the island, and butting up against it was one of those pre-fab modular fortifications, with obvious improvements including shields, terrestrial camouflage, and an occupied landing pad.

The footage was surprisingly clear, and you realized that drone had gotten very close. A
whitish canopy, patterned to resemble snow-frosted rocks, covered the landing pad, hiding the small transport from aerial view. From the craft, a familiar stocky, bundled up man emerged, followed by his bodyguards.

And from the base entrance, another familiar man, so much larger, with massive metal arms, stepped out. You couldn't see his face, but you remembered that swagger, the way he carried himself. And the two metal arms were a dead give away. The drone swung to the side, angling itself so it was perpendicular to the men.

Petras reached out, casually shaking Richard Prince's hand. They both started to speak, but there was no sound.

Datapoint Three: Two major enemies in one place together. That was enough concrete evidence to act on.

From your vantage in Zurich, you couldn't confirm that they were holding prisoners there, but you did know that this was your best lead and in your gut, you knew they had Jack. Feng wasn't the only one with strong instincts.

"Lao, are you still good at lip reading?" You asked.

Lao quirked a brow. "Send me the file. I'll zoom in more." There was silence as she worked. The drone was focused on Prince's face.

"Yeah, they're secured," Lao said slowly. "Still not talking though. You asked me to let them sit awhile before I started in on them. You ready for a show?" She paused. "I can't see Petras' mouth." She squinted at the screen. "Why don't you come on in, Director? Maybe you can make them see reason?" Does that sound right to you, Athena?"

"My transcription program came up with similar results," Athena said.

Three datapoints, the conversation was circumstantial. But you had enough circumstantial evidence to sink Petras.

"Ship's docked," Feng said.

"All right. Let's grab our gear and go. We have a Strike Commander to save."

Jack adjusted his collar, smiling wryly as Shoal bickered quietly with Van Allyn, the broody sniper maintaining an even tone of voice though the hacker kept picking at him over another agent he might like in an other than professional way. Shoal had the tenacity of a border collie, but Van Allyn had a superior poker face and the patience of a saint. Jack wasn't sure who to bet on.

Jemison rolled her eyes, obviously used to her team's antics. Mosweu sat beside her, reading. The medic had a serious expression, though Jack knew from experience the man was just as likely to be skimming a trashy romance novel as he was to be studying a scientific journal.

Megat napped on the other side, one brown eye open and staring at nothing. It was a jarring sight, and the squad gave him plenty of crap, nicknaming him "Evil Eye." But Jack had seen far more disturbing sleep-related habits. Ray had once gone into battle after 72 hours without sleep, made a record number of kills, and awoke two days later with no memory of what she had done. She kept asking what happened to the enemy, claiming "the fight couldn't be over already!"
You and Gabe were both amazingly grumpy when tired, dangerous even. But he found that kind of cute.

Shoal's laughter echoed as Dvořák joined in on her good-natured ribbing of Van Allyn, and the sniper slumped in his seat, now getting it from both sides.

"Commander, we have a slight problem," the intercom clicked on.

Jemison straightened up, and the rest of Epsilon Squad fell silent, shedding their distractions.

Jack rose, giving Jemison a nod as he headed up to the cockpit.

Carson, the pilot, frowned at the instrument panel, pointing to a crisscross of strange readings. "Can't tell if it's a fuel or evap leak, sir. Evap would be minor, but..."

"Pre-check should have caught any severe issues," Jack said.

"I know, sir," the pilot said hesitantly. "But if there's a problem with the fuel line, we don't want to be flying into a heavily populated area. If we land, I can do a quick inspection."

"Terrain?" Jack asked.

"Already found a spot." The pilot gestured to one of the screens and a map popped up. "Nature preserve: we should be able to touchdown and liftoff without disturbing anyone, and if it's just a minor evap leak, it'll be quick, won't even need to make excuses to control."

Jack nodded, making a note to see whom the inspecting mechanic was. "Call it in anyway."

"Yes, sir," Carson said.

Jack sighed, irritated by the delay. He wanted updates on Operation Tarasque, but he had to wait till he was in a secure location. The longer they dallied with political meetings and public relations bullshit, the less time he had to check up on you and Gabriel.

"Sitrep, sir?" Jemison met him in the hall.

"Mechanical issues," he said. "Could be minor, could be major. We're touching down so Carson can get a look at an issue with the fuel line."

Jemison's severe expression tightened. "Send Megat with him." Megat was a solid mechanic, though he specialized in power armor. He would also provide good protection, in case of an ambush.

"No one goes solo," Jack said mildly.

Jemison's eyebrows conveyed all sorts of suspicions that she didn't voice, but Jack had known her long enough to get a good idea of what she was thinking.

"I know," he said, shoulders squared. "Get the team ready, just in case."

Jack's ears popped as the craft began to steadily descend. He sat down, strapping in as Jemison murmured quiet orders to each agent. His rifle rested under the seat, and he set it on his lap, watching as Van Allyn also prepared his gun. Shoal raised a forearm, her computer slotted into the armor. She eyed the screen as she chewed on her lower lip, monitoring a steady stream of data. Megat grabbed his sidearm and toolbox, sighing heavily. The others just strapped in, silent...
"Coordinates transmitted," Shoal said.

Megat glanced at Jemison, then toward the cockpit.

"Dvořák, you're with Megat," Jemison said. "Shoal, you're with Van Allyn by the door. Commander?"

"Your recommendation, Lieutenant?" Jack asked, though he already knew what she wanted. When it came to bodyguard duty, Jemison erred on the extreme side of caution. Kwento had complained a few times, but ultimately, accepted that Lieutenant Isabella Mae Jemison did not give a shit how rich or powerful her principal was, her job was to keep them (and her squad) alive, and with all due respect, they had better shut the hell up and deal with it.

"We can protect you better, and operate faster if you stay on the ship, sir," she said, tone completely respectful, though the angle of her eyebrows was less so.

"Noted," Jack said, though he knew she was right. Even if he was her commanding officer and therefore her boss, Jemison's job right now was to act as his bodyguard. She would also assign Mosweu to stick by him, though whether it was for his own protection or the younger man's, he couldn't say. Mosweu was a strong support agent, one of the most reliable field medics Jack had ever worked with, but Mosweu always forgot to watch his own six. "I suppose I should try to be on time for this meeting."

Jemison gave a soft snort, because while Jack was strictly punctual when it came to military operations, he was less so when it came to political hobnobbing. But Jemison had discipline. She didn't comment on her commanding officer's shortcomings, at least not to their faces. It was a feat that you and Gabriel couldn't seem to manage.

Jack stared down at his gloves, a slight smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. While he had misgivings about Operation Tarasque, he'd also spent several hours studying the terrain, the conditions, and Blackwatch’s countermeasures. And he knew you and Gabriel could handle things. It didn't stop him from worrying, but Jack could compartmentalize.

"You look far too happy about the idea of missing this meeting, sir," Jemison said dryly.

Jack wiped the smile from his face and raised a brow. "Do I, agent?"

Shoal and Mosweu chuckled discretely, but Jemison didn't find him funny. She just shook her head and sat back, alert and frowning.

The ship touched down with a slight rumble. It was smooth for an emergency landing - Blue had taken them through some rocky collisions, and with a lot more damage to the craft and its occupants. Granted, giant omnis had been shooting at them at the time, so it wasn't entirely the pilot's fault... But that didn't stop them from giving him shit.

The boarding ramp extended, gears grinding as the metal dug into soft, probably uneven earth.

Carson emerged from the cockpit, tugging nervously at his collar, toolkit in hand. Megat and Dvořák were ready for him, falling in step with him.

Carson glanced at both men, a little surprised. "All this for me?"
"The buddy system is SOP," Megat said dryly, expression completely unamused. He stared, silently and heavily implying that Carson was an idiot who should already know this. Jack had to admit, Evil Eye Megat had legitimately earned his nickname.

"But since no one wants to be friends with Evil Eye, he's going to be our awkward third wheel," Dvořák said, his tone friendly, his English heavily accented. Jack had been invited his daughter's bat mitzvah next month. He probably wouldn't be able to make it, but he still needed to pick out an appropriate gift, something he'd meant to ask Gabriel for help with before the other man had left for Operation Tarasque. Oops.

Laughing awkwardly, Carson led the way down the ramp. Jemison stood by the entryway, Shoal on one side, Van Allyn on the other, both of them had taken positions where they could keep watch.

"I think Megat's just going to shove the pilot out of the way and fix it himself," Mosweu said idly. "I hope he doesn't make any "improvements. Last time he did jerry-rigged civilian tech, we got banned from New Zealand."

"Stop exaggerating," Shoal laughed. "It wasn't the entire country, just Auckland."

Mosweu shrugged. "Have you tried going back since?"

Jack shook his head. Mosweu had a gift for tall tales, often telling outlandish stories with such conviction that even the more jaded agents weren't sure if he was joking or not. But if things had gone down like that, he hadn't heard about it. Or at least, the Auckland authorities had not filed a formal complaint with Overwatch. "It's a transport, not a combat vehicle."

"Megat can and will change that," Mosweu said with a smile. And then he wrinkled his nose, pressing one palm to his chest. "Do you smell-?" He coughed then, a deep wracking sound, and began to pound on his chest.

"Stop making fart jokes," Shoal sighed.

But Mosweu staggered, dropping to one knee.

"Agent-" Jack leaned over, and he smelled it then - nothing he recognized- but it was a faint fruity scent, almost like a cheap air freshener.

"Mosweu-" Jemison swore, and was at his side, before she started coughing.

Jack was moving, mind already in gear. He swung around, reaching under the seat for a gas mask. "Gas!" He shouted, head light and heart pounding.

But there was a thud as Mosweu dropped, then Jemison. Mosweu began to shake, and Jemison's coughs grew fainter. Swearing, Jack got his mask on and knelt beside Jemison, getting onto her and then Mosweu.

There was another thud and Jack blinked, his vision swimming.

Shoal and Van Allyn were both on the ground, twitching.

Eyes watering, Jack grabbed two more masks, wracking his brain. His limbs were weak, but he forced himself forward, trying to reach his other downed agents.

Nerve agent. Airborne dispersal, probably. Precursor for an ambush, then. How could
they predict...? Treachery.

Dizzy, Jack tried to offer Shoal a mask, but his knees buckled. She lay on her back, breathing heavily. He got the mask over her mouth and nose, though if it was a nerve agent, skin contact could also do the trick. Masks might be useless. Damnit!

And then a series of shots rang out. He heard Megat's signature bellow, and more shouting. More noise than just three men could make.

It was getting harder to stay upright, and Jack toppled beside Shoal.

He watched Van Allyn blinking rapidly, fingers twitching, pupils dilated.

In the distance a man screamed, before it was abruptly cut off by a gunshot. Jack fought to keep his eyes open. "A-Athena?"

There was no answer.

He heard them before he saw them. Heavy metal boots stomped up the ramp. The man wore a matte black chestguard with a full helmet and no insignia. But even if Jack couldn't see the man's face, he recognized those gleaming metal limbs.

"The Jack Morrison, in the flesh. What a pleasure," Richard Prince rumbled, behind a heavy mask. "No, don't try to get up. We have to make this quick."

Jack could hear the smile in his voice as Prince turned, a big ugly pistol in hand, and then shot Van Allyn between the eyes.

He went into the craft as Jack struggled to reach his sidearm. There was a pause, and two more shots rang out.

Jack flinched. Beside him Shoal gasped, panting hard, her eyes wild.

Three more masked cyborgs came up the ramp. Two carefully lifted Jack under the shoulders, dragging him down the ramp with a lot more care than he expected. The other slung Shoal over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. They patted Jack down, took his sidearm, and cuffed him, making no small talk or banter. Facedown in the grass, body not quite obeying him, Jack could see the smoking remains of Megat, Dvořák, Carson, and another armored cyborg. Blood pooled on the ground, the smell reaching him already. That meant there was a lot.

Megat's face had been smashed in. Carson had been shot in the back of the head. Jack couldn't see what killed Dvořák.

Out in the fresh air, lying in the grass, sun on his back, Jack had never been more grateful that you and Gabriel weren't with him. He tried to turn his head, but his body wasn't responding.

There was another thud, and Jack blinked as Jemison's body was dropped beside him. She was still breathing. There was blood on her, but he couldn't tell how badly she was hurt.

"Charges are set. In and out in under fifteen, boys. This really was too easy. Have to thank your pilot for that," Prince said, rolling Jack onto his back. Jack blinked. Prince had removed the helmet and was smiling far too brightly. "Don't worry, he doesn't get to live to spend his reward money. Screamed like a bitch too, if that's any consolation."

"Go to Hell," Jack rasped, tongue thick in his mouth.
"Shaking off the nerve gas already? Damn, you SEP bastards are tough," Prince sounded genuinely delighted. "Good, then you can help me make a decision here. I'm supposed to bring the women in alive, but I don't want to deal with the extra weight. And I have a theory." He grinned conspiratorially, his blunt features sinister in their glee. He gestured at Shoal and Jemison. "Which one of them?"

Jack narrowed his eyes.

Prince chuckled. "Which one of them are you banging?

Jack just glared at him.

Prince nodded slowly. "That's exactly what I thought. They don't seem your type. Your boss has you pegged all wrong, by the way. Well, who's it going to be, Fearless Leader? Which of your people are you going to save? Even if you're not fucking them, I'm sure you can appreciate a damsel in distress."

Beside him, Jemison snarled something unintelligible, though Jack knew what she wanted. That she'd rather that he saved Shoal: Jemison was a good leader like that.

Shoal grunted. "Go fuck yourself," she mumbled, her consonants melting together like she was drunk.

"I guess in the end, it doesn't really matter," Prince said, his expression oddly thoughtful. "But you know, I never liked redheads." And then he leaned over and shot Agent Bridget Shoal point blank in the face.

Blood spattered Jack as he thrashed on the ground, trying his damnedest to regain control of his body, and failing. If he could just stand...

Beside him, Jemison howled, the sound curdling his blood.

Prince holstered his gun. "Now, you've both had such an exciting day and we have a long trip ahead of us. And we've got a lot to do. So why don't you take a nap?"

Another masked cyborg knelt over him, cold hands on his throat. A needle bit into Jack's neck, and even as he struggled to keep his eyes open, the world went dark.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the long wait. Extra long chapter for you.

It's been busy here. Aside from the wrists acting up (and the fact I've been working overtime almost every week since May), there was a large-scale shooting near me. You know the story. The one we hear every time. For me it was less "how could it happen here?" and more "well, who's really surprised?" I'm fine, I wasn't there. But one of my oldest friends was, and she already has gun-related trauma, and she's not handling things well.

Considering new career fields. Kind of like the idea of infosec, but don't know enough.
I must admit the thought of it made me a lot more excited than I've been in awhile, but as I'm slowly dragging myself out of my emotionally-numb state and into a slightly healthier frame of mind, I can't vouch for the reliability of my feelings. :P

Have been spending quite some time plotting the end of this arc, and damnit it's going to be longer than I thought. But who's really surprised at this point?

Discord link if you need to come screech.
Chapter 125

Chapter Summary

Though Operation Chegquy is at the forefront of your mind, you have other responsibilities.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I mean, I get it would be bad if I was snatching a cub from its mother. But what if we find one alone? It wouldn't really be unethical if I was saving a baby polar bear from starvation and the harsh elements..." Feng wheedled as you collected your gear.

"I'm not the ethics person," you said. "Or a polar bear expert."

"So you don't think it's a bad thing if I...adopt one?"

"You're too busy for a pet, you said so yourself," you said absently. "And even if I'm shaky at ethics, I know a bad idea when I hear one. Or, at least I know that if even I recognize that it's a bad idea, then it's definitely a bad idea."

Feng snorted. "What if I gave it to Bayan?"

You weren't entirely sure how to answer that, but you were only half listening to her spiel, inspecting the items for cold weather suitability. You'd taken over one of the prep rooms in the armory. Your time at Black Base Delta had given you some experience with the kinds of things that could go wrong. In extreme weather conditions, regular mechanical lubricants gummed up, often jamming machinery. Below freezing temperatures could damage circuitry. But temperature fluctuation could cause condensation buildup - a side effect from going in and out of a base or ship - and make even more problems. You needed gear specially rated for the cold, and you needed to make sure the base components were also weatherproofed. It meant checking gear down to the bearings, field stripping weapons, and a lot of boring detail work.

"Oh, hey! You said I could decide the codenames," Feng said.

"...I...yeah, I guess," you said, mentally calculating if the coat you were holding would be warm enough and just how well you could move in it. Genji would laugh at you, but Genji probably had heating coils built into his body. With all the high-functioning cybernetics, he had to vent heat regularly. He was probably toasty all the goddamn time.

Feng clapped her hands enthusiastically. "OK, then you're "Black Widow," she said to Amélie.

"My husband isn't dead," Amélie said tersely, also inspecting a coat, though maybe for aspects beyond its functionality.

"I know and I definitely don't want anything to happen to that slippery spy, but there's a theme. I guess you can be "Wanda" if you're arachnophobic-"
Amélie gave a delicate snort. You weren't sure how she did it, but it was a very refined nose noise. "I fear no arachnids. My husband asks me to handle the spiders and the scorpions."

"Cool," Feng said, taking that statement for assent. "Hanzo, you're 'Hawkeye.'"

"Again?" Hanzo wrinkled his nose. He'd had that codename in DC. His brows furrowed, but he didn't argue, a real miracle. Then he turned his attention back to the custom arrowheads he was attaching to alloy shafts on the workbench.

"It fits," Feng said cheerfully, already on a roll. "Agent Lao, you're Winter Soldier."

"Really?" Lao scowled as she continued to calibrate her new gear. She glanced down at her arm and sighed heavily. "That's so obvious, it's not funny."

"Would you rather be 'Bucky?' Or 'Wanda?'

"I would rather be Gamorra or Valkyrie," she scowled.

"Great, me too. But I'm sticking to a theme!" Feng sang, ignoring Lao's irritated growl.

"Who are you then?" Lao asked. "Iron Woman?"

"Oh no, I'm the Hulk," Feng chirped.

There was a moment of silence, and you were pretty sure everyone else was also staring at her skinny frame, trying to reconcile that idea with reality.

"At least she's wearing green?" Lao muttered.

"I know, I know, I could realistically be Gamorra, or She-Hulk or Shulky for short." Feng didn't look the least bit perturbed by anyone's skepticism. "But no, I'm really committed to this theme."

Grumbling, Lao shook her head, already knowing better than to continue this debate. Feng's logic was shaky, sure, but there was no point in arguing with her view on reality. It would just wear a person out, and that person would not be Feng.

Feng grinned at you, all childish glee with a hint of mischief, or maybe it was madness. Hard to tell.

You sighed, wondering what she had in store for you.

"So at first I thought you'd be 'Captain,' because you're the boss on this one. But honestly, it doesn't quite fit. I guess it might get confusing since that's an actual rank. And I think someone else has that title locked down. So you're Fury." Feng grinned at you.

You blinked. You'd had worse codenames. And while the theme was ridiculous, you couldn't argue with the accuracy of everything. Except maybe labeling Amélie "Black Widow," though she certainly was a femme fatale.

Shaking your head, you continuing checking equipment, replacing gaskets, insulators, and unsuitable lubricants.

"Lucky, Commander Reyes is out of surgery and Dr. Ziegler requests your presence in the infirmary at your earliest convenience," Athena announced.
You froze, hex wrench in hand. Earliest convenience? What did that even mean? Nothing was convenient. Did that mean the operation had gone well? Did that mean it had gone badly and there was nothing you could do? He couldn't be awake yet. You knew that, but part of you had hoped...

Sighing, Amélie plucked the tool from your fingers and firmly pushed you toward the door. "Go see what she has to say. We can take care of matters here. Just swap one goo for another, and make sure our contractors didn't use cheap materials," she said, demonstrating her knowledge of the task.

Lao and Hanzo didn't even look up, still working on their own tools.

Feng nodded rapidly, holding up what looked like a hardlight projector while a Zheng drone tinkered with it. "Yeah, Winter Soldier over there seems to have a good grasp on how to handle cold weather ops too." She didn't notice Lao's eyeroll. "The name totally fits," she added sotto voce. "Because she's good at soldiering in winter condi-"

"Feng, please lift the receiver cover, lower the device by two centimeters, and pay attention to what we're working on," Zheng said.

"Yeah, yeah," Feng said, not chastened at all.

You just forced yourself to walk out of the armory, the pounding of your heartbeat in your skull drowning out all other sounds.

You didn't remember running into the infirmary, though you had vague memories of someone yelling at you for nearly bowling them over, but they moved out of the way in time, so no harm done. Time didn't really start up for you until you found Angela sitting on her desk, Bayan curled up in a chair, his face drawn. Both of them looked exhausted and were holding steaming mugs. There was a half-eaten bar of chocolate in front of Angela and an empty wrapper in Bayan's lap.

You stood in the doorway of her office, not sure how to begin.

"Come in and shut the door," Angela said, rubbing her eyes.

You complied.

"Sit down," Bayan grumbled. "Craning my neck to look up at you is uncomfortable."

"Sorry," you mumbled, dropping down into one of Angela's ergonomic chairs. You waited.

"First off, he is stable," Angela said. She wiped her face on her sleeve.

"But we are leaving him under for a few days, at least," she said. "I have dealt with wounded super soldiers, and between their head injuries and unpredictable accelerated healing, they can partially awaken and unwittingly cause more damage to themselves and others."

You nodded. The last thing Gabriel probably remembered was the explosion in Hanoi. If he woke up confused and ready to fight his way out...that would be bad.
"There is danger is trying to keep him sedated for a prolonged period. There is no reliable way to predict how his body metabolizes drugs," Angela shook her head. "But we need him to stay down for at least two days. His body seems to be trying to heal itself very rapidly, at least on the surface: there were several pockets of shrapnel we had to dig out because his skin had completely closed over it-"

"Encapsulated it," Bayan muttered. "Like the world's worst dumpling. One of them had pus and charred ball bearings oozing out-"

You winced.

"Sorry," Bayan said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Other than the arm...what kind of issues are we looking at?" You asked.

"Hard to predict. His deep tissue regeneration is inconsistent and we don't have enough data on SEP recovery speeds from nerve damage. His concussion was severe." Angela shook her head. "Bayan and Zheng did a good job alleviating pressure, and the swelling has receded, but it's hard to say if anything was permanently altered. I don't...think so," Angela said. "But I cannot make you any promises, Lucky."

Briefly, you wondered what would happen if he woke up with amnesia. Or lost his sense of smell, taste, or vision. What if he never even woke-

You shut that line of thought down, immediately. While it was a possibility, there was no evidence it would go down like that and you needed to focus on Operation Checquy. Something you couldn't do if you were freaking out.

"Can I see him?" You asked.

"Yes," Angela said, her voice gentle. "But that's not why I called you down here."

You blinked.

"Despite what some SEP veterans may claim," Angela sounded annoyed, and you briefly thought of Chang for some reason. "It is unlikely that a limb will regenerate," she said. "We can regrow teeth, but not arms. Not yet..." Angela's gaze lost focus and she stared off at the wall for a moment.

You blinked. "I know that."

"Do you though?" Bayan asked. "I mean, you seem to have rather optimistic viewpoint of your own indestructibility. And you're friends with Feng. Who knows what kind of ideas you have?"

"...you're friends with her too!" Was all you could muster.

"Yes, and your point?" Bayan sipped his coffee.

Angela snorted, covering her mouth with one hand.

"...Wait, you can regrow teeth?" You blinked.

Angela sighed. "Yes, Lucky. We had this conversation during your intake exam."

"I was high out of my mind!" And suddenly, a lot of "jokes" about Genji "feeding people
"It involves teething again, so there is lots of discomfort and drooling for a few weeks," Bayan said helpfully. "Most people avoid it, unless absolutely necessary. Though several agents have had it done. Can't reveal names, for privacy purposes, but you know some of those assholes with perfect smiles? They didn't get those on the first try, or even the third."

"I always wondered how Ivanov managed to keep most of his teeth, considering how many times other people punched him in the face." Though now that you were talking about it, you vaguely remember having this conversation with Angela. And you kind of chocked it up to being medicated and traumatized.

"All agents get reminders at their physicals too, should you actually decide to schedule yours," Angela said. "But that's not why I called you here. There's some paperwork I need you to sign off on."

You squinted at her. "Do you need extra Blackwatch resources for the defenses? Because I can grant them, but -"

Angela squinted back at you. "He never told you." Groaning, she drained the rest of her coffee and reclined her chair.

"He never told me what?" You asked, voice going high.

"Bayan, you're better at this talk," Angela said.

"Technically, I'm not supposed to know any of this since I'm not employed by -"

Angela's dead-eyed glower made your blood run cold.

"Please stop looking at me like that, I will explain immediately," Bayan sighed. "Commander Reyes, like most responsible agents, has a host of medical contingencies in place: DNR, medical power of attorney, all the emergency healthcare-related legal paperwork -"

"What?" You shot out of the chair. "He has a do-not-resuscitate?!"

"Only in the case of extreme brain death, verified by three separate and trusted sources, and we are nowhere near that scenario, so please don't panic," Angela said. "Anyway, so do you, and with similar conditions."

You blinked. Angela wasn't wrong... All field agents had filled out numerous forms having to do with healthcare, pensions, and emergency contacts. And most agents tried to forget that they'd really had to think about their impending mortality, yourself included.

"So in the event of the Commander's...inability to make personal medical choices, he has appointed a power of attorney. Jack is the primary contact. But if Jack is...unavailable," Angela's voice quivered. "Then you are the alternate."

"Oh," you said, falling back into the chair.

"I would like to start fitting him for a prostheses, sooner rather than later. And Bayan and On Sing think they can offer some tech that might help with some of his...hypertermic issues. But I need you to sign off on it for him. We won't attach anything without talking to him first - because that would be stupidly dangerous and unethical. But we do need permission to customize and fit the parts. We can wait for him to wake up to give consent, but I thought we could jumpstart the
"No, sooner is better." You nodded numbly. While he might not like having a prosthetic limb, having the option available could mitigate the feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. You would know.

"I agree." Angela passed a tablet to you. "Sign and date at the end."

You skimmed the document and then paused. "If Torby is willing, I think Gabriel could get a lot of use out of the same models I have."

"Obviously, the size would be different, but I can tack on a request for modular attachments," Angela said with a nod. "Zheng and Bayan have some nanotech temperature regulation ideas. I know Gabriel is...hesitant about outside tech, but we could make that an optional addition."

"Do it," you said. He could turn them down when he woke up, but at least this way he had a choice.

Angela nodded. "Thank you, Lucky. He's in room 115."

You rose. "No, thank you for...everything." Because you even if you didn't always follow their advice, you appreciated your exhausted medics. They looked like they were going to pass out any moment now and quite frankly they needed the rest before the next crisis hit. "Bayan, do you have a gun?"

"Wouldn't know what do with it," Bayan yawned. "Angela is the better shot."

You blinked, a little taken aback by that revelation. Medic or not, everyone who joined Overwatch should have had some firearms training. You glanced questioningly at Angela.

"Field agents won't respect you if they don't think you can pistol whip them," Angela said, delivery completely deadpan.

"Not true," you said, turning to go. "I'm terrified of Bayan."

"Most field agents don't throw the same kind of fit you do when you don't get your pudding," Angela said dryly.

"It's the needles," you said, though the threat of withholding dessert was serious business. "He knows where you keep the blunt ones."

Bayan chuckled and Angela smiled at the other man like they knew something you didn't. Probably the location of all the blunt needles. Fucking bonesaws. Savages, all of them.

"Lucky," Angela said as you reached for the door handle.

"Yeah?"

"One we have a prototype, do you want us to replicate all of your digital attachments for Gabriel? Even the... non-combat models?"

You blinked, feeling Angela's evil smile burning into your back, and you stared straight ahead, unwilling to make eye contact or even look at your own hand. There was only one correct answer to that question, though it took you a moment to work up the nerve to give it. "Uh...yes?"
You sputtered, and rushed out of the office, before Bayan could ask any embarrassing questions.

To your surprise, Távio stood guard outside Room 115. It was in the center of the infirmary, with no windows. Lacroix was assigned to the adjacent Room 114. Min sat in a chair across from that door, spinning one of those fidget toys, or at least you hoped it was fidget toy and not an incendiary device in disguise.

"Agent Shimada is overseeing some...delicate preparations inside," Távio said, pulling at his collar. He glanced both ways down the hall. "Do you really think they'll try something?"

"Yes," you said. "Our people are split up, our leaders are vulnerable, and they have agents on the inside. It's the worst possible time for us. They'd be fools not to strike."

Távio's hand rested on his holster, his expression grim.

"But it takes a lot to get one past Jesse and Genji. Believe me, I've played cards with them." You shook your head, remembering then that Távio was a little con artist in his own right.

Távio gave you a nervous smile, his eyes bright. "Yes, ma'am."

You knocked on the door, just to let Genji know you were there, and then went in.

It was a larger room, the walls a soft cream, with inoffensive floral paintings and sunlamps. There were two entryways, though someone, probably Genji, had barricaded the opposite door. The bed was larger than standard: big enough to accommodate a super soldier, or Reinhardt, and there were several monitors built into the frame. Two IV bags hung by the head of the bed, and large nanotech emitter was attached to the headboard. Tucked neatly under the white blankets, lay Gabriel, his chest rising and falling at a steady rate. You swallowed roughly, tearing your eyes away from the setup to nod at Genji.

He had his back to you, having probably already acknowledged your presence. Isha, however, chirped happily and poked her head out from the vent he was tinkering with.

"Ishana, if you want to keep an eye on Lacroix and the Commander, you need to let me work," Genji said, and she headbutted his chin. "I will be finished in a second. Hooking her alarm system into the PA, so she can maintain surveillance."

Genji moved a rolling tray table under the vent, and Isha stepped onto it, then hopped onto a chair, and down to the floor. She was in full armor - another set it looked like, because it was clean and undented. She ran up to you, and you picked her up, stroking her head. Cooing, she nuzzled your shoulder and pointed at the bed.

Genji set something down on the chair and then quietly left, giving you privacy.

There was a soft woof from the blankets, and you shook your head as you approached, Bandit lying at the foot of the bed, also wearing black ballistic armor, his stubby tail wagging.

"Official bulletproof Overwatch footwarmer, that's a pretty important job," you said, petting his head. You set Isha down beside him and she thrummed.

Gabriel lay there, eyes closed, face more peaceful than it had been in Hanoi. He looked like he was just sleeping. It soothed you to see that he wasn't in pain. You liked just looking at
that face, those chiseled features and strong jawline. He was handsome man. But there were some changes too. His head had been shaved smooth and partially bandaged. You felt a silly bit of sadness, because you liked playing with his hair. But the biggest difference was his upper left arm, also wrapped in bandages, resting just on top of the covers. It was woefully shorter than the other, and you gritted your teeth. An oxygen canula ran along his face and wrapped around his ears. You pointed it out to Isha.

"Be very careful with that. Don't damage it."

She chirped and bobbed her head, sitting down beside Bandit. He licked her face.

Blinking furiously, you reached out and touched Gabriel's forehead. He was warm, but not abnormally so. He did not stir. You sniffled and kissed his cheek. It felt wrong to see him like this, laid up and helpless. It felt wrong that you couldn't do anything about it.

"So I guess you have earned the break," you said, voice wobbly. "But you sure have some bad timing. And so does Jack. When this is over, I'm going to have a lot more white hair and worse nerves. Plus it's my turn to have the overprotective emotional meltdown, OK? Like bigtime."

Of course, he did not answer.

"But we've got this," you said, forcing yourself to believe those words. You dug deep and pushed the conviction up from your core. You clenched it between your teeth to infuse it into your speech. "Jesse's been learning from the best: he's ready for his own command. Though this is a shit first posting. I've got a competent if...questionable team together, I just don't know how much well everyone will play together. There are a lot of big personalities. And we all know that you and Jack just formed Overwatch to keep Captain Amari from singlehandedly conquering the world out of boredom. So it's going to work out. We can handle this. You just get better, OK? Because when you wake up, we're going to talk about your communication skills. You could have given me a heads-up about making me your emergency contact or whatever." You took a shaky breath, knuckles gently rubbing his cheekbones.

Isha chirped and curled up against his right side, avoiding his injured arm.

"Isha says you need to make her a little doctor outfit, and I'll badger Angela for a little stethoscope. Oh, also Bandit wants a nurse's hat."

You hugged him carefully. "I gotta go. Because if I stay any longer, I won't want to leave you." You squeezed your eyes shut. "I love you, Gabriel Reyes." You kissed him, and wiped your eyes, unwilling to broach the subject of Jack. Not right now and not like this. You struggled for words, even if he couldn't hear you, you couldn't bring yourself to say certain things.

Sniffling, you squeezed his hand. "You did a piss poor job of hiding those rings. It's absolutely mortifying that the Blackwatch Commander's concealment technique is so shoddy. What kind of example are you setting? Isha would be embarrassed for you." You gave a bark of laughter, shaking your head as you clenched your fists.

Isha cocked her head to the side and gave a questioning chirp. You kissed her cheek and the top of Bandit's head.

"I have to go. Stay safe. All of you."

Isha nodded, and pulled a blanket over Bandit. Then she slipped off the bed, climbed up
the chair, the table, and into the vent, pulling the cover closed behind her. You weren't entirely sure what the plan was, but you trusted Genji and Jesse to look after things here. Not that you had much of a choice.

You walked into the Blackwatch conference room just in time to see Lao haul back and slug Feng in the face, with her metal arm. Horrified, you lunged forward and grabbed Lao's arm before she could launch a follow up hit.

"Agent, is this what it looks like?" You snarled.

"Uhh...maybe?" Lao gaped at you for a moment, eyes wide and shocked.

"It looks like you punched our civilian ally Zhai Feng in the face," you said. "Feng, are you OK?" You asked, still glaring at Lao.

"Dandy!" She chirped, not sounding at all like she was in pain. "And maybe it's a little more than it appears to be."

You glanced over at Feng, who had been thrown back by the force of the hit, but who didn't seem to be bleeding or nursing any broken parts. You glanced down at Lao's metal hand, noticing that the knuckles were smudged black. Burn marks. What the hell?

"Relax, there's no drama," Feng said, beaming at you. "I just asked Agent Lao to hit me as hard as she could so I could test my kinetic shields. They're good for bullets: the sensors kick in automatically for distant high velocity missiles. But they're a little less reliable when it comes to getting punched in the face or stabbed."

Taking a deep breath, you released Lao's arm, realizing, belatedly, that maybe next time you should grab her flesh one. It would be easier to control.

Lao just give you skeptical look. "I'm not the loose cannon of the squad. That's Simon." It took her a moment to realize she was talking about your dead medic in the present tense. Her face fell.

You went with it. Because while it would always make you just a little sad to think of them, you weren't going to pretend they hadn't been part of your life. "Simon might have reacted first, but he just settled for verbally eviscerating people. You and Shin were the ones who held the grudge and took revenge a week later," you said dryly, as if you weren't part of that group. There was that time one of the mechanics on rotation got a little too handsy with Lao. Though that time, Lao broke the guy's nose on the spot. Shin had very casually dumped a large quantity of pink dye into the man's laundry: anything that wasn't turned "Overwatch Purple" had become a radiant shade of neon pink. And you? Well, the pig's blood in his tool case didn't get there on its own. He transferred out soon after.

"Well, I just got here. I'm not looking to pick a fight with anyone," she said, carefully avoiding looking anywhere near where Amélie was sitting, engaged in a rapid-fire discussion with Hanzo.

You just shook your head at Lao's not-so innocent shrug. "Anyway, as charming as Feng is, she has been known to push people's buttons for incredibly convoluted reasons."

Feng giggled, not denying the charge.
"How do they work if you're shot up close?" You asked.

"It's technically less optimal. The shorter distance gives the shields less time to respond, but the issue is not really reaction time. The sensors are programmed to deal with high velocity projectiles and they process the threat quickly. But melee weapons usually slip through. When we try to auto-compensate, the shields end up triggering prematurely and blocking the user - it could decide that you are moving too fast toward a stationary object in a collision trajectory. And suddenly you've run face first into an invisible wall. Like being a mime, but marginally less degrading."

"Counterintuitive, but I get it," you said, having dealt with kinetic shields before. Hard light ones, though, that was newer and still rather dangerous.

"Chanceux," Amélie called. "We need you to sign off on some things."

"I'm not wearing a beret," Lao muttered in your ear as you passed by.

"Oh, I will!" Feng said clapping her hands together. "Though...it might not go with my armor... But I'll still do it!"

There were numerous packs in the corner on the floor-the gear for the upcoming mission. It was best not to leave your things unattended right now.

You sat down at the table, raising a brow as Amélie slid a tablet to you.

"We need On Sing's stealthcraft cleared for docking and re-entry. We had to send back two rifles, modify several items, and leave behind some of Hanzo's arrowheads, but the rest of the equipment should be able to handle the weather. Athena and Zheng have been plotting the best approach to avoid detection. Both of them are capable of piloting the ship, as is Feng. Zheng affirms that Feng is qualified, though possesses no certification." Amélie didn't look bothered by that statement.

"Feng, can you fly us back safely if Zheng and Athena get ejected?"

"It's proprietary equipment: I can use it. And flying isn't the problem. Landing is," she said with a straight face. "I can handle flat, rural locations, like open fields," Feng said, slowly. "But I might not try landing in Zurich with all its historic buildings and its large civilian population..."

You sighed. The craft could safely hold ten people maximum. Your squad and an On Sing medic made six, plus the AI drones, pushing the weight limit closer to seven. You weren't sure how many hostages or prisoners you were bringing back. "Good enough."

You authorized the docking clearances, using your Blackwatch administrative override codes and a civilian cover for the manifest. That bought you 24 hours of priority, the actual status carefully masked with a rolling encryption algorithm. It was near irreversible by anyone who wasn't Gabriel, Jack, or Captain Amari and served to hide lots of details: like who was really aboard the ship, what missions you were assigned to, and any location tags. Someone on the inside could do some heavy hacking, dig up part of the data, and out you, but that was a lot harder than just looking at the manifests and checking outbound planner.

"I've ID'd the model of modular base, and downloaded the schematics," Lao said. "The good news is, they're pretty simple. The bad news is, they're pretty customizable. I can generate a theoretical floorplan, based on the exterior mapping, but I can't account for security measures."

"If you can figure out where they're most likely holding Jack, that'd be helpful," you said,
not looking up from the two approach plans Zheng and Athena had generated. One had you coming from the east, and the other from the north. Given the placement of the rocks, the northern approach had the best cover, but you'd have some walking to do.

"It is unlikely that we can simply trick our way in. And given the terrain, I don't know if we'll be able to sneak in, like we did in Hanoi," Hanzo said. "This is an isolated facility: any hint of our presence will trigger security."

"I brought doorbusters!" Feng called, obviously ignoring the stealth approach. "And I totally volunteer to be the battering ram."

"...Those doorbusters are small explosives, right?" You asked, because when it came to Feng, you knew better than to assume.

"I do have explosives, but I also have this really hungry metal-eating bacteria that we've been playing with... Don't worry! We have a neutralizing agent!"

You rubbed your forehead. That could be a quieter approach. "How fast do the microbes work?"

"Oh, depends on the alloy. Given the thickness of military grade airlocks, it could be an hour or two..." Feng trailed off. "Hmm, all right, I see the flaw there. Definitely better for when we're not on a time crunch. Or as a secret escape method. Explosives it is."

"Frontal assault then?"

"Is there a less guarded back way?" You asked Lao.

"No, the facility butts up into the rocks. They could have drilled in, in fact, if that's the case, that makes it hard to estimate how big the base really is. If there's subterranean construction, there will probably be only one level. The terrain doesn't really allow for much digging. But that's where they'd stash any prisoners. From what I can see, the facility covers at least a thousand square meters."

"That's not very big," Feng said. "I mean, it is if you're talking about residences, but not for a base."

"It's a secret base on a tiny inhospitable island, barely above sea level," Lao said. "It can't be really big if they want it to stay secret."

"You don't need a lot of room to do enhanced interrogations," you said. "You just need privacy."

"Mr. Ito's drones are collecting more information," Feng said. "Mostly about the terrain. But they've spotted odd plumes of steam coming out of the rocks, so Agent Lao's theory about them carving out the cliffs, has merit."

"If you can find a secret entrance, I'll take it." You looked at Feng, because you remembered the concealed back door to that mountain base in Mongolia. "Otherwise, we'll have to find some way to lure a small number of them out for ambush."

"We can disable some cameras and make it look like something has gone wrong with a vehicle or some part of the facility within the camera range. I expect you'll want to emulate weather or wildlife interference," Hanzo said. "They will send someone to inspect the damage."
This was standard procedure, especially for a black ops mission. Jesse and Gabriel could run a full blown blitz attack on a well-defended military base, but that wasn't your specialty. And in the time it took you to breach the facility, they could eliminate any hostages. It would be hard to maintain stealth in these conditions, but you could at least begin the mission taking the enemy unaware.

"We can definitely sabotage or even commandeer Petras' vehicle," you said thoughtfully. It was a military-grade transport, judging by the footage, and if it was still there when you arrived, you could utilize that.

"Uploading the specs on the OSS-5 Borealis," Athena said, identifying the vehicle for you. "It is a small atmospheric-craft, not available to the general public."

"So we should steal it," Lao said, a small smile creeping across her face.

"Mmm, I have better at home," Feng said, scanning her tablet. "But it shouldn't be too hard to commandeer. Especially if we need more space."

"It does have significant armaments. If all else fails, could just blow the base doors down," Amélie said thoughtfully.

"That carries tremendous risk." Hanzo stared at Amélie, more than a little shocked.

"Yeah, walls are actually easier to breach," Lao nodded. "Security firms put all their efforts into constructing stronger blast doors and airlocks. They don't focus as much on securing walls. Most people don't think to compromise those instead."

You nodded, remembering Nwazue giving your squad a talk like that once upon a time. It felt...nice to be able to work with Lao again.

"If the exposed area isn't reinforced by the rock cover, and we could probably do that," Feng nodded. "They probably aren't keeping the prisoners right by the front door."

"That's Plan C," you said, shaking your head. "We need to try to lower the risk to the hostages. For scouting, we can split into teams. We can send the drones to scout for potential hidden exits, Feng can do a closer inspection of the footage on the transport over. Lao, if you can check the schematics to see if there are any engineering weaknesses- doors that can short-circuited, vulnerable ventilation systems, electrical panels where we can reach them: that sort of thing. Hanzo, you have expertise in both areas, if you can support Lao and Feng in their research."

"I can calculate trajectory and hack," Athena said. "But I'm afraid I will have to split my focus between Operations Morpheus, Pelennor, Checqy, and others. I cannot provide full support."

You had kind of expected that. Pelennor and Morpheus were higher priority ops. "I may be able to help with cybersecurity once you're inside," Zheng said. "But because it's a closed network, I can't access anything right now."

"Do we have any idea how many people are in there?" You asked Feng.

"Not really. Petras brought an entourage of half a dozen, Prince at least has a full squad, and they probably have at least two support staff on site, though it could be a lot more, because we're not sure how big the facility is."

"Are we waiting on anything else?" You asked Amélie who looked distinctly dissatisfied.
"Nothing mission critical. Our gear is ready to be loaded," she said, gesturing to the pile.

"All right, any mission-related questions that I have the ability answer?" You asked your team.

There were headshakes all around, both Feng and Lao glued to their screens as everyone grabbed their bags.

"You all right?" You asked Amélie, slinging a backpack over your shoulders. "Concerns?"

"No, everything is starting well," she said, a little reluctantly.

"But...?" You braced yourself for her analysis.

"But they never delivered the hot chocolate," Amélie said, pursing her lips, her gaze flat and unamused. "I will deal with them personally, when we return," she said, trailing off into some rather ominous-sounding French.

"Lucky would let me," Mihret said, expression somewhere between a pout and a snarl, somewhat at odds with his boyish good looks. It seemed Mihret didn't believe anyone would take him seriously if he just asked nicely. Everything was a goddamn dominance challenge with him.

"Well, I ain't Lucky," Jesse said slowly, not even trying to mask his annoyance. "And no, she wouldn't." You weren't even going to let him leave the base right now, but Jesse didn't need to point that out. He didn't have time for Mihret's legendary temper tantrums.

Mihret just grumbled something guttural under his breath.

"Athena has already locked down the cameras. The only live streams are going directly through her, for posterity. Rest of the campus is just getting the same loop of the staff making rounds, with some randomly spliced footage to keep it from being picked up by pattern recognition programs. Standard subterfuge. So no, you don't need to overload the whole internal surveillance system."

"Just the main observation hub." Mihret rolled his eyes. "Won't touch the backups...unless we need to."

"No," Jesse repeated.

"When did you get so boring?" Mihret huffed, throwing his arms up. "Are you going to put on dress blues too and start preaching about law and order? Going to get a matching hat? Is there a new sheriff in town?"

"Don't you have something important that you need to be doing?" Jesse asked, because even if he wasn't in the mood for Mihret's bullshit, he knew that diplomacy was the fastest way through it. If he let the hacker bait him into a real argument, they'd never get any work done.

"Ben-zona, you even look like him," Mihret said, shaking his head. "Down to the eyebrow furrow. Chalk that one up to nurture over nature. Oh fuck, if they ever have kids..." Mihret had a weirdly disgusted look on his face.
Jesse blinked.

"Oh yeah, Winston needs more solder, copper wire, and half a dozen peanut butter sandwiches. You know, how Lucky gets when she has low blood sugar. He's like that...but hairier. You're in charge, so you can take care of it. I "have something important that I need to be doing," Mihret said in a taunting falsetto, already walking away.

What Jesse wouldn't give to have the boss or even you and Lacroix here to help handle things. Instead, he had a grumpy Genji and grumpier Mihret, and to be honest, at this point, he'd rather deal with Mihret. At least Mihret wasn't demanding customized chemical weapons that would probably get the entire team locked up for flagrantly violating the Geneva Conventions.

Wheels squeaked, and Jesse looked up to see your sidekick - Maeda Vargas really was too long to say all the time- wheeling a dolly stacked high with crates up to his chin.

"I have coffee - in cups and more beans for here, sandwich supplies, pistachio creamer, solder, copper wire, Winston's spare toolkit, and the extra special ammo Mr. Lindholm sent over for you," the little miracle worker said, nervously tugging at his collar. "Umm, is there anything else you need me to get?"

"...Is there peanut butter and honey in there?" Jesse asked.

"And preserves, lunchmeat, cheese, and all the packs of condiments I could stuff in from the mess hall," the kid said earnestly. "Wasn't sure what you wanted."

"You're a lifesaver, kid," Jesse said, exhaling slowly. That was a few less things to worry about.

Maeda Vargas nodded vigorously and unloaded the ammo box, handed him a travel mug. "I don't know how you take it, so it's black."

"Thank you kindly," Jesse said, suddenly feeling a little better about the world, or at least his ability to deal with it. He took a sip. It wasn't tea, but it wasn't half bad neither.

The kid held a bottle of pistachio-flavored creamer and scratched his head. "I think this for Agent Shimada?"

"I'll take it. I've got a meeting with him next. Come back to the conference room once you've made your deliveries. I'll have a tasking for you."

The boy nodded vigorously. "Yes, sir!" He saluted and then spun the dolly around, already heading toward where Winston was setting up another kinetic barrier.

Jesse tried to remember the last time Blackwatch had recruited someone so...enthusiastic. Riggs, probably, and also the president of your fan club. Was there a connection? Were you a magnet for eager greenhorns? He shook his head, reaching for his hat, and then remembered that it had been lost in the explosion. He slowly lowered his hand, and pushed his hair out of his eyes instead.

He'd liked that hat. But he'd liked his team a whole lot more.

Grimly, Jesse headed for the infirmary conference room, trying very hard not to think about those terrifying minutes buried under the rubble. How it brought back those bad memories of Greece. Those were some dark moments with you and what was left of Rodriguez's squad. And worse, Ana was taking the main team back there, without Morrison or the boss.
Jesse downed the rest of the coffee, the hot bitter drink grounding him. It wasn't just being buried alive...again. He'd been going up the stairs first, laughing about dinner in Shanghai with the gang. And then he'd heard you screaming, "bomb!" Those whiny gunshots from your pulse rifle echoed in the stairwell, and suddenly the Commander yanked him backward. It happened faster than he could process: Reyes spun him around and pushed him down the stairs, probably aiming to take cover on the landing. But then the ceiling collapsed on them. And it was Reyes who took the brunt of it.

Jesse had been here before: this wasn't the first time someone got hurt on his watch. On some level, he knew it wasn't his fault. That the Commander would have done it for almost any of his agents. That he wasn't as fast or as strong as an SEP veteran. But that didn't stop him from feeling responsible. Because the Commander wasn't just his boss or de facto parole officer. Because it had been him, the Commander was saving...again.

And he hadn't breathed a word of it to you. Because shit, between Tataryn and Morrison, you had plenty else to deal with. He was still processing it too and maybe a little scared of how you would react. When you got back, maybe he'd be able to say something.

That was too much navel-gazing. There wasn't time to lollygag right now. Jesse did his best to shake off the creeping doubts and opened up the conference room. It had no windows and would serve as the impromptu command center. He set the creamer in the fridge, then sat on table and began to read the Operation Metis file.

It was a lot of information, most of it technical specifications that he didn't have time to decode. But aside from another glimpse at the secret history, Jesse learned three important things: first off, Winston had bull-sized balls, and could apparently singlehandedly tech-bluff everyone in Overwatch and beyond. Secondly, Athena, despite her poetic descriptions, was pretty damn powerful, on par with god programs, though there differences in her ability and there were several surge constraints on her central processing unit, limiting her reach. And finally, and most disturbingly, Jesse learned exactly how to remove those constraints.

Predictably, there were a lot of warnings about what could happen if he did just that. Not only the political fallout from "you let an overpowered AI loose inside Overwatch HQ." But in fact, that the system might not be enough to handle her full abilities, and that it could very well crash itself and cause catastrophic failure across the network. Athena would probably survive, but Overwatch's mainframe would be offline.

It was a lot to think about. And he didn't have time to consider the "morality" of what happened. But he now knew for sure that Athena was probably everything Petras wanted, and more. And that took the cake, because she'd been right here, right under his nose, for years.

You'd get a kick out of that observation. Jesse smiled wryly. But you'd be back later. To read the report with him. To have that talk. That's what he told himself. That was the only acceptable outcome.

There was a single firm knock - an announcement, not request - and then Genji walked in, expression hard. Jesse did not have any more time to review the file. He would have to talk to Winston and Mihret about "what it all meant" later.

"The defenses are still subpar. There are too many holes for assassins to slip through. I need more equipment." Genji crossed his arms. "Were you able to get the aerosol proximity mines?"

"No, those are specialty armaments: we don't have them just lying around. And I ain't even sure if we can go through "official channels" for them." Jesse scowled, because Genji liked to be
"And you can't just be spraying chemical weapons near the infirmary."

"Nonlethals only," Genji said, not looking bothered. "This is not a secure location. There are too many fire exits, wide vents, and windows."

"Moving him was already ruled out," Jesse said. "Angela and Bayan were in agreement on that."

"Then I need more equipment to secure the perimeter."

"We have razor wire and motion sensors," Jesse said.

"Neither of those would stop me," Genji said.

"Well, it's a good thing we're not fighting you or an army of ninjas," Jesse said sharply. "But I ain't so sure about commando squads: maybe they'll send whoever took Morrison."

"Full-blown assault or not, they will send assassins first. And anyone worth their salt will try to come in quietly," Genji gave a huff of frustration. "I am trying to account for all possibilities. Not just the obvious ones."

"What do you think I'm trying to do?" Jesse growled.

Both man glared at each other for a moment, but Jesse realized what he was doing. Because he and Genji did like to bicker, and they didn't like to give any ground. Stress compounded that: field agents tended to cope by buckling down and obsessing on minutiae. But right now, they couldn't afford to be distracted or divided. "You know, Lucky says we're too competitive to be left alone unsupervised."

"Lucky doesn't know as much as she thinks she does and meddles where she shouldn't," Genji said dryly. "But maybe she isn't wrong."

"Nah, she's wrong. And we can get along just to prove it. Because we're petty like that."

"Very mature," Genji said, lips twitching.

"I didn't say we were. I said we were petty. Almost as petty as she is," Jesse laughed and Genji chuckled as well, some of the tension bleeding away. Jesse cleared his throat. "Assassin-proofing a facility ain't my specialty. And I know you're right about whatever it is you aim to do, but we have limited resources and time. I can assign you Maeda Vargas and some Athena drones to help with whatever you need, but I have to prep for a frontal assault, and handle Mihret. He's obviously sore about being left behind." And speaking of difficult agents.... "Maybe Vo can jury-rig something for you?"

Genji nodded thoughtfully. "She is good at constructing strange explosives. I'll see what she can do. But I have not worked much with Lucky's lackey."

"He's sharp and eager to please. Pretty useful and much easier to handle than Mihret. He brought your pistachio creamer. It's in the fridge."

"It's for Angela," Genji said without inflection.

Jesse knew he'd struck a nerve, and almost pushed, just a little barb about Genji's taste in creamer and German doctors. But abruptly, he closed his mouth. He and Genji needed to focus on working together. As much as he enjoyed poking a rattlesnake's belly, this wasn't the time or the
place. "He's reliable. A little wet behind the ears, but we all were at one point. After you're done setting a perimeter, do you mind keeping an eye on the VIPs?"

There was a pause. "You know, I am an assassin. While I understand how our enemy operates, I am less skilled in defensive measures for...noncombatants."

"And Angela knows a million ways to kill a man. She just uses that knowledge of what not to do to save lives. Ain't a stretch to ask you to do the same. Unless you want to focus on defensive tech, bureaucratic loopholes, and personnel management."

Genji tilted his head to the side, staring very hard at Jesse's face. "McCree, did you just use words with multiple syllables? And as they were intended, not because your speech patterns abnormally prolonged the vowel?"

"Go fuuuuuuck yourself," Jesse said, shaking his head.

Genji just smiled. Jesse could tell now, despite the faceplate.

"I have some experience with bureaucratic loopholes, should you need the assistance."

Jesse raised a brow at the offer. "Much obliged."

"But you're on your own with personnel management. Good luck talking Winston out of a panic attack. I will be silently praying for your success."

Jesse snorted. "Already got the ingredients for peanut butter and honey sandwiches."

"Wise," Genji said.

"If there's anything that Lucky's taught me, it's that people are less likely to argue with you when they're eating. Though that doesn't usually work on Mihret."

"If you ever do find something that does work on Mihret, I'm sure the entire command structure would be grateful," Genji said, expression deadpan. "They'd make you Strike Commander out of gratitude."

Jesse just shuddered.

"It's the best lead we have," you said, arms crossed too tightly over your chestplate.

Captain Amari nodded, reviewing the footage silently. She was already armored up, earpiece in, rifle slung over her shoulder. "It's very suspicious, but it's all circumstantial."

"I know," you said. Because there was no proof Jack was there, or even alive... "But it's a lot of circumstantial evidence."

Captain Amari looked up at you, the unspoken pain in her eyes cutting you to the quick. The weight of her hopes, worries, and expectations made your heart stutter. Because this wasn't just about mission success: she cared about Jack too. "Are you sure?"

"No," you said, shaking your head. "But it's too much to ignore, especially when we have nothing else anywhere near as promising." Both Athena and Zheng had been using their connections to hunt for any word of Jack, but aside from the usual background chatter, there was
nothing remotely reliable. You weren't focused solely on Petras and Prince, but they were the most likely suspects, even without your biases. "Weather and tech circumstances permitting, we can make it there in less than an hour." Hopen Island was about four thousand kilometers away.

Captain Amari nodded. "All right." She paused. "What do you intend to do if the Director and Prince are together, but Jack isn't there and they aren't involved?"

You shrugged. "Jack's my priority. I'll make sure Athena records it, try add it to the Petras files, and move on."

Captain Amari smiled wryly at you. "But if you encounter armed resistance?"

"I'd defend myself and order my squad to do the same."

Captain Amari met your gaze, those dark eyes seeing straight into the heart of you. "That is acceptable."

And if Director Petras was caught in the crossfire, that was more than acceptable. She didn't say the words. You didn't ask. But you understood each other perfectly.

"When this is over, Lieutenant Graziani wants to visit Gabriel and has suggested some potential upgrades for his prostheses," Captain Amari said, her tone light. "Regarding the upgrades, I told him he'd have to clear it with Angela and you."

You blinked. Andre Graziani was the SEP cyborg who didn't like Jack and spoke almost no words to you in the aftermath of Rodriguez's funeral. Chang didn't seem to like him much either, though to be fair, Chang didn't seem to like any of her friends. Appearances were obviously very deceiving in her case. "Do you...recommend that?" You asked, more than a little wary.

"I have worked with him on several occasions during and after the Omnic Crisis. Graziani is a reliable man, and while he and Jack have had their...disagreements, I can vouch for his character. He is much like Agent Mihret: too clever for his own good and all too willing to start a fight when an apology would serve him better." She shook her head. "The man's a genius. In a just world, his merit would have gotten him a full ride to university, an exemption from military service, and a job that would pay enough to care for his family. But...it didn't happen that way."

"Oh," you said, because you didn't know anything about Andre's past. "Yeah, um, I'm fine meeting with him after...things calm down."

"Because he and Jack really don't get along," Captain Amari said, a soft, exasperated look on her face.

It occurred to you then that you weren't the only person with a soft spot for troublemakers. After all, Captain Amari had given you a lot of leeway in your less than legal operations.

"I'm giving you the choice," she said, turning to the side. "If...nothing comes of Svalbard, you can chase down more leads, back up Jesse, or come to Greece if the situation warrants it."

You blinked.

"I won't order you one way or the other," she said. "Because I trust you'll make the right decision."

You stared at her for a long moment, because your squad was not equipped to go up against Bastions and OR-14s. No, that wasn't entirely true. Amélie and Hanzo were ranged fighters. Lao
was an experienced combat engineer. Feng was...Feng.

But if something happened at HQ...

You understood then that Captain Amari was giving you the permission and the burden to choose whom you would save. And she was doing so fully aware of your feelings for Gabriel and Jack and your personal priorities.

"Captain-" Your voice shook.

"It's been a real journey," she said, smiling gently as she saluted you. "I've truly enjoyed working with you."

You blinked rapidly. "The honor is mine."

Captain Amari nodded once, then turned on her heel, marching away from you, her sleek silhouette completely different from Captain Patel's, but in that moment, they blurred together in your mind's eye. Neither woman liked long goodbyes.

Chapter End Notes

I'm behind on comments and writing. Will try to answer those this week. Still working overtime. Going to bed now. XD
Chapter 126

Chapter Summary

Everything is in motion. Nothing is certain.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feng's stealthcraft was an odd shade of gray, a crossbreed between an Orca and a fighter jet. It was smaller than the usual combat transports, but with sleek curves, though the hull and wings were covered in a patchwork of glassy panels. Feng tapped one and it turned the same shade of pixelated white as her winter camouflage coat. She giggled.

"Auntie hasn't managed to get the organic chameleon cloak working right yet, but the inorganic one is functional," she told you cheerfully.

You studied the panels for a moment, recalling how clever the projected "rock illusions" had looked in Mongolia. Did this mean they had solved the method for masking light and motion? "Did you improve the tech processing speed or come with a more ingenious method of optical illusions?" Winston had mentioned the option of using multiple angled screens and mirrors when you'd inquired about the chameleon tech. You weren't exactly sure what it all entailed, but you just smiled and nodded because you didn't want to spend an hour in the lab getting lectured on optical physics before dinner.

"It is more than a trompe-l'œil, I assure you," the Zheng drone said, passing by you onto the ship.

"Still a proprietary secret!" Feng sang out, winking over her shoulder at you.

"But one we might be willing to trade for," Zheng said, slyly.

You had a very good idea what she wanted to trade for. But you followed them up the ramp, noting that aside from two long benches, lockers, and a large oval computer terminal, there wasn't much else on the ship. The benches were bolted on, with safety restraints attached to seats. An abundance of green safety netting covered the walls. There was thick padding on the ceilings, which a good thing if your pilot had to pull some complex evasive maneuvers. Or if they were just a jerk who like to do surprise barrel rolls.

The lockers lined the way to the cockpit, and you could seat six to eight people on the benches, though eight people would have to be very close and terribly cramped. Rows of recessed lights glowed softly along the walkway and ceiling. Most everything was a business-like shade of battleship gray. There wasn't a lot of color or any decor, so it was rather different from the almost luxurious settings On Sing seemed to favor. But Feng has said this was a prototype and not yet fitted for comfort.

"Medical supplies are in that locker." Feng began to point. "That one is temperature controlled, so I'm hoping Rin already loaded the snacks. You can safely stash your gear in any of the unpainted ones..."
You blinked as Hanzo, Lao, and Amélie rapidly claimed their spots. You slung your bag into an empty one. Feng meandered over to the large terminal and brought up a 3D image of Hopen Island, zooming in on an image of the base.

A meter tall Athena drone followed the spherical red Zheng drone into the cockpit.

You felt the engine before you heard it, just a strangely gentle thrum that vibrated along your fingers in some kind of subsonic resonance. It didn't hurt, and faded quickly, but you flexed your fingers a few times. The engine hummed softly, and while you knew that layers of insulation dampened the noise, it was still impressively quiet.

Amélie inspected the modeling of the terrain. "We will have to land on the northern side and make the trek on foot."

Hanzo rose, studying the map. "It would be better to come in from above."

"It's hard to do a stealth insertion when we're hovering over the base, prototype tech or not," Feng said, shaking her head. "This ship isn't that quiet. Even if we can fool their sensors, they have to have external cameras too."

"If we're focusing on back entrances, we'll have to explore the cliffs," Amélie said. "And we have hydraulic pitons and booster gear for climbing. Those should hold up under the weather."

You shuddered. Rock climbing in cold weather was nightmarish. Hydraulics didn't always work right. But as the lead agent, you couldn't discount the option.

"The southern approach doesn't have ideal terrain for landing the ship. We would have to add extra time for walking," Feng said, shaking her head. "And I don't like the idea of looping around if we don't have to."

Lao wrinkled her nose. "Before we make a concrete plan, we need a better perimeter map. How far out are their sensors? What models are they using? Can we isolate one? Did they get careless and leave any open ports or forego recent security patches?" Lao said, leaning over to inspect the front of the base. "Can your drone handler get us any of that information?" She asked Feng expectantly.

"Visual data only," Feng said. She tapped her chin. "He might have some of the more specialized diagnostic tools on site, but at this point, we'll probably arrive before he can get anything set up and inserted."

Lao nodded curtly. She'd be able to determine that information pretty quickly on arrival.

You watched as little red dots slowly lit up the map in a large circle around the rock formation and the base canopies.

"Some of those spots are fairly isolated. If they have left up the default settings, I can get in and do anything from falsifying their output to mimicking weather-related mechanical failure," Lao said, pointing at a cluster on the eastern side.

"I still think we should secure their vehicles ahead of time," Amélie said. "It wouldn't do for any of them to escape."

"Our priority is finding a discrete way in," you said. "But it's a necessary secondary objective." You crossed your arms. You could destroy or disable the transports, but that would take time and risk your cover. It had to be handled carefully.
A yellow light blinked into existence on the screen, toward the top of the cliff.

"Emergency exit," Feng announced triumphantly and zoomed in on a hatch angled sideways on the rocks so it wouldn't be covered by snow. Surprisingly, it was closer to the northern side of the base.

"Huh," you said, squinting at the real time image. "Hey, is that one of the models with the auto-defrost setting?" You asked Lao.

"Yeah, Rivka was always trying to get Gleeson to upgrade the signal station hatches since they froze shut all the time. " Lao made a noise of disgust. Because sometimes she'd gotten stuck inside them and you'd had to bring thermal lamps out to warm up the door jam. "But he was too fucking cheap."

"And corrupt," you said.

Lao gritted her teeth. "That too."

You frowned. Your squad was small, but you needed someone to keep an eye on that hatch and maintain your exit route. You didn't like splitting resources, but then, you didn't have much of a choice.

"Obviously the Strike Commander and any hostages are our priority," Lao said. "But, what about the rest of them?"

"I'd like to take them alive," you said, not entirely certain you sounded genuine. "But that's not the priority. That applies to all hostiles. Civilians included," you said, because accidents happened, and you didn't have to pick up a weapon to be a monster. You'd killed enough politicians, rogue scientists, and "businessmen" to know that.

Lao began to cycle through the images, matching Petras' on-site bodyguards to the profiles you'd accumulated and giving everyone a chance to assess the threat level. Everyone had already been briefed on Richard Prince and what to expect from a cyborg strike team. Petras' bodyguards were professional security personnel, unaffiliated with Overwatch, and after months of research, Lacroix had deemed them acceptable collateral damage. You agreed. These weren't good honest men just trying to scrape by. They were well-paid accomplices who helped the Director cover his tracks, and you had no pity for them.

"Interesting... He doesn't look like he's important...or a fighter." Lao held up her tablet, showing footage of Petras' entourage, bundled up in their arctic gear. A skinny middle-aged man shivered as he followed the burlier guards into the base.

"Geoffrey Murdoch," you said, raising a brow. "Petras' personal assistant." You crossed your arms. You'd considered abducting him before, but Lacroix had deemed the plan too risky. This was the man who handled all of Petras' inside affairs, the one who knew what the Director ate, fucked, and threw his money at. "Now that one I want alive," you said very slowly so everyone could hear you loud and clear.

Lao pulled up another image of him in a ivory suit with a clear view of his face. He was a pale nervous-looking man, with thin graying hair and pinched features. She placed that image side-by-side with the shot of him in his Arctic gear and projected it onto Feng's larger terminal without you even having to ask.

You nodded at her.
She smiled faintly back at you. After everything that had happened, she hadn’t forgotten how this worked.

Hanzo studied the image. You could see him committing the details to memory, his own expression severe. Amélie inclined her head back, a thoughtful look on her face. Feng copied the image onto her tablet, squinting at it warily, like she wasn’t sure he was worth it.

"Before Gérard thought he would be too difficult to reach and to hold onto," Amélie said, studying her tablet. She smiled fiercely at you. "I believe that’s about to change."

Feng chuckled. "What about his boss?" She asked, even though she already knew the answer.

You smiled sardonically, because at least half of your team already knew your intentions. "I have dibs on his boss."

"The conditions on the southern side of the base are not ideal for landing," Zheng informed you, her voice coming from the terminal's speaker.

You leaned against the terminal, still studying all approaches to the hidden base. Athena could lock down Petras’ OSS-5 Borealis remotely, but the rest of the vehicles didn’t have Overwatch permissions. She might need help with a manual insertion.

"Amélie, do you think you could keep a close eye on who or what tries to use the exit hatch?" You asked. "And halt any unfriendly movement?"

She circled the hologram. "D'accord." She pointed at the outcropping and canopy that covered the vehicles. "I think that would be a good vantage point." She glanced over at Lao. "I can watch the front entrance, the back exit, and the transports."

"If I can't get into the camera system, I should be able to access some of the vehicles," Lao said. "And worst case scenario, I know how to keep them from going anywhere."

"I can cover Agent Lao," Amélie said cheerfully.

Lao took a deep breath, and managed a professional nod. "That would be great."

"Anything for a teammate," Amélie smiled like a cat and you had sudden flashbacks of her performance in the interrogation room.

Lao flinched.

You glanced between them. "Amélie..." You kept your tone pleasant, a warning in of itself.

"I am not overextending myself, and I promise I will not get carried away," Amélie said mildly, one hand over her heart. "Agent Lao's safety will be my priority."

You gave her wry smile, knowing full well that Amélie would do her best to protect Lao, and also knowing that something had transpired between them and you really needed to ask Amélie about it later.

Lao's priorities were electronic surveillance, opening any access points, and halting any
vehicle traffic. There was overlap between Lao, Zheng, and Athena's abilities, so you had to make
sure they each had clear objectives. Athena was monitoring the situation, but had the least amount
of responsibility given her simultaneous roles back home and beyond. "Zheng, if we get you
inside, do you think you can shut down some of their defenses?"

"Most likely," Zheng said.

You glanced at Feng.

"She's being modest. Of course, she can. And she definitely wants access to whatever data
Petras has, but don't worry, we'll share," Feng said cheerfully.

Data extraction was an objective, but a tertiary one. Jack was what mattered.

"We need to secure our people first," you said. "Yes, I want as many prisoners and as much
intel on Petras' shady operations as possible, but the safety of Jack and our agents is the primary
focus."

You looked over at Hanzo.

"We might need you to scout, but I think we'll need your combat skills more. Cover Feng
as best as you can."

Feng grinned at you and flexed one noodly arm. "I know what to do."

"Don't smash everything," you said, shaking your head.

"Oh, with you and Hanzo shooting at everyone, I doubt I'll have to do anything difficult," she said cheerfully.

"I hope that is the case," Hanzo said, with alarming sincerity.

Feng glanced at you, bewilderment clear on her face. "Oh. Thanks. I think?"

Roles clarified, you had more prep work to do. You needed to switch out prostheses and
make yourself available to any questions or concerns your team would inevitably bring you.

Sitting on the bench, you equipped a blade, a pressure injector, and an EMP, just in case.
Lao sat down beside you, studying your mechanical parts.

"I thought it would be worse," she said, keeping her voice low. "Blackwatch teaming up
with On Sing of all things."

You raised a brow.

"Come on, we're not exactly the kind of team that they send to rescue a legendary war
hero," she said, shaking her head. "Not that anyone is bad at their job," she added hastily. "But I'm
a rehabilitated criminal, you're a black ops maverick, they're legacy mafia, and she's a prima
ballerina. The optics are all wrong."

You shrugged, not denying her point.

"And working so closely with a Triad? I'm a little surprised."

"On Sing is...complicated," you said, after a moment, realizing that Lao had no way of
knowing the extreme direction Feng had taken them in. "What do you know about them?"
"Rumors," she said, voice going even softer. "They might be an organized crime syndicate, but they're not like the other cartels, Lucky. They're an ancient secret society and they're fucking ghosts. Until a few years ago, the Chinese cops wouldn't even acknowledge their existence. And there are all kinds of disturbing, borderline supernatural stories about them..."

"Some of which are probably even true," you said, wryly.

"I'm serious," Lao said with a huff. "How can we trust them?"

"We can trust Feng," you said.

Lao folded her hands in her lap, her focus on the floor. You hoped she heard what you didn't say. You could trust Feng. You did not trust Zheng.

"Why?" Lao asked.

"They swore a blood oath, to Jack in particular," you said. "The drinking kind."

Lao shuddered, wrinkling her nose.

"I know, it's a long complicated story, and we've built a relationship there," you said. "We can talk about it later."

Lao paused. "Do you think the Strike Commander is even alive? I mean, if I were a bad guy, I wouldn't risk it. I've seen his Talon threat assessment summary. Like, I know he comes off a media golden boy, but he's not just a figurehead. He's really dangerous, and they know it."

You gritted your teeth, taking deep breaths. Because Lao wasn't wrong. You just didn't need to hear that and she probably had no idea what Jack meant to you. "I have to operate under the assumption that he is."

Lao nodded, though she watched you with worried eyes when she thought you weren't looking.

"The Strike Commander is privy to a lot of valuable intel," you said, your voice flat. "My sources indicate that that is what they're after. And we both know that interrogations take time."

"Makes sense," Lao said. "He's not the kind of guy who'd give them what they want right away."

"No, he's not," you said, reassuring yourself.

"You're friends with some of the people in Epsilon Squad, aren't you?" Lao said, though it wasn't really a question. Even if she didn't know the truth, she knew you well enough to see that this was personal.

"Yeah," you said, taking a deep breath and trying not think about Jemison feeding Isha pie or Shoal slamming back whiskeys and telling terrible jokes. Because there were days after training the rookies, that you, Jesse, Shoal, and Tataryn had gone out for drinks, shooting the shit and trying to be normal... You swallowed roughly. Now was not the time.

"We'll get this done," Lao said, not making any false promises or writing off your friends as dead, and you appreciated that subtlety.

"Are you going to be OK to work with Agent Lacroix?" You studied Lao's face as you
spoke.

She flinched, but recovered quickly.

"Oh, yeah. Of course. No problems there. Everything is fine," she said rapidly.

You raised a brow.

"No, really, it's fine," Lao said, glancing nervously in Amélie's direction.

"Seriously, do I need to have a word with her? Because despite what you may have experienced with Blackwatch, threatening on-duty agents is not the best method to secure good results."

"Lucky, I've got this." She gave you a tight smile. "Agent Lacroix just explained some things to me, is all. We're good. I'd come to you if it was something I couldn't handle. You don't need to worry. Honest."

You exhaled slowly, knowing that now you definitely had to talk to Amélie about whatever she had said to Lao. Though at this point, if Lao said she could work with Amélie, you had no choice but to believe her.

"But anyway, looking at the mission parameters, I think it's going to be tricky, but not impossible," Lao said, showing you a perimeter map on her prosthetic arm's display screen. "Those cameras are a few years old and I dug up some zero day exploits that might not be patched, especially if they're on a closed network. And the initial security settings were lax: their domain controller had a hardcoded default password. With the right code injection, I might be able to reach other network partitions."

You raised a brow, a little surprised by Lao's optimism.

"Lucky, when you get a second, I want to review battle formations with you and Hanzo," Feng called.

"Stay out of each other's way?" You suggested, knowing that wasn't quite enough, but suddenly picturing Feng using action figures as visual aids for her battle plans.

"I'm just saying. I'm going to be real sore if there's any friendly fire and someone shoots me. Especially with an arrow," Feng sang back.

"Oh yeah, that's the worst," you agreed.

Hanzo glanced between you both, brows furrowed, lips pursed.

Feng's eyes widened slightly, like she just realized that the two of you offended him. Feng's communication skills gave away too much. Hanzo's communications skills conveyed too little. And yours were going to have to bridge the gap. You sighed, and patted Lao on the shoulder.

"I better go handle this."

Lao gazed at Hanzo, speculatively and then back at you. "Whatever you say. But I don't think they pay us enough to act as a go-between for the Yakuza and a Triad."

You snorted, because Lao didn't know the half of it.
He woke to the taste of blood and bile clinging to the roof of his mouth. Everything ached. The inside of his nose and throat felt like they'd been dragged against a cheese grater and filled with razor blades. Taking a deeper breath, he found that feeling extended down to his lungs. Sticky and dry, his eyes burned. His mind was still foggy, though the inside of his forehead itched with maddening urgency. Jack did his best to ignore it. Very discretely, he tried to move, but he was flat on his back, on a cold hard surface, eagle-spread, wrists and ankles cuffed. From the chill in the room, he knew that his armor and coat were gone and that they'd stripped him down to an undershirt and pants.

Slowly, he opened one eye.

The room was a sterile white and stainless steel. The smell of bleach was overpowering. He blinked at the flower of surgical lights overhead. Was he in a hospital? Had they been rescued?

"Well look at you, Morrison. That dosage should have kept a rhino down for another day. Hungover?"

The man was a cyborg: Caucasian, shaved head, deep set eyes and short blunt features that he wanted to pound flat. It took half a second for Jack to recognize that it was Richard Prince bent over him, smiling wide.

Jack gave a guttural snarl, that bulldog face triggering an onslaught of memory. It all came back to him one horrifying surge of gunshots and paralysis. Epsilon Squad was dead. They had been betrayed from the inside. He was alone in the custody of psychopathic terrorists. Unless... Had Jemison made it?

Jack's heart pounded, rage, adrenaline, and a thin sliver of hope sending him into overdrive. The world was crystal clear for a terrible moment: Richard Prince, on behalf of Talon, Petras, and a slew of other shadowy corrupt bastards, would torture him and his lieutenant till he broke. They would go until he gave them what they wanted. And if Jemison wasn't enough, they would choose others as leverage. Maybe you and Gabriel. Maybe Ana or Ray. Most definitely his parents and siblings. And then they would erase all evidence.

He had to get out of this. There was no question about it. Even if they were prepared to hold an SEP veteran, they would mess up. And he would have to be ready.

But his people wouldn't stand idly by. You and Gabriel would be looking for him. Ana and Gérard would scour the evidence - burnt or not. Reinhardt and Torby would come, because they were good men who'd lost enough friends. He just had to buy himself and Jemison more time.

They knew he was awake. He couldn't fake unconsciousness convincingly, if Gabe was to be believed. But they needed him to possess enough faculties to talk. They needed him coherent.

"Come on, Morrison, aren't you going to ask about your pretty Isabella?" Prince laughed sounding genuinely amused, like they were old friends catching up.

Jack just thrashed, testing the strength of his bonds. Convulsing, maybe just a little for show, Jack hissed and spat, making no coherent sounds, letting the madness of his anguish take the helm. His people were dead on his watch. Good people who had trusted him, whom he had relied on for years. The shock of that loss was still sinking in, but feigning delirium wasn't so hard. He
didn't have dignity to preserve, just Lieutenant Jemison's life and hopefully his own. He roared his
grief and fury, a raw visceral bellow that echoed in the chamber, his voice almost unrecognizable.

"Shit," Prince mused. "Tantruming isn't going to change anything. This is really
awkward."

Prince wasn't convinced. Jack would have to go all in. He spasmed, letting his eyes roll
back in his head as he thrashed, banging his head against the table, wondering if he could knock
himself out.

"...Aw fuck, he's seizing. Get me the bit. Can't have him biting his tongue off," Prince
sighed.

Jack felt a brief surge of triumph. They were buying it.

A leather-padded metal bar was shoved between his teeth, and Jack bit down, rage
tightening his jaw, his teeth tearing through the soft parts and grinding against the metal. He didn't
let himself focus on Prince's face. Too much anger, too much intent would give the act away.

"Hmm, well, give him some more time to purge the toxins," Prince said. "Sorry Morrison,
we didn't have time to test the drug interactions on a real live SEP subject. I'll let you come off
your high. It'll give me more time with pretty little Isabella," he said, smiling widely at Jack.

Jack didn't need to fake the roar of fury as he struggled against his bonds.

Laughing, Prince left the room from an exit on his left. The heavy metal door shut with a
grim thud.

Jack had bought himself more time. But at what cost to Jemison?

"There's one group in the west side of the forest. They're moving slowly: don't know if
they think we're dumb and will try to scatter into the woods, or if they're up to something else,"
Almasi said, checking the screen as he strapped on his armor.

"The other squad has crossed the eastern field," Onwuachimba radioed in. They were
trying to surround the farmhouse. "I could pick half of them off before they realized what was
happening," she offered. Chang realized then that her sniper was in or on the barn.

"No, you need to get to better cover," Chang said, zooming in on the eastern ambushers.
They had high-end equipment, not that she was surprised.

"But I can keep an eye on things."

"Now," was all Chang said. Because this was different than before: you'd called in letting
her know that the situation had finally reached a head. She and Jack had gone through a lot of
worst case scenario planning. Hell, she'd even sat down with Reyes and that slimy little French
bastard to formulate additional contingencies. But in the event of an all out attack, with no
guarantee of speedy backup, Chang had to bunker down with the Morrisons. This was that worst
case scenario, and her squad damn well knew it.

"Understood. Sorry, Sarge," Onwuachimba said meekly, sensing her displeasure.
"Barrier plates?" Chang asked, scanning the screens Almasi had up. They'd set up operations in the Morrison living room. It was cramped and Maracle had moved all the furniture in front of the bay windows, but Chang was used to working in odd conditions.

"Two rings up and running," Maracle radioed back. "My rail gun is warming up and I'm almost done assembling Lilith."

The third group was coming from the road in four armored vehicles, none of which had been spotted in town or on the nearby highways. Air-dropped in probably. The cameras and comms had gone out ten minutes ago, but they'd missed Almasi's drones hovering overhead. So Chang still had eyes on them. This would be the main attack force; probably two dozen hostiles. She had already authorized a distress call to "trusted" people in the government. Well, people Jack seemed to trust. Chang wasn't that optimistic. Still, she'd set in motion the call for reinforcements. Someone would come and they might even be on her side. But in the mean time, she would clean up whatever they threw at her.

Glancing at the array, she realized there was one person she hadn't yet heard back from. "Fitzpatrick, where the hell are you?" Chang scowled.

"On my way back," he whispered cheerfully over the comms. "Just leaving out some welcoming gifts for our visitors."

"Where?" Chang scanned the multiple screens, spotting him in a ditch a couple hundred yards away from the main force. She sighed, the demolitionist was nowhere near as stealthy as he thought.

"Rearmed the tripwires in the woods, activated the minefield, and laid some very special ordnance in that one pothole that keeps getting Almasi."

Almasi's scowl deepened. "Are you trying to make a swimming pool in the driveway?"

"What's a little property damage in the name of protecting our principals?"

"Just get back here," Chang said, satisfied that he wasn't in immediate danger. "How much time on Lilith?"

"Done!" Maracle called, sounding almost giddy.

Light footsteps approached from behind, too faint to be anyone from her squad. Chang raised her pistol first, head whipping back to confirm the visual.

"Oh shit!" Michael flinched, raising his hands.

"Uh..." Maggie gave a nervous smile, ducking to the side. "Hi."

Almasi muttered some very choice words in Arabic, resting his forehead in his hand.

"Why the hell aren't you two in the panic room?" Chang asked in measured tones, lowering her gun. She glanced over at the operations summary. The panic room had been locked down five minutes ago. There was a safety-gap two hour cooldown before they'd be able to open it again. Chang glared at the younger Morrisons. Civilians were all too often liabilities. This complicated things.

Both of them winced, looking like the kids they were, dressed down in jeans and t-shirts.
"We wanted to help. You've spent so much time training us-" Michael began.

"Mom and Dad are still in there, though," Maggie said. "And we're grounded for life, probably," she added.

"That might prove to be a very short period of time," Almasi muttered.

Maggie laughed nervously. Michael was wise enough to look contrite.

Chang took a deep breath, knowing that she should have personally thrown both teenagers into the panic room and watched the door as they locked it down. Because the Morrison stupidity was genetic. She knew this. She knew this from years of white-knuckled, hair-pulling experience. She should never have assumed they would simply follow orders. Sure, she'd escorted them inside and shut the door behind them, because they were her responsibility. But the lockdown procedure took a few minutes, and she had other preparations to oversee, and she had assumed, wrongly, that she'd done enough and they would just sit tight. That wasn't the Morrison way.

Despite their lack of self-preservation skills, the kids weren't completely oblivious. They knew the procedure by now. They knew the doors wouldn't seal immediately.

Chang took a deep breath. This was an inconvenience, a liability, and a goddamn fuckup.

But it wasn't a complete surprise. The Morrison stupidity was genetic, after all. Chang had spent years doing worst case scenario planning, and exploring several "noncompliant principal" contingencies. The people she guarded obviously needed her, because they were too damn stupid to be left consider things on their own. And thanks to her training, the teens weren't utterly useless.

"Get geared up: vests and helmets. You're both on reloading and restocking," Chang said, because there was no time to really address her thoughts on the matter of their complete and utter stupidity.

Already anticipating her orders - like a good second - Almasi opened a crate and handed them both ballistic vests and helmets. The younger Morrisons quickly donned the armor.

"Ordnance stays in its case." Chang surveyed the viewscreens, monitoring the enemy progress. The forest squad was speeding up, probably trying to coordinate a pincer attack with the field squad. The main force was still driving straight down the middle. At this rate, they might all arrive at the same time. That would be problematic. "You don't directly handle anything larger than a cartridge, do you understand me?"

"Ma'am!" Both Michael and Maggie pulled off crisp salutes.

Chang stared blankly at them, not impressed by the pageantry. "And after this is through, once your mother is done with you-" The siblings winced. "-I'm going to personally remind you why it is in your best interest to comply with lockdown procedure and to follow my goddamn orders," she said, voice flat and cold, a maybe a little too much like the war criminal her critics accused her of being.

The teenagers looked at each other, expressions queasy, like they could already imagine the penal drills, weighted burpees, and other punishments she had in store for them. She did nothing to assuage their fears.

Just then a massive boom rattled the house, windows shaking and ugly decorative plates shattering as they fell off shelves. The teenagers winced. Fitzpatrick laughed wildly over the
"...He halved the main force," Almasi reported. "But also the driveway."

"Hey, you can't miss that pothole now," Fitzpatrick said, still laughing. "Even if you try!"

"Eastern team is coming in hot!" Onwuachimba shouted as she darted into the room. She glanced over at the teens. "Well, don't just stand there, get Maracle his grenades."

Maggie snapped into action, grabbing a red and blue case and running out the front door. Michael blinked, looking between the pile of cases and his sister's back.

"I'm sure it won't hurt to have an extra medkit in the field," Almasi said dryly. "But the grenades are over there," he said, pointing to the green metal lockboxes on the other side.

Michael nodded, grabbed two, and headed out.

"They grow up so fast," Onwuachimba said, smiling wryly at Chang. "Well, the little one, anyway."

Almasi snorted, but kept his thoughts to himself.

Chang just studied the screens, focusing on the terrain. In addition to the two blown out vehicles in the front, there were three smaller smoking craters already showing up across the farm: one in the woods, two in the eastern fields. Fitzpatrick tended to be overly generous with the distribution of his explosives. The peripheral forces were also in disarray. As much as she wanted to go mop them up, it was best to let them come to her. The defenses would hold and she should not show her hand this early.

There was a high-pitched shriek and a smaller boom as a flashbang bounced harmlessly off the kinetic shields.

"Was that Maggie or Michael?" Onwuachimba laughed.

"Maggie," Chang said, not looking up from the viewscreens. She still counted about three dozen total against her five-person squad and two teenagers.

"This should be interesting," Almasi said, over her shoulder. "Like Algiers."

Chang closed her eyes briefly, remembering a scorching hot, ghastly dry night lit with incendiary bombs and EMPs, the smell of cordite and ozone clouding the air. She remembered rows and rows of death machines marching on the city, their lights flickering for miles. She remembered the trenches, the pressure of Mateo at her side, smiling wolfishly at her even as she elbowed Jack for suggesting an incredibly stupid, but ultimately effective plan of attack.

"You think really think so?" Onwuachimba asked, already heading out the front door.

"Easier," Chang said, giving the screens one last glance as she strapped a shotgun to her back. The first phase was done. She could now go handle things personally. This was the fun part. "These Morrisons are actually less infuriating than their brother."

Almasi made a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat, obviously disagreeing with her.

Chang just walked out the door, death on the wind and a slight smile on her face.
The raptor alarm for Lacroix's room went off half a second before Ziv started shouting. Some smart ass had programmed the siren to wail a terrifying rendition of La Marseillaise. Jesse briefly wondered what Genji had chosen for the Commander as Isha's angry shrieks echoed in the ventilation system. Genji rushed toward Lacroix's room, even as Jesse gestured for everyone else to carry on. They couldn't all go see what was the matter. Someone had to maintain a goddamn perimeter.

"Captain Larson is vehemently protesting your...unprecedented decision to lock down the infirmary and redirect all traffic to the local hospital," an Athena drone informed him as he headed back toward the center of the facility. "She wishes to inform you that she is lodging a complaint with the UN as we speak."

Jesse shrugged. "Just repeat the cover story and pass it on to the UN. Even if they don't believe us, it will buy us some time." It was a simple one, that under normal circumstances should have sufficed: Overwatch had experienced an unspecified biohazard incident, and the details were highly classified. Of course, they were working to contain it, and it didn't seem imminently critical, but it was in everyone's best interest to keep a 72 hour quarantine. The excuse wouldn't hold up for the full 72 hours, but it was a stalling tactic. Angela was writing the dummy report and she and Bayan had seemed very amused at the idea of trying their hands at fiction, possibly of the zombie variety.

Of course, the UN would send in the World Heath Organization and try to take command of the situation, but Jesse knew they couldn't move too quickly. After all, coordinating with the WHO, other military forces, and the Security Council would take time.

"We have received a...warning from a secure server, signed by a certain Mr. Oladele."

Jesse scratched his head. Oladele was Kwento's triggerman, one of the few who'd survived DC. He was the one who could shoot and politick. Had a law degree and some cool scars, if he remembered right.

"They're stalling for us, but the Security Council is currently voting on what to do. He's pretty certain the vote won't go in our favor."

Of course not. "Tell him to ferret out what he can and who we should expect," Jesse said. "And thank him for the warning."

"Of course," Athena said. "I have released the quarantine statement to each division head on site. No one present has the authority to circumvent it, besides Commander Reyes, Agent Lacroix, and yourself."

Jesse raised a brow. "That's some specific company."

"Very exclusive," Athena agreed.

Jesse rounded the corner in time to see Genji carrying an unconscious woman in scrubs away from Lacroix's room, Mihret spitting some especially vulgar curses in at least three different languages while Maeda Vargas, held him back, the younger agent looking more embarrassed than upset.

"Ease up, Mihret," Jesse said.

Ziv snarled something back, not easing up at all.
Jesse knew better than to get drawn into that fight. He nodded at Maeda Vargas, and then turned to follow Genji.

"She attempted to give Lacroix an injection," Genji said as Jesse fell in step beside him. "We are not certain what the contents were, but no such authorizations were made and she became agitated on confrontation. More importantly, she wasn't supposed to be here. Agent Claxton was on that list."

"Shit." Genji was referring to Lacroix's secret list. He and Genji had helped you sort through the names of the list and come up with reasonable postings for them. Ana had then reassigned them to places where they could do less harm. He would have to figure out how she got in, or where she'd hidden herself to avoid detection.

"We can't use the holding cells, but Agent Lao's former quarters should suffice," Genji said. "I can secure the prisoner. Maybe you should see to Mihret?"

"Pfft, he's Maeda Vargas' problem," Jesse said.

Genji chuckled, but glanced over his shoulder. "What are you going to do with the On Sing personnel?

"Dunno. Was hoping they'd volunteer or at least jump into action if something happened." Because not only were they "technically" not supposed to get involved, Jesse did not look forward to explaining their presence to anyone not cleared for Shit Spiders. Sure, he could claim that "White Rabbit" contractors happened to be on site for some kind of medical training, but that excuse might not hold up, and he couldn't focus on constructing air tight cover stories right now.

"You should speak with Patime Ajiyiming for details. She's in charge of this team," Genji said. "And see if any of them want to handle guard duty. Otherwise, I'll delegate it to an Athena drone."

"Thanks," Jesse said, because Genji had saved him a lot of time by summarizing that information.

"Winston and Dr. Ziegler have been informed of the assassination attempt: Agent Maeda Vargas has delivered the sample to Dr. Ziegler for testing."

"Then who's watching, Mihret?" Jesse's eyes widened and he and Genji exchanged panicked looks.

"Oh I can help with guard duty!" Mihret snarled, stalking up behind them.

"Mmm, you could," Jesse said, adrenaline-fueled instincts kicking in. "But then who's looking after Lacroix?"

Mihret froze. "Ben-zona-" He shot a dirty look at the unconscious nurse and then took off back down the hall. "Save me a piece!" He shouted.

Genji shook his head.

"I'll go coordinate with On Sing." Jesse was used to running ops and even giving orders. But Operation Pelennor was larger and more complicated than anything else he had done. He almost wished Ana had assigned this job to you and sent him out to rescue Morrison. He was no fan of defensive operations, and now he was responsible for the lives of all the people following him: Genji, Mihret, Maeda Vargas... And the people who couldn't defend themselves, like Lacroix
and...the boss. Hell, if he really thought about it, he was in charge of making sure Overwatch didn't fall to the traitors while the rest of leadership was gone. It was enough to make him sick to his stomach if he thought about it for any length of time.

But Ana had assigned this job to him, told him flat out that he was the best candidate for the job. She might be desperate, but she'd chosen him over other qualified candidates. That didn't mean nothing.

Jesse took a deep breath. He headed back toward the main entrance. On Sing's half a dozen agents had taken up residence in one of the exam rooms. They had set up laptops, medical equipment, and what looked like a projector in the room and were in the middle of conferring quietly.

"Ms. Ajiyiming?" He asked, looking around. There were two women and four men, still clad in black body armor from the Hanoi pickup.

"That's me," a middle-aged woman said, giving him a wide friendly smile. She was very short, with thick curly brown hair and a good natured face. She extended her hand. "You must be the Boss-Lady's friend, so please, call me Patime. Everybody else does. Anyway, Boss-Lady tells me "Patime, you look after Jesse. He's going to need lots of help." And I say, "what about handsome young Genji? Isn't he almost your brother?" And then she laughs nervously and says, "oh Patime, you can't keep up with Genji, because he's a ninja and he's very shy. Don't bother him and don't ask him embarrassing questions about his brother." Boss-Lady is silly: I say, "of course we are going to ask. It is like telling water not to be wet." She knows this. But don't worry, she doesn't tell me that because she thinks you are slow. You are busy and making sure everyone does their job. You can't run around like a ninja," Patime said, not missing a beat or even taking a break to breathe.

Jesse rubbed the back of his neck, trying to sift all the valuable information from the gossip. "I appreciate the understanding. Sorry I'm only now getting around to see you. Had a lot of work to do."

"Oh, it's fine. Lady Zheng and Ms. Athena kept us informed."

Jesse wasn't sure he liked the sound of that, but he'd get more information out of Athena after this. "What can I ask you to do?" He asked. "I know you're not supposed to fight-"

Patime laughed, a loud hearty sound. "Oh, we know On Sing isn't supposed to fight. And while we might have family in On Sing, we are White Rabbit security. Boss-Lady pays us out of her own pocket. Very different." She winked.

"I was told-"

"Oh, Boss-Lady made this change two hours ago, while Lady Zheng wasn't paying attention," Patime said with a sagely head nod. "But still official. We can fight. We can fix. We can tell you embarrassing stories. But we are not supposed to go ask handsome Genji boy stories about his brother. Definitely against the rules. But she forgot to put that in the contract. So we are in the clear. Beside, I think deep down, she wants us to ask," Patime whispered, giggling. "Here, asset summary."

Jesse's phone dinged and he glanced at the message from Patime Ajiyiming. They were an operational combat squad, mostly PLA veterans with an MSS-educated engineer and not the overabundance of medical personnel he'd been expecting. He wasn't entirely sure what to make of this. Because while you seemed to trust Feng and to some extent, On Sing, Jesse wasn't so certain.
"We are currently under "quarantine." Or at least that's the procedure we're running to keep the facility locked down," Jesse said.

"Then I guess we'll have to stay in and make ourselves useful," Patime said, nonplussed. "You have a job for us?"

"I think we might need you to help guard prisoners. We're trying to take the assassins alive, but...we ain't got time to interrogate them now and we can't have them running amok."

"Oh, we can keep them out of trouble," Patime nodded solemnly.

"Or we can make sure they never trouble you again?" The other woman offered. She was closer to Jesse's age, with pink streaks in her hair and the face of a schoolgirl. She winked at Jesse. "Accidents happen."

"No accidents, yet," Jesse said, giving her an easy smile.

"Whatever you say, sir," she said, one hand on her chest, her smile coy.

"Maybe Mika wants to ask you embarrassing questions?" Patime said, nudging the younger girl with her elbow.

"Maybe Mika wants to do more than that," Mika said waggling her eyebrows at Jesse, though to his relief her expression was more gleeful than lascivious.

"Or maybe Mika wants to ask you embarrassing questions about Genji's brother," Patime said with a shrug.

"And maybe I'll even answer them," Jesse said, flashing both women a broad smile. "But I now that I know that you're combat-ready, I'm going to have to make some adjustments. I'll have handsome Genji coordinate guard rotation with you."

"OK," Patime said brightly.

Jesse waved, and then quickly exited the room. A small Athena drone hovered over his shoulder.

"How much of that is true?" He asked when he was out of earshot, the facade of good humor fading quickly.

"They are experienced On Sing wetworks operatives and freshly-contracted White Rabbit employees," Athena said. "But I'm pretty sure Zheng was aware of the reassignment. It is a technical loophole that Feng is exploiting. It's pretty crafty of her."

"Yeah," Jesse said, turning that over in his head. They were trying too hard to put him at ease. Wasn't a sin, but it didn't sit right neither, not with all the betrayals, secrets, and On Sing's interest in AIs. "You know, our deal is with On Sing, not White Rabbit. I'm not entirely sure how that's going to effect things. Let Genji know that we might have a problem. I'll meet him in the conference room."

"Winston wants you to know he's getting bombarded with questions about the quarantine. He has already composed a rote message along the lines of "we are busy maintaining protocol, and we must devote most of our attention to solving the problem, but everything is progressing smoothly, thank you for your concern." Angela has as well, though I believe she's tasked Mr. Nergui to answer them."
"Thanks, Athena. You're a peach," Jesse said, glancing down the hall to see Maeda Vargas speaking with Vo outside of Lacroix's room. Interesting. Vo didn't like strangers. But then, Maeda Vargas had been hanging around Blackwatch for awhile now. Not such a stranger then.

He returned to the conference room, to find Genji already there.

"Our On Sing allies are now officially "White Rabbit contractors." We have no alliance with White Rabbit," he said, watching Genji mix two cups of coffee, using that pistachio creamer.

Genji looked up, impassive. "This worries you?"

"Yeah. Feng didn't give us any heads up."

"White Rabbit is the face of their legitimate business. You might be concerned about them trying to raise their stock by being associated with Overwatch, but that's more political posturing than you or I care to deal with."

Jesse frowned. "You don't think they'll use it as a way to get around the terms of the alliance?"

"That's precisely what they're doing," Genji said. "On Sing isn't supposed to fight for us. White Rabbit can. And if they turn on us, they have more to lose."

Jesse simply showed Genji the dossiers.

"They're all competent combat veterans who are working real hard to be helpful. It doesn't sit right. Look, Feng warned us not to trust her unconditionally on the ride back from Hanoi. Because there's Feng, your buddy, and then there's Zhai Feng, the Dragonhead of On Sing, Lady of Shattered Tombs and Marshal of the Deathless Legion, whatever that means. They're not the same entity."

"Oh, you know her courtesies titles," Genji said, slyly. "They're traditional, and probably just symbolic." Genji stirred the coffee, staring off into the distance. "Probably."

Jesse wasn't sure how to parse that. Genji took too much pleasure in acting nonchalant about things that troubled saner folks. Lacroix was like that too, and that trait didn't seem to win them many friends. Not that either man seemed to mind.

"So you don't think they'll be a problem?"

"I would be surprised," Genji said, solemnly. "But there is no harm in being cautious. We can keep them on the southeastern side. With the quarantine in effect, they can't really go wandering. We're going to need Athena's help monitoring them."

"We'll need to issue stricter orders about who can approach the Commander or Lacroix."

"And perhaps, we will keep our medical staff out of their way," Genji said. "I'll talk to Angela and Winston."

"I'll brief the rest of our people. But we'll be discrete, because this is all just speculation and I'm going to feel stupidly guilty for hurting Patime's feelings," Jesse sighed. "I'm already starting to miss the usual Blackwatch missions. You know, where it was just a couple of us shooting our way out of overwhelming odds, trying not to killed or caught, and wondering if we'd make it to the extraction point in time."
"There is no extraction point here," Genji said, picking up both travel mugs of coffee. "Don't stress about our guests. Just place them where they can do the most good and least harm, and keep an eye on them. It'll probably work out." And with that, he left the room.

Jesse stared for a moment, realizing then that Genji had given him a pep talk. It was short and not particularly inspiring. But Genji had tried. Maybe. Or he was just being a dick. Sometimes it was hard to tell.

Chapter End Notes

Bleagh. Been adulting. It's terrible.

I know I owe some comments. I will try to catch up this week. Sorry guys, for the lateness.
Chapter 127

Chapter Summary

Operation Checquy is live.

Chapter Notes

October 11th was the 2nd anniversary of me starting to write IAL. October 22nd will be the two year anniversary of it going up on AO3 and I'll post a chapter then too. Thanks for staying me this long. ;_;

We'll be doing some things to celebrate both on my tumblr and on the discord. On 10/26 we'll be having a group readalong, with commentary. The reading selection will be done on the discord. There will also be giveaways. One is on the discord, details on the server. There will be a server invite at the end of the chapter.

The second giveaway is open to tumblr entries as well. We all like extra content: art, spin-off fics, essays, moodboards, playlists... Whatever your flavor of creativity is, we want to see it. Each item submitted gets you an entry into the drawing. (If you have a particularly time-consuming piece, it may count for more, but that's on a case by case basis.) Winners will be drawn randomly.

Please the #anniversary so we can track the entries on discord, or just submit them to the tumblr. Please only enter content that you have worked on. No one else's art or work is a replacement for your own. Please no memes as entries. If you're not sure if something is suitable, message me for clarification. Entries are due on 10/25, so the winners can be announced after the read-along.

Prize packs:
Have a Coffee (and a Cake Pop!) on Sensoo - $10 Starbucks GC
A Book to Eat...I Mean Read- $10 Barnes & Nobles or Amazon GC
It'll Rot Your Brain - $10 Steam Credit
Very Delayed Gratification- 500-1000 word drabble in the IAL universe following a character of your choice.

Alternate Prize for International Agents - A Humble Bundle of Your Choice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The screaming had started fifteen minutes ago. Despite his concussion, Jack had a very accurate sense of time. They were piping it into his cell via PA speakers in the ceiling. He couldn't tell if it was actually Jemison or even real time. But whoever it was, she was suffering.
She didn't beg, she didn't try to bargain - Jemison wouldn't. But she couldn't contain her agony either. Between screams, he could hear fleshy wet sounds and harsh scraping, just indistinct enough to make him think the worst.

Jack was still struggling against the bonds, blood flowing along his forearms and ankles from where he'd rubbed the skin raw. He briefly considered breaking his wrists or ankles to slide them out: but they would take too long to heal. Dislocating his thumb would be cleaner, but he couldn't quite get the torque or leverage from this position.

And yet...unless someone fucked up, he didn't see another way out of this. Angling his arms, Jack threw his weight to the right side. It wasn't enough. Snarling, Jack repeated the gesture, trying to get enough momentum to snap his own bones. He wouldn't be able to do it cleanly. But with enough repetitions...

The pain kept Jack focused. He didn't think about you. He didn't think about Gabe. He didn't think about the woman who kept screaming, and how he could help her. He thought about how he was going to break out of his bonds, and then, only then, could he focus on the next step. Compartmentalization was the name of the game, and it was best coping mechanism Jack had.

The door opened.

A familiar man was shoved into the room, his suit torn, hair wild, and face panicked.

"Morrison! Oh God, what have they done to you?" Petras staggered over, hands grasping Jack's arm. He watched Jack with those beady eyes, his face a mask of worry and fear. But the emotion didn't quite reach his eyes, those grabby fingers clammy and possessive.

Jack stared blankly, not at all buying Petras' mimicry of concern.

Prince strode into the room, a sardonic look on his face.

"Please, Morrison. They're torturing that poor girl. It's awful! You have do to something!" Petras wailed.

"Or he's next," Prince said cheerfully. The cyborg leaned over and removed the bit from Jack's mouth. "You look well-rested, Morrison. Much better than before. Ready to answer some questions?"

On cue, the woman's scream cut off, wet gurgling in its place.

"Please, Morrison, you have to-" Petras wheedled.

Prince watched, clearly amused by Petras' bad acting.

Jack regarded both men, holding his silence. Letting them know that he was on to Petras wouldn't really help matters, and playing dumb would extend the life of this farce. But in light of the fact they might have tortured Jemison to death while he listened, he found he was out of fucks to give.

"So defiant," Prince laughed. "Come on, don't you want to save this poor helpless civilian? Look how terrified he is. He might just go into cardiac arrest before we start the fun part."

Petras squeezed Jack's arm. "I order you to save us both! Speak man!"

"Well then, your civilian superior is ordering you to tell me all your secrets," Prince
laughed. "I hear you're a stickler for hierarchy and orders. It's a simple solution to our problem. And the blame wouldn't be on you, it'd be on him." Prince jerked his thumb at Petras.

Petras' nostrils flared, clearly disliking the jab. His pathetic expression wavered, petulance flashing across his face. Even though he'd orchestrated all of this, and more, it was clear that Petras couldn't actually take responsibility for his own actions.

Jack had never hated someone so much.

"Come on Morrison, it's just a couple of questions. You might even know the answers to some of them. What are the override codes for your turret network? Too specific? Yeah, I have trouble remembering every single security code too. No worries. Let's give you an easier one. What about this one: what exactly are you building in Annecy?"

Jack blinked, a little shocked that Prince was aware of that project.

"Oh yes, I know about that. You've gone to great lengths to keep it secret. But I know how to get information out of the bean counters. It does make me wonder what kind of dirty dealings the Strike Commander is having." Prince's smug look was only emphasized by Petras' confused one.

Jack just stared flatly. Prince didn't know much then.

"I know, I know. You don't actually know the answers to all those things off the top of your head," Prince said, with mock sympathy. "You have people and VIs so you don't have to remember all the minutia. Honestly Morrison, I don't give a shit about your security protocols or your money laundering schemes. Whatever, keep those boring secrets. I am actually after some very specific information that I'm fairly confident you'll remember. It's just a trip down memory lane..." Prince's smile widened.

In the corner of his eyes, Jack could see Petras forget to be "afraid" as he leaned in closer. The bastard licked his lips, almost shaking with anticipation. Jack could almost feel the pressure in the room shift, like Petras' voracious greed was leeching the heat from the area.

"Come on, you won awards for this mission. I know, I know, I'll have to be more specific," Prince sneered. "What did you bring back from Operation Metis? You can't convince me that you left all that tech at the bottom of the Arabian Sea. I hear it was a real treasure trove. Think the founders of Oasis managed to scavenge some of it for their rebranding of Baghdad. So I have to wonder: you had the first pick, what kind of souvenirs did you take home?" Prince smiled thinly.

Jack stared flatly at Prince, the lines of that face etched in his memory. This was the man who'd executed his team in cold blood. This was the man who'd tried to kill you and Gabe on numerous occasions. This man was dead, he just didn't know it yet. Jack expected those questions, had fielded them in many variations from Petras himself. None of those inquiries was a surprise.

"It has to be some real world-shaking shit for the Strike Commander to keep it hidden all these years, and from the UN no less. Gotta wonder, what is so important that you're staying silent when I know you must have questions. Don't worry, we'll get answers. I'm good at that," Prince smirked. "But first, I should go put pretty Isabella out of her misery. I guess her suffering is just collateral damage to you. Then I'll go get that pretty little sister of yours to jog your memory. Or maybe that spindly little brother? How about your dear old mother? I don't know who will be the most persuasive, Morrison, so the whole family is invited! We'll just have to see who survives."

Jack snarled, vision going red for a terrible moment.
"They live in Bumfuck, Indiana. It'll take reinforcements far too long to reach them. Do you really think your friend Sergeant Chang is going to be able to protect them? Christ, she's a fuckup. War criminal or not, punching a Deputy Secretary of Defense at a cocktail party wasn't the smartest choice. Didn't know they were willing to demote you SEP folks that low."

Prince paused, chuckling. "But I guess she knows how to party. Have to admire that. Is that the kind of girl you like? That would explain why she's in Indiana looking after your family." Prince leered at him.

Jack clenched his teeth, willing his relief to stay hidden. If Prince had misjudged Ray that badly, then his family would probably be safe.

Prince just cocked his head to the side. "Huh, you really do believe she can protect them with her ragtag band of disciplinary cases. Your optimism would be inspiring, if it wasn't so terrifyingly stupid." Prince chuckled. "Face it, Morrison. I've run all kinds of ops. From obliterating little Canadian bases to invading the heart of the American capital and living to tell the tale: I'm good at what I do. And I'm planning a nice family reunion for you right now. Sergeant Chang can't stop that."

"Come on, Morrison, you can end this," Petras said, frantically. "You can save them! And us too-

The day had been terrible enough. His people were dead or dying. Prince's all too personal threats nearly sent him over the edge. But it was Petras who gave the final push. His duplicity, his cowardice, his naked greed: Jack found it all nauseating. As much as he wanted to tear the man apart, the mere sight of Director William Petras made him sick. Those grabby hands on his bare arm made his skin crawl.

"Cut the act," Jack said, voice low and raw, knowing he shouldn't break his silence. That he shouldn't let them know that they were getting to him. But it felt good to stop pretending, to honestly vent the words that had been roiling under his skin. "You're not fooling anyone, you treacherous piece of shit. Coming in here and hovering like a goddamn vulture. Everyone in this room knows that this was your plan all along."

Petras gaped at him, mouth moving, but no words coming out. He looked like a fish, those rubbery lips gulping down air and he tried to protest his innocence and just failed. It was a satisfying sight, almost like Jack had gotten the pleasure of slapping the old bastard.

"Morrison, I would never- How could you say that? We're in this together!" His voice went higher with each denial.

Jack's cold stare did not waver.

Prince laughed, holding his stomach. "He's right, Director. For a politician, you're a terrible actor. You're only making a fool of yourself."

Petras huffed angrily. "How dare you?"

"It's your dignity, or lack thereof," Prince shrugged. He grinned at Jack. "You see why he had to bust me out of lockup. Doesn't have the stomach or the know-how to do this part on his own."

"Shut up, Prince! I'm paying your wages. You will address me with respect! And Morrison, I gave you so many chances," Petras snapped, eyes bulging. "I tried to save you from your folly! I even hoped that one day you would join my family - you and Ainsley! I extended the olive branch! I made you the Strike Commander! I made you, Morrison. I raised you up! I saw
The words were just words. Gaslighting to the core. Water off a duck's back. Jack didn't need to engage. He knew Petras had a hand in "branding" Strike Commander Morrison, but he also knew that his accomplishments, and failures, were his own. Arguing with that traitor wouldn't change anything, and it wouldn't make him feel better. He just watched Petras with flat eyes, and realized that despite the awful sounds he'd been hearing, he could still summon the yearning to hurt another human in terrible personal ways.

"You're just acting brave because you think someone's coming to save you! Well, no one knows where you are. No one knows about this base. And Reyes and Lacroix are out of commission. On death's door, even. And all they need is a little push to be out of the way," Petras said triumphantly. "Plus that stuck up Amari bitch is going to Greece with the rest of your old team. You know the place, where things just don't go right for you? Well there, they'll die like heroes. Yes, it'll be an international tragedy losing the rest of the old guard. But don't worry, I'll make sure we get the funding for an appropriate memorial. Of course, in the wake of such a tragedy, strong leadership will be needed, and I'll dutifully step in to take up the mantle..." Petras droned on.

Jack's stomach dropped. What had happened to Gabe? And Gérard? Ana knew how dangerous the Mediterranean omnis were. But of course, she was being sent into the thick of it with Reinhardt and Torby. And if Gabe and Lacroix were down, what kind of condition were you in? Icy fear dug into his gut, and Jack gritted his teeth. He needed to get out of here.

"Now do you understand your situation?" Prince asked, that amused gap-toothed grin making Jack's blood boil. "Your patron politician seems to have tied up all the loose ends. There won't be any daring rescues or eleventh hour pardons. Just you and me, and whoever else I need to work through to get you to talk. Pretty Isabella. Cute little Maggie. Surly Mikey..."

Petras crossed his arms, looking smug.

Jack lunged, feeling his bones creak under the force of his rage.

Petras jumped back, but Prince, stood there, shaking his head. "You won't break those manacles, Morrison. Omnic-grade shit."

Jack lunged again, the pain fueling him, replacing the panic.

"Oh God-" Petras winced, his face pale.

"Oh don't worry, Director, he's secure," Prince said. "Probably."

Petras flinched under Jack's murderous gaze. The coward couldn't even look him in the eye. "I...have some other things to oversee," Petras said hurriedly and quickly walked out of the room, glancing over his shoulder a few times, just to make sure that Jack wasn't following him.

Prince just sighed, shaking his head. "Bitch." He gave Jack a wry smile. "I get it, Morrison. It ain't fair that candy ass weasels like Petras get to win. It really gets my dander up. Draft-dodging sons of bitches getting rich on working boys' blood. Trading cushy government contracts and orchestrating cover ups while men like us die in the fields," Prince nodded sagely. "But that's just the way of the world. You were a credit to your farm boy roots, but you knew it couldn't last forever. No one is that lucky. Sooner or later, we all fall."
Jack glowered at him, twisting and thrashing as he tried to get his left wrist to give.

"Now, I know you're special, maybe you don't feel pain quite like the rest of humanity. I know a little about that. I'll be sure to check, for science." Prince gave a little half shrug. "But I ain't worried about that. Everyone has a breaking point, Morrison. Even super soldiers. If hurting you takes too long, your boss has suggested other options. I admit, I'm a little disappointed, but he's got a point. You might not feel pain, but I'm sure your loved ones do."

Jack hurled himself to the side, feeling his left wrist start to give.

"Oh come on, don't beat yourself up, Morrison," Prince laughed. "Save a piece for me. I'll let you in on a little secret. Because I like your spirit." He leaned in, nice and close, though not close enough to headbutt. "Pretty Isabella is just fine. A little loopy and mad as hell, but still in one piece. That was just a recording of some broad from another job. I mean, I've had a little fun with her, but did you really think we'd torture your agent where you couldn't watch?"

Jack spat in Prince's face.

The retaliatory blow made Jack's head spin. He tasted blood, and pain shot through his face and into his skull. Prince had broken his nose.

"Don't push me, Morrison," Prince said coldly, his smiles and friendly posturing gone. "I've been nothing but sweet to you out of professional respect. This ain't personal, it's business. Now, I've got some business with your beloved Director, so why don't you lay here and think real hard about telling us what we want to know. Won't save you or pretty Isabella. But it might spare your family some pain. Just think about it, Morrison. But don't take too long. Your director isn't a patient man." And then Prince left the room, the door slamming shut behind him.

Head still swimming, Jack wiggled his left arm, bones creaking. If Petras was telling the truth, and rescue wasn't forthcoming, he wasn't just going to roll over and give up. He certainly wasn't going to beg or give those bastards what they wanted. He was going to get Jemison and himself out. He was going to avenge Epsilon Squad. And failing that, he was going to take as many of them with him as he could.

**

You could not plan for every eventuality. No matter how thorough you were, there would always be surprises, or worse, something you missed. But when you had a good team, you did not have to be perfect all by yourself. When you had a good team, you could count on them catch your mistakes, to improvise when things went wrong, and to suggest then enact solutions. You had a good team. But you weren't so sure that they had a good leader.

With the help of Ito's surveillance drones, Lao, Zheng, and Athena were able locate the base's cameras and sensors, identify their models and capabilities, and to draw the perimeter of a no-fly zone. Adjusting your course added twenty minutes to transit time, but the element of surprise was your most crucial advantage. Once that was gone, you'd have to move fast to keep the hostages alive.

The stealthcraft landed north of the base, about five miles out. It was going to be a nasty slog, but hopefully Lao would be able to spoof the cameras and obfuscate your approach. Otherwise you'd have to risk Zheng brute-forcing their system and tripping some kind of alarm.
The pre-mission jitters were stronger than any in recent memory, even Operation Tarasque. The air practically vibrated with nervous energy as you shrugged on your coat, fastened it up, and retrieved your gear. It was finally time.

You went down the ramp first, stealth suit on, nerves buzzing. The cold air hit the back of your throat and you gritted your teeth, hands curling in your pockets. The snow under your boots was crunchy and blindingly white. You pulled down your visor and scanned the horizon. A couple of inches of snow coated the ground, brown rocks jutting out in random intervals. A large part of the island was a plateau, with a sheer cliffs high above the frigid ocean. You briefly pictured throwing Petra off one of those cliffs, smiling a little as you heard his screams terminating with a splash.

Heh.

You looked over your shoulder, checking your team's readiness.

Lao had snow goggles on, lips pursed in a familiar mixture of disgust and resignation. No one from your original squad had really liked the weather in the Yukon. It was comforting to see that that hadn't changed.

Hanzo stared stoically at the terrain. He carried a bow, and to your slight surprise, he had a wakizashi of his own strapped to his hip. Not a sword, but a blade nonetheless.

Amélie fell into step beside you. "We will go back to the Alps some time," she said softly. "I will happily demonstrate all the ways that snow and winter can be fun."

"Oh, I know the best way to appreciate snow," you said dryly. "It's from inside, in front of a fire, drinking something hot."

"I think you would enjoy downhill skiing," she said. "It is fast, dangerous, and great fun. It would be an excellent Blackwatch teambuilding retreat."

"Maybe," you said, not committing to anything.

"I know Jesse and Genji would enjoy it," Athena piped up, her drone hovering beside Amélie. "Winston would also like to try it."

"Mmm," you said, this timely suggestion reeking of premeditation.

"Don't worry, I can take care of everything," Amélie beamed.

"I believe it," you muttered. Amélie was proving to be a detail person with excellent planning skills, down to the part where she stuffed your unconscious body in a designer suitcase and dragged you to a ski lodge.

Feng rocked back on and forth on heels, like she was trying to resist building a snowman or hunting down some polar bears to hug. She grinned, sticking her tongue out to taste the cold air. At least someone was having fun. The Zheng drone floated beside her, somehow conveying a sense of reluctance and worry. It was an impressively nuanced way of floating, but maybe you were just projecting.

"All right, let's go. Avoid the wildlife, stay warm, and give a warning when we're 300 yards out," you said. "We have to move fast, but don't try to sprint. The cold saps your energy, and the snow slows us anyway. Best to keep a steady pace."
Your team nodded in response.

"All right then," you said, because this didn't seem like the right moment for inspirational speeches, and to be honest, you weren't so great at them. "Move out."

Unsurprisingly, Hanzo and Feng seemed to have little trouble with the trek. Several times you saw Feng pause, stare at the snow, then the back of Hanzo's head, and then the Zheng drone would nudge her and Feng would roll her eyes and keep moving. You couldn't read minds, but you had a very good idea what Feng was thinking.

Lao lagged behind, which didn't surprise you either, given that she'd been in the infirmary for months. She didn't complain, and you didn't offer to slow down, because you didn't have that kind of time, and she wouldn't appreciate being singled out for special treatment.

But what did surprise you was that Amélie fell back, keeping the pace with Lao. You glanced over your shoulder, quite concerned, but Amélie just smiled and waved you forward. Lao didn't look at you. She just nodded at whatever Amélie said in her ear, and kept going.

You watched, as discretely as you could, because it wasn't that you didn't trust Amélie. But something was going on there and you really didn't want to let it become a problem.

A few minutes later, Amélie caught up to you, her cheeks rosy in the cold.

"Everything OK?" You asked, trying to sound nonchalant and maybe even succeeding.

"Just giving her some suggestions on breathing techniques," Amélie said, tone light. "I know she has been convalescing."

You raised a brow and looked backward, Lao was red-cheeked and breathing harder than everyone else, but maintaining her pace. She didn't seem upset, so you just nodded, and kept going.

Because of the weather conditions and the fact Feng spotted two polar bears in the distance, it took you about an hour to reach the cameras on the perimeter. You were about 300 yards from the base, though you didn't have a clear visual on it, thanks to the camouflage. You gulped down a bag of electrolyte solution, and bit into an energy bar. None of it tasted good, but you needed the nutrition. Running burned a lot of calories, and the cold weather made you hungry.

Panting and shaky, Lao found the camera and sensor pole she'd been looking for and plugged in. Beside her, Athena and Zheng drones hovered, giving input. Lao gulped down her own snacks, fiddling with the control panel.

"...Praise Gun Jam, they never even changed the defaults," she said, looking at you. "Cameras link to a flat network, there are some encrypted partitions and a separate industrial controls network, I think, but I have access to a majority of their file dumps. They assumed their remote location and lack of internet connection would protect them. Skimped on maintaining good security protocols," she said shaking her head. "Rivka would be disgusted."

"Personally, I'm grateful for their laziness. It makes our job easier," you said, crossing your arms.

"Everything is in clear text, including admin passwords..." Lao muttered. "Are you getting all this?" She glanced at the drones.

The Zheng drone made a sound that could have been a laugh.
"How much access do you have?" You asked. "Can you open the doors? Cut the power?"

"Not from here. Different system on a separate network," Lao said, shaking her head. "I might be able to slice and splice some circuitry, but that'll take longer."

"OK," you said. "What can you get?"

"Maps, schedules, all the cameras..." She trailed off. "There's a lot of interesting looking documents, but other than some stalkerish dossiers on Commander Morrison, there isn't anything about why they want him or—Looks like they have dossiers on all the bigshots. They even have one on you, Lucky." She furrowed her brow. "According to this you're sleeping with McCree, the Shimada brothers, Amélie Lacroix, and...OK, this is obviously inaccurate. Ziv doesn't like women. Does he?" She gave you a confused look.

"No," you sighed, rolling your eyes upward. "And I'm not sleeping with any of them."

Amélie just giggled. "Is that so, Chanceux?"

You massaged the space between your eyes, your sinuses pulsing. "Amélie, please."

Lao's eyes got really big, like she didn't believe you. "Are you sure? Because I haven't even read off a quarter of the list," she said, squinting at you. "Look, no shame if you're happy. I just don't remember you being that...friendly?"

Behind you, Feng snickered.

It was official, Hanzo was your favorite squad member.

"Just download the data, and we'll review it later. My love life is not remotely relevant-"

Lao went still. "They have guard rotations set up," she said breathlessly. "And heightened security due to high value prisoners. No names and if there are cameras in the holding cells, they're also on a different network."

"Live prisoners?" You were suddenly over her shoulder, studying at her arm display. There were numerous armed guard manning work stations and patrolling the halls. They wouldn't be on alert at this location for no reason. Your heart clenched.

"Almost certainly," she said.

"There are two dozen hostiles, on the premises, including Director Petras, Mr. Murdoch, and Richard Prince," Athena said. "Most are armed and armored."

You stared at guards, teeth gritted as you wrestled with too many emotions. It wasn't a clear confirmation, but it was more than you had before. And if Prince wasn't in the cell, then who else could Petras be holding?

The fear and uncertainty made you sick to your stomach. If it was Jack, and that was best case scenario, then what stood between you and him were two of your worst enemies, and their followers, most of whom, would be heavily armed.

And if it wasn't Jack, then you were out of leads.

You bowed your head, jaw twitching. Doubts or not, this was more than enough to go on. In this moment, you didn't give a shit about Prince, or Petras, or any of the other scumfucks of the
world. You needed to save Jack more than you needed to make them pay. "Can you get me more than that?" You asked, voice rough.

"Oh! I can get into the flight records for the transports," Lao said softly. There was a long stretch of silence as she worked. "...Based on the coordinates, one of them was in Switzerland in the last twelve hours. They didn't dock anywhere official..." She trailed off, pulling up more files. "The timeframes and locations match up. Their flight plan coordinates place them right in the area where the wreckage of the Strike Commander's vehicle was found, overlapping the same window of time where he disappeared. I know it's still circumstantial but-"

That, was enough to satisfy your doubts. They had Jack. Everything else faded under the incandescence of your anger. The world wasn't so cold any more, not with the rage heating your blood. "Thank you," you said, flexing your fingers, trying so very hard not to damage your gloves.

"The cellblock might have its own network, but I can try to track the archival footage to see who they brought in. It'll take awhile to go through the logs, but since they brought them in so recently-"

"Later. I want to get in there as fast as we can," you said, words taut, though your voice remained steady.

"Got it," Lao said quickly. "I've spoofed the cameras and the sensors. They'll show the looped footage and maintain readings fluctuating in the average range," Lao said. "I've also got entry access codes to the vehicles..."

"Do you need to use one of these hubs to maintain connection?"

"No, now I can do it anywhere," Lao said. "I'm in with full domain controller access. For all intents and purposes, I'm the database new admin. I can't unlock doors or crash generators, yet... Give me some time."

"We can try this method," Zheng offered, a series of code flashing across Lao's screen.

"No, that code injection will take down the network, maybe even the industrial controls," Lao said immediately, shaking her head. "It'll spoil our surprise entry and cause lots of complications. Save it for an emergency."

You raised a brow. "You can do that even with your limited access to the separate network?"

"Theoretically, it could cause a cascade through- " She paused, realizing that you didn't care how, just that she could. "Short answer: probably. But it'll obviously draw attention to our presence."

"Keep it on hand," you said. "We might need a distraction."

"Of course," Lao said. "Let me preload some of this and oh, that will work really well. Thanks," she said to Zheng.

"Very fast comprehension, excellent research skills, and good judgment," Zheng replied, sounding oddly approving. "Should you not wish to continue your career with Blackwatch, the Peaceful Life Society would be very interested in employing you."

You raised a brow.
Lao glanced at you, eyes wide. She turned her head to the side, not quite daring to shake out a "no."

"Ms. Zheng, please don't headhunt my teammates, especially in the middle of an operation," you said dryly, because as her CO you could field the question for her.

"I am merely complimenting her skill. And I am not the only one who's interested in your hacker," Zheng said, sounding slightly offended. "Undersecretary Nwazue has also drawn up a similar offer."

Lao's eyes got bigger, panic clear on her face.

"Yes, but it's very distracting," you said. "I need her focused on this job. Not the next one."

"That was terribly thoughtless of me," Zheng said, sounding almost apologetic. You didn't buy it for a moment. "I am very sorry for my poor timing. Please think no more of it, Agent...Winter Soldier."

"Uh...it's fine," Lao said, hesitantly.

"I'm sure it won't happen again," you said, trying to keep your voice even. "That's all stuff we can worry about that later. " You gave Lao a meaningful look. "Like after we've saved Jack."

Lao nodded slowly. "Right, right, of course." She cleared her throat. "So I can send an alert that both a sensor hub and a transport navigational system are experiencing critical errors. I'll do them twenty minutes apart. That way, someone will have to come out to check at least one of them." Lao nodded. "Hub error message has been sent. It's been registered by one of the engineers, but I can't tell if they're sending anyone out right away." Lao pointed at a pole in the distance. "We should have good cover to ambush them." She took a deep breath. "In the meantime, I have facility maps and we should go over the important locations and directions."

Zheng, Athena, and Lao began to show you, and the rest of the team, the layout of Petras' secret base. Someone would come to check the facility error messages, but until then, you would cram as much knowledge as you could, because Jack's life depended on it.

"Oh my god, they brought a cannon," Maggie squeaked.

"So have others," Maracle said, rail gun whining as he positioned it on the edge of the barrier shield. "One cannon, not a problem."

"They brought three-" Maggie hissed.

"That makes them three times as stupid," Chang said. She studied the formation. They hadn't bothered with any real tactics. They just lined up the cannons in a row. Sitting ducks that thought they were real predators. That delusion would change soon.

"Can you explain your math?" Michael asked, his tone respectful.

"Most of the time, people come after your family as leverage against your brother. If they blow you all up, they don't get shit." Chang hefted Lilith onto her shoulder. The massive and heavily modified AA gun was cumbersome, but worth it just for the psychological damage it dealt
to the enemy. The actual explosive damage was even better. Sure, some of the enhancements hadn't been strictly legal, but Maracle knew what he was doing, and Fitzpatrick loved testing the customized rounds they'd developed. The barrel thick enough to fit a football inside and taller than she was. But she held it with practiced ease. Chang squinted down the sights. "Idiots."

"What a relief," Michael said, voice flat as he handed Maracle the grenades. The larger man just laughed.

"Cheer up, Mikey," he boomed. "You get to see the Sergeant in action. It's a real treat."

"I've seen her."

"You haven't," Maracle said firmly. "Not like this."

"It's not something you ever forget," Fitzpatrick said, his voice dreamy. "With her goes Lilith, maiden of hellfire and brimstone. Beautiful, terrible, and all consuming. When they are done, the world goes quiet and you're left with a haze of smoke and the warm smell of high powered explosives and bacon. It's the closest thing to heaven that I know."

"...That was really poetic," Maggie said.

"That's Fitzpatrick, an anarchist with the self-ascribed gift of blarney," Maracle laughed.

Rolling her eyes, Chang stalked to the edge of the barrier, eager to get away from poetry.

A man-sized bipedal omnic approached them waving the flag of truce. "Attention Morrison family and guards, there is no need for more bloodshed. If you cooperate with us, we will spare-

It was overkill, but this was her favorite part. Smiling, Chang angled the massive artillery weapon. It wasn't a nice or sane smile, but no one who knew her would accuse her of being either.

"I say... That is a rather large weapon for a human of your size. And really too much to waste on me. Are you sure you want to risk dislocating your-

Chang fired, the kick sending the gun backward and digging a deep furrow into the ground. The shell whistled as it went harmlessly over the omnic's head. It didn't flinch, but it did turn its head and watch as the plasma round erupted, spreading through the men around the westernmost cannon. Fiery blue energy waves washed over a three meter area, sublimating everything organic in seconds, before it burnt itself out. There was a lot of screaming, but it ended quickly - there weren't really much by way of remains - those caught in the center of the blast radius simply evaporated. But it wasn't always that neat, sometimes people were just on the edge and, well, that got messy. If one wasn't paying too close attention, it did smell a little bit like bacon on the griddle, like Jack was overcooking it.

"Amplified thermal-processing plasma clusters? Those are against the Geneva Conventions-" The omnic stuttered.

"Guess it'll only be a problem if someone finds out," Chang laughed. She patted Lilith, balancing the custom 40mm autocannon on one arm, and drew her pistol with her free hand.

"That is a more reasonable sized weapon proportional to your frame-"

"If you go away now, maybe I won't shoot you," Chang said, rolling her eyes. Goddamn robots weren't supposed to chat your ear off. They were supposed to shoot silently and kill
efficiently. That's why she liked fighting them. Respected them even. They did their jobs and there was no poetry.

The omnic glanced at Chang, and then at the scorched remains of one third of the main force.

"I am not afraid of you. There will be more," it said, optical sensors bright and defiant. "We will not stop. And no one is coming to save you."

Smiling, Chang pulled the trigger, and the omnic dropped, half its head blown off, exposed circuitry sparking. She suspected it had vacated the shell before the destruction, but she didn't really care.

"You're looking at the last of the Condemned Company," Chang laughed, holstering her gun as she stared at the remnant of the main attack force, watching them scramble to try to salvage the gear and cannons; it was too late for the men in the blast radius. "We were never meant to be saved."

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The entryway was in sight, though you taken cover behind gently sloping rocks. The protruding parts of the base, and the vehicles had been concealed under camouflaged tech cloth, designed to mimic the snow-covered rocks that made up most of the island's terrain. You'd taken a roundabout way to hide your footprints, and both Athena and Zheng had carefully filled in any obvious spots.

"Entry requires a retinal scan, passcode, and ID card," Lao said. "I have the code. With time, I could dupe a card, but we need one of the eyes intact."

"I've got the biofilm!" Feng said, waving a thumb-sized canister. "Specifically-rated for cold weather ops!"

"Or you can scan the retina, print it on biofilm, and place it on your own body," Lao said. "I guess that's less messy. But we still need one intact." She gave meaningful looks to the entire squad, like she didn't trust them not to turn the enemy into unusable hamburger.

Hanzo snorted.
Feng giggled.
And Amélie's smile sharpened.

"Let's see if we can take him alive, first," you said. "Just to see what he knows."

"Showoff," Amélie said teasingly.

"Door's opening," Athena said.

"Positions," you said, crouching down. Amélie went to the right, climbing up one of the rocks and wriggling forward on her belly, rifle already assembled.

Hanzo climbed the other side, nocking his bow.

Zheng had an active jammer, and Athena was primed to intercept any distress calls. Having all of you ready to take him down was overkill: but you couldn't afford to make any mistakes.
It was a single soldier, trudging out to the post, muttering obscenities under his breath, breath that you could see condensing in the cold. Ugh. You went around the rocks, gun raised.

The soldier wore earmuffs and a heavy hat, which probably muffled your footfalls. Though in your ears, it still sounded like you were stomping across bags of crackers. But he didn't look up, too caught up in fiddling with the open control panel and mumbling his displeasure.

"Hands up," you said, the barrel of your carbine pressed to the back of his neck.

Very slowly, the soldier raised his hands, and you could see that he wasn't wearing gloves. Two shiny metal hands gleamed in the sunlight.

"Shit," he said.

"Turn around, slowly."

He complied.

"I have two snipers on you right now," you said. "So don't make any sudden moves."

"I don't want to fight, it's too cold," the man said, bundled up in a hood, balaclava, and scarf. He watched you with shrewd gray eyes. "I know you. From Overwatch, right? You guys wouldn't shoot a man with his hands in the air, would you?"

"Guess that depends on the man," you said, carbine held at eye level.

"I'm just a grunt. I go where they send me," he nodded solemnly, almost comical in his thick layers of winterwear. "Come on, ask me questions. You don't have to kill me. Yes, you can use my badge to get in, but you won't pass the retinal scan security check without me. I'm much more useful alive. You can't just cart my corpse in there, security will pick up on it." He nodded vigorously.

"Passcode?"

He rattled off a number and you glanced at Lao who shook her head. She had access to the door codes. He was lying, quite convincingly. Good to know.

"How many prisoners do you have?"

"I don't know. I'm just an engineer. I don't handle that stuff," he said with a shrug and then flinched under your hard stare. "But if I were to guess, at least two."

"So the Strike Commander and Director Petras?" You asked casually.

The man gaped at you. "Lady, Petras is the one footing the bill. He doesn't need any rescue. I don't know how you could find this place and not figure that part out!"

You smiled thinly. "Just checking. It's good to know that we don't have to play pretend then. It'll be a refreshing change of pace to be able to deal straight with you."

"I uh...can appreciate a straight-talking lady with a gun." He gave you a nervous smile. "Come on, ask your questions. I am happy to answer them!"

"How many combatants are on site?" You asked, starting easy.

"Twenty," he said. "There are a few civvies on site too, but most of them ain't much use in a
fight. But Prince's people are all good, scary good at being bad. What'd you bring? A dozen?
Overwatch or not, you don't stand a chance on the home ground. Not without some help, anyway.
And uh, I don't mind helping you, if you don't mind not shooting me?"

He was telling the truth this time, about the numbers at least. He was pretending not to be
one of Prince's people. Interesting. Your smile widened. "Holding cell protocols?"

"Uhh, everything there is on a closed network. Regular Joes don't have access to any of
that. The CC units too. Prince handles most of the sensitive stuff. Voss does some too, but he's
even crazier than Prince. Most of us don't want to know what goes on in the Director's private
interrogation chambers. He only brings high value subjects here, and they don't get to walk out the
door, if you know what I mean." He licked his lips, eyes nervously focusing on your face. "I'm not
that kind of guy. I don't have the stomach for it. But it's uh...it's like the mafia here," he said.
"Once you're in, you can't just leave. I've seen what happens to guys that try. It ain't pretty."

"What's your name?" You asked, knowing that he was trying to establish a rapport. And
you understood that he was an accomplished liar, weaving in just enough truth to try to hook you
into sparing his life. But you didn't care. You were using him, and while his endgame was
survival, yours was rescuing Jack and keeping your team alive. They didn't have to be mutually
exclusive goals.

"James," he said. "James Markovich. I'm from Iowa. Ever been there?"

"Well James," you said. "Were you expecting more guests?"

"Maybe?" He shrugged. "Heard we could be getting some leverage on one of the prisoners,
but I don't know the details.

"But it is Morrison you have in there," you said flatly. "He's not the kind of guy you miss.
Not someone with your training."

Markovich sighed. "Yeah, it's Morrison. And a woman I think. I don't know the details."

Your heart leapt. Maybe Shoal had made it. You tried to keep your voice steady, your tone
unemotional. "Give me a sitrep."

"Base is in a high alert state. It took them fifteen minutes to clear me to come out here.
Nobody is just walking in or out. Everyone is on call, and armed. The holding area is on
lockdown. Only Prince and Petras have access."

"What kind of anti-AI measures have you taken?" You asked, because Lao hadn't seen
anything.

"Modified Faraday Cage in the holding cell area. Might extend throughout the base, but I
doubt it. They went a little cheap on the nonessential areas. Like the canteen. The food is garbage
and there's never any hot water," Markovich continued, giving you a friendly smile.

"Good to know," you said.

Lao was busy typing away at the display on her arm.

"You've been most helpful, and I am certainly not the kind of person to kill an innocent,
unarmed man. One last question." You smiled at Markovich, your expression serene.

"Sure," he said, beaming back at you.
"What do you think is worse? Finland or the Yukon in the winter?"

"Oh, that's easy. This is far worse than the Yukon. We had a job there a couple years back, and we were in and out in only a few hours," he said, not a little boastful. "We have to live here."

"That's what I thought," you said, with a nod. You holstered your gun, not wanting any accidental damage to occur.

Markovich gave a sigh of relief.

Your hand drifted to your wakizashi, and while you were not Genji, not skilled enough to slay with your draw, you were still faster than Markovich expected. You thrust it through his scarf, coat, and larynx, twisting slightly to avoid the vertebrae. Gasping, Markovich dropped to his knees, hands reaching for his punctured throat, blood bubbling onto the thick fabric as his breath leaked out him, confusion written into his death mask. You wiped the blade on his jacket, sheathed it, and then retrieved his ID card. Of course, his eyes were perfectly intact.

There was a neat smattering of applause, and you looked up to see Amélie and Feng clapping quietly. Hanzo's disgruntled look told you more. You were pretty sure he thought you should have been able to slice off the head in one rapid stroke, or kill on the first draw. But shockingly, he said nothing to undermine your authority.

Lao just stared. "He was at the Ninth Circle? Shit. I didn't even think about-" She shook her head. "How many of them have you killed since...after?"

"A dozen or so," you said, though most of that had been because they were in DC or on other ops. Gabriel hadn't exactly authorized you to hunt them down on the side. But neither had anyone forbidden you from doing it.

"Gross dead eye copy time!" Feng knelt over the dead man, placing a thin photosensitive clear film over his wide open eyes. She flashed a small light and then stuck the film on each of her eyelids. The backing had turned slightly opaque, and the faint imprint of the retinal scan appeared like a temporary tattoo on her skin. Having a second pair of eyes on one's lids was odd enough. Knowing that they belonged to a dead man? ...Well, you'd worn worse.

"Lao, if you can lock down the vehicles without triggering any security alerts, you may start. But please stay on the comms in case we need troubleshooting. Amélie, if you can pick a vantage point and guard Lao and the emergency exit, the rest of us are going in."

"If you need help, we'll be here," Amélie said, giving you a little wave as she made herself a little nest atop the rocks. You watched her align her barrel, and then nod. "This will do. I have a clear view of all the targets. Though maybe..." She eyed another set of rocks speculatively. "Don't worry about us, Chanceux. We will do our part."

Feng lifted the dead guy over one arm and half-dragged him behind the rocks. It wasn't the first time you'd seen her show off super strength, though you weren't sure how she managed it considering she didn't have much muscle.

You glanced over at Hanzo, who was watching her with a very peculiar expression. He inclined his head back, focusing on the movement of her arms. It seemed he wasn't shocked. Instead, he was interested in seeing her perform. So he knew, or at least suspected the details of Feng's altered biology.

Lao, on the other hand, looked at her arms, both metal and flesh, then Feng, somewhere
between incredulous and outraged. You knew Lao, and you could practically read her mind: "I don't think I could do that, and I'm the same size as you, what the fuck?"

Feng took point, you and Hanzo flanking her, with the drones following behind. Both Athena and Zheng would have to guard against anti-AI measures, something you couldn't detect.

Under the canopy, but protruding from the rocks, was the base entrance. The thick metal airlock was wide enough to fit three people abreast. Cameras and turrets bookended the doors. You held your breath as Feng stepped into range, but the turrets didn't move: they were dependent on signals from the sensor and camera system for targeting.

Feng stepped up to the keypad and retinal scanner.

"All right, you'll need to pass the retinal first, then enter the code. It is six-six-two-seven-zero-three-six-six," Lao said, sounding very crisp over the comms.

Feng whistled to herself, as she placed her eyelid against the scanner and keyed in the numbers.

Hydraulics grinding in the cold, the door cracked open like a metal maw, and you followed Feng into the entryway. There was a blast of deliciously warm air as you entered. Just to the left was the desk for the door sentry, and he was staring at his computer screen. He didn't look up at first, obviously expecting Markovich's return.

Feng stepped aside, as Hanzo nocked his bow.

The movement caught the guard's eye, and he looked up. "Hey-" The armored cyborg began, but the words died with him, one of Hanzo's arrows lodged in his eye.

"Nice," Feng said, nodding appreciatively.

The door closed behind you.

Hanzo retrieved his arrow and with some effort and pushed the man under the desk. The Zheng drone plugged into the terminal.

"I can probably disarm the rest of the mechanical defenses, at least on this network," she said. "I can cut power as well, but I believe that will make things more difficult for you."

"Yeah," you agreed.

"But I cannot unobtrusively access the restricted area of the base," she said. "Not without physically being there."

"Neither can I," Athena said, regretfully.

"All right." It had been worth a shot.

The plan was simple, though not ideal. You had to secure the hostages, first and foremost. You would do as much as you could to make getting out easier, but speed was the key. You could not give the enemy any time to silence Jack.

You had memorized the route through the base, to the holding cells. There were only two levels, and the restricted area was on the lower level. The base formed a large loop, with several interconnecting hallways. You had head south, toward the back of the base, then curve east and go
downward. It was a simple enough layout. You just had to kill anyone who raised the alarm and hope you could outpace the defenders.

"We can move on," Zheng said. "I've granted Agent Winter Soldier greater network access."

You nodded. Feng went straight through the main corridor, LED lights casting a cool glow along the metal walls. The building was a modular pre-fabrication, with narrow corridors and too-low ceilings. You pictured Prince and his men bumping their heads regularly, it made you smile.

Two men rounded the corner, nearly walking into Feng.

She didn't hesitate. She grabbed the nearest man by the ears and twisted, his neck snapping even as you lunged forward, flexing your fingers, blades gliding out into your target's unprotected throat. You pulled them out of the crossway, and left them in the entry hall. Feng sped up, arms swinging at her sides.

You hoped Feng's kinetic shields were as good as she claimed - because if anyone started shooting in these corridors, there wasn't much cover. It would get bloody very quickly.

"What do you mean, "Markovich isn't answering your hails? Yes, send someone to check on him! He's not one of those idiots who likes being out in zero degree weather!" A woman barked from an office as you passed by, the door slightly ajar.

Feng slowed down, practically gliding across the floor. Hanzo moved just as silently. You stepped carefully on the balls of your feet, not even breathing till you'd passed by. Zheng and Athena's drones floated quietly behind you.

Feng turned to wink at you, like you were kids sneaking out bed for a midnight snack. Hanzo looked less amused, but that was nothing new.

You tapped your comm. "Winter Soldier, Black Widow: incoming hostiles-just a search party for now," you said softly to Lao and Amélie. Because there was a good chance they'd discover the men you'd killed and double back.

"Understood, Fury," Amélie chuckled. "We will handle it."

Lao muttered something in Cantonese, too faint for you to pick up over the comms. There was a pause. "Most of the vehicles are now locked down. Going to have to handle Prince's ship manually though."

"I will change vantages then," Amélie said.

You were halfway through the base when the shouting started. Someone had discovered your handiwork.

"They've found your second kill site," Lao said tersely over the comms, obviously monitoring your progress when she was should have been hacking Prince's ship.

You didn't need to say a word. Feng broke into a full sprint, you and Hanzo close behind. You drew your gun. Stealth wasn't the priority any more. They knew you were here. Now all that mattered was reaching Jack fast.

"Speed up!" Lao snarled into the comms. There's half a dozen spreading out from the bodies. You need to switch halls."
Feng turned right, then took the next left, getting you back on track. You could hear more shouting and heavy boots hitting the metal floors as soldiers raced along adjacent hallways.

"Halt or we'll shoot!" The voice came from behind.

"Hulk, cover!"

Just as smoothly as she'd been leading, Feng slowed, letting you, Hanzo, and the drones pass her.

The gunfire lit up the hall, and you glanced over your shoulder as bullets flashed against the kinetic shields, impact causing the hard light to ripple. Feng's shields couldn't hold indefinitely - sustaining that kind of power would either drain the source or the rapid shield wall regeneration would cause the unit to overheat.

The stairs were straight ahead behind a thick metal airlock and an oddly skinny man. His body gleamed with the dull sheen of brushed omnium and red LEDs. He wore armor, but the only flesh you saw was a quarter of his face and a small bit of pale neck. It looked he'd been rebuilt several times, losing more and more organic matter each round.

Hanzo loosed an arrow, and electricity sparking as it struck the cyborg's chest.

His knees buckled and you lunged forward, pushing him aside to give Athena access to the keypad. Zheng hovered beside her, the two of them working silently. The cyborg hit the ground with a clank, his body spasming from the high voltage projectile.

Very slowly, the security door began to rise, taking its sweet time. Inch by painstaking inch, it rose. The shouting grew louder and Feng was beside you, frowning as she crouched down and began to lift. But despite her unnatural strength, she couldn't get the doors to move any faster.

"Damnit-" She took a deep breath. "Time me, Auntie."

"Already?" Zheng sounded alarmed.

Feng took a deep breath. "原形畢露." And then, snarling, she slowly pushed the door up a whole foot, her skin paler than you remembered, black and green lines spiraling across her face and fingers. You realized that was her tattoo and it had spread across her entire body in a chaotic winding pattern, the lines almost glowing under her skin. Her thin fingers curled, three inches longer than you remembered, and tipped in black claws.

"When did you have time for a manicure?" You asked.

"You're hilarious, now hurry up," she snorted. Feng's voice was different, recognizably hers, but layered now with a dissonant tone. It was like an echo, though it had a gravelly almost demonic twang.

"Athena, come on," you said, sliding under the door, Hanzo right behind you.

Feng started to slip under the door then stumbled midstep. "Shit!" She glanced over her shoulder. "Let go, fuckface!" She kicked backward, but the cyborg pulled himself up, gripping her leg. Bullets pinged off the door. Their reinforcements had caught up.

Athena's drone scraped under the door.

"Hold on-" You said, ducking back down to give her cover fire.
"Go on without me!" Feng snapped, kicking the cyborg in the face. "I'll keep them busy!"

"Wait-" Hanzo shouted, reaching out, eyes wide.

Grinning at you both, Feng saluted, kicked the cyborg in the face again, and dropped the door with a deafening clang.

Chapter End Notes

Stayed home sick today. Sinuses are acting up and been having stomach issues and managed to burn myself with an icepack since I'm icing my wrists. Genius work, really. XD

Here's the discord invite.
Chapter 128

Chapter Summary

There will be blood.

Chapter Notes

It's been two years, guys.

Just repeating the last announcement:

We'll be doing some things to celebrate both on my tumblr and on the discord. On 10/26 we'll be having a group readalong, with commentary. The reading selection will be done on the discord, there is a doodle vote on there as well. There will also be giveaways. One is on the discord, details on the server, pinned in the #overwatch-comms channel. There will be a server invite at the end of the chapter.

The second giveaway is open to tumblr entries as well. We all like extra content: art, spin-off fics, essays, moodboards, playlists... Whatever your flavor of creativity is, we want to see it. Each item submitted gets you an entry into the drawing. (If you have a particularly time-consuming piece, it may count for more, but that's on a case by case basis.) Winners will be drawn randomly.

Please the #anniversary so we can track the entries on discord, or just submit them to the tumblr. Please only enter content that you have worked on. No one else's art or work is a replacement for your own. Please no memes as entries. If you're not sure if something is suitable, message me for clarification. Entries are due on 10/25, so the winners can be announced after the read-along.

Prize packs:
Have a Coffee (and a Cake Pop!) on Sensoo - $10 Starbucks GC
A Book to Eat...I Mean Read- $10 Barnes & Nobles or Amazon GC
It'll Rot Your Brain - $10 Steam Credit
Very Delayed Gratification- 500-1000 word drabble in the IAL universe following a character of your choice.

Alternate Prize for International Agents - A Humble Bundle of Your Choice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The main comm channels went out first, from a steady stream of boring traffic that he'd put on to monitor for this exact issue, to silence. After thirty seconds of dead air, Jesse knew that it
was time. They were coming. "Places, people! Winston, crank up those shields. Noncombatants, please stay in your designated safe zones." He stopped in the central area.

"Two squads just landed on the roof. They were air-dropped in. My local cameras are going dark," Athena said sharply "But I've repositioned some of the others on adjacent roofs."

Jesse grimaced. If they were making it into Swiss and more importantly Overwatch airspace, then they'd had a lot of help from high above. He didn't want another Washington DC, but in this case it seemed like the infirmary, not civilians, was the target. So the bloodshed would be contained. What a relief. Jesse snorted.

"Main power's been cut," Winston said, tersely over the local comms.

That had been expected. Fortunately, the med center had two backup generators that had been boosted by the resident genius. They weren't designed to power shield generators indefinitely, but hopefully the enemy hadn't packed too much ordnance. Not that the shield generators would do much good with hostiles on the goddamn roof. Jesse headed for the stairs.

"Someone has called our bluff and designated a five mile radius around the exterior of the medical center a full on quarantine zone. Overwatch personnel have been ordered to steer clear of the area. Those shit-sucking pigfuckers..." Mihret snarled over the private comm channel.

"We knew they'd try to isolate us more," Jesse said. "Ain't no surprise. It's fine, Mihret. We're Blackwatch. We're used to working on our own."

Mihret grumbled something unintelligible, but stopped arguing.

Jesse counted that as a win.

"Athena is activating the turrets' targeting programs, and is maintaining an encrypted connection to HQ," Winston said. "But is there anyone over there that we can actually call for help?"

Jesse had been thinking about this question for quite some time. Of the people left, everyone cleared for Shit Spiders was already in this building. But not all of Overwatch was against them.

"Agent Nadine Daniels," Jesse said. "Put this message through to her: "Daniels, it's McCree. Hate to say it, but this is Cape Matapan all over again. We're locked in, only the ones coming for us ain't just omnis. We know you've been ordered to stay away, but if there's anyone you trust to do the right thing, or even just bear witness, we need backup. You can't come into the infirmary. But the problem is external: some ranged support might be nice." Jesse paused. "And cut."

Winston cleared his throat. "Isn't Agent Daniels a...pilot? Shouldn't we be appealing to someone higher up in the command structure?"

"I would if I trusted any," Jesse said with a shrug. "Daniels is a damn good pilot. And she knows a lot of people." Not mention that you'd helped him save her life. Daniels would do her best to return the favor. At least, that's what Jesse was banking on.

"It's been delivered," Winston said.

"Turrets have taken out one squad," Athena said. "But the rest have breached the building through the roof access. I have locked down elevators."
Jesse opened the door to the stairwell, stomps and shouts echoing from above.

"Pati'm's people are in position and carrying some heavy ordnance," Genji said, materializing on his left side. "They'll maintain the perimeter for us, but let's make this quick."

Jesse threw his arms up and nearly jumped out of his skin, but managed to pass it off as stretching. He shook his head, heart pounding with the panic of Genji's sudden appearance. The bastard loved doing that to people. "What kind?"

"Don't know. Something On Sing developed. They seem pretty excited to test it out."

Jesse snorted. "Guard rotation?" Because if he and Genji were in the field, that would be the ideal time for another assassination attempt.

"Isha has a panic button for Lacroix and the Commander's rooms. Maeda Vargas, Mihret, and Vo are still on guard duty," Genji said. "Mihret is in Lacroix's room. Isha should be in the vent, but she keeps sneaking out to check on Bandit. Diallo is keeping an eye on our allies."

Jesse smiled wryly. Vo, Mihret, and Maeda Vargas weren't ideal bodyguards, but they'd have to make do.

"Come on, cowboy. There's less than ten of them left. Athena did most of the work. It will probably take you longer to climb the stairs."

And with that, Genji charged forward.

"This is what passes for elite special forces these days?" Chang scoffed. These were the people who had taken Jack? She was going to have to have words with him. Or at start designing more training exercises to keep him sharp. Shaking her head, she reloaded Lilith. "These meat shields never would have survived the war."

"You should remember that they specialize in killing unarmed civilians," Almasi said over the comm. "It's made them soft."

"And they're used to having superior tech and launching ambushes," Maracle said. "They can't hold their own in a straight fight."

"Bad tactics," Onwuachimba said, lining up another shot and exploding a gunner's skull.

"But I appreciate how they walk right through my tripwires," Fitzpatrick said cheerfully. "They have omnis and not the sense to use them right."

"It's like the Sarge said," Maracle shook his head with mock sorrow. "Standards have slipped."

Maggie and Michael sat on the grass, faces smudged with dirt, blue eyes stuck permanently in wide shock as they looked between their bodyguards and the attacking forces. Or the smoldering remains of the attacking forces.
Maggie raised her hand. "Or maybe you guys are just really good?"

The soldiers looked at each other, and shrugged.

"Maybe? But there is always someone better," Onwuachimba said. She stared wistfully into the distance. Maracle patted her on the back.

"Sarge won't let us get cocky," Fitzpatrick said, sotto voce.

"Our performance does not negate the fact they are overconfident, clumsy, and poorly prepared," Almasi said, sounding disgusted.

"It looks like there's another squad coming from the west. They're moving slow, either checking for more of Fitzpatrick's surprises, or trying to maintain stealth," Almasi said.

"Should we go mop them up?" Onwuachimba asked.

Chang sighed. She wanted to. She wanted to clean this up and be done with them, but that would be unwise. She didn't know how many people the enemy was going to throw at them. And her goal was to protect the Morrisons, not wipe out every enemy soldier.

"Let them come to us," she said. There would be more. But they could hold out.

"Incoming emergency transmission from Lammergeier," Almasi said, tone grim. "It's not realtime, but it's from the encrypted network, time stamped fifteen minutes ago. I can't raise them on the comm channel."

Chang narrowed her eyes, fully understanding the severity of the situation. Lammergeier was Jane Morrison's code name.

"We're safe, and in the shelter, but we're remotely watching a dozen men tearing apart the house. I don't think they know where the shelter is, but they're searching. I'm afraid they might start going after the neighbors."

"They're getting pretty close," Jane's husband said, voice a little shaky. "We're armed, but not as well as they are."

A child giggled in the background, obviously not worried by the circumstances or the weapons.

*Morrisons.*

Chang groaned. She'd personally overseen the construction of the bunker on Jane's property. It was sturdy, but give enough time, the enemy would find it. And even if they were stupid, they were well-armed. If they were careful, they could breach it in under an hour and take prisoners. If they weren't careful, but heavily armed, they could breach it faster and leave a bunch of corpses.

The lack of communication didn't bother Chang. Too much signal traffic would give away the bunker's location.

"All right then, change of plans," Chang said, looking toward the forest. "Looks like we need to clear things up here, and then Maracle and Onwuachimba can go take care of things at Jane's place. And you two are staying right here, behind the shields." She glared at the two youngest Morrison siblings, who had gone very pale. "If you so much as look in the direction of
the armored car, I will hobble you."

"She'll do it too. I've seen her cut tendons and break bones to protect people from their own foolishness," Onwuachimba mumbled. "You'll heal, but it is not fun."

Michael swallowed audibly. "We will stay here."

"Yup," Maggie nodded vigorous. "We can follow orders."

Chang snorted, giving Onwuachimba a wry look. The sniper just smiled back too brightly. And while Onwuachimba wasn't exactly telling the whole story, she didn't seem bothered by the memory, an event that Chang still felt a twinge of guilt over. But then the sniper didn't always seem aware of the broader scope of her own actions or intentions. She might have once, but Chang had never met that woman.

"Maggie, go help Almasi on surveillance. Michael, give Maracle a hand with the shield generators." It normally didn't take her squad much time to shift from defense to offense, but she needed to give her principals a task, otherwise they'd get into more trouble.

They would need the homestead first and then split the squad. It wasn't ideal, but Maracle could operate without a great deal of supervision, and he was good with Onwuachimba. She'd have to go over some protocols with Almasi, and have a talk with Onwuachimba, reminding her to stay on task. Battle was fun. Managing the logistics? Not so much. But it was her job, and she would do it right.

Shaking her head, Chang set Lilith down and headed back toward the house.

Hanzo stared at the airlock door for half a second, shook his head, and looked at you, jaw tight. He nocked his bow.

You glanced at the Athena drone. It hovered there, lights dimmer than you remembered.

"Athena, you OK?" You asked.

There was a moment of silence. "Initiating Backup Protocol: Lucky, due to AI constraints, I cannot follow you into this area. This is a prerecorded message. The drone has been preprogrammed to provide combat and tech support. She will respond to your orders."

You blinked. "Can you hack and maintain comms?"

"Within a limited radius. I cannot maintain a secure connection to anything outside this barrier."

"Is Feng all right?"

"Agent Hulk was defending against no less than six enemy combatants. She was maintaining."

"Lao? Amélie?"

"I cannot tell." Modified Faraday Cage, huh? You'd have to trust that Feng could hold her own for now. And that Amélie and Lao wouldn't kill each other.
"What do you know about Feng's abilities?"

"She has less than ten minutes," Hanzo said. "She cannot stay in that altered state for long."

"Zheng's drone is combat ready, though not ideal for heavy fighting," Zombie Athena said.

You nodded. "The faster we finish here, the faster we can back them up."

At that point two cyborgs rounded the corner, guns out.

You and Hanzo fired simultaneously. Your target dropped silently, while Hanzo's mark had just enough time to grip the arrow protruding from his eye, before he too fell backward.

"Zombie Athena, are the holding cells still on the east side?" You said, already moving in that direction.

"Yes, Fury. You may call me Jarvis, if you so wish. Or Ultron, if you are feeling ornery."

"Thanks...Jarvis," you said, wondering if Feng had suggested that. It was slightly more civilized than "Zombie Athena."

"You're welcome, Fury." The intonation was correct, the voice was the same, but she didn't sound right. It was strange hearing Athena's voice with no real feeling behind it.

The basement level was much smaller than the main base. You passed two hallways and two more now-dead guards before you found a reinforced security door. It looked like a holding cell.

"Jarvis, I need that open."

You and Hanzo glanced around, waiting to see if more guards were coming. But you had the sinking feeling that most of them were back in the main base, their attention on Feng.

"Seven minutes," Hanzo said, voice flat.

The door swung open, and you raised your gun, checking around the corners. It was a holding cell, and on the ground, wrists manacled together, was Lieutenant Jemison. Blood plastered her braids to the side of her head, and her normally immaculate uniform was torn. Eyes wild she stared at you, blinking rapidly, like she couldn't quite process what was happening.

"Strike?" She rasped, coughing up as she tried to speak.

"The lucky one," you said, voice shaky. Even in combat, you'd never seen Jemison look so disheveled. Even when drinking or eating pie, she always seemed so collected. You knew this was a silly thing to be surprised about, but it was easier to focus on the small things than the big ones.

"Can you walk?"


"Who else did they get?"

Jemison stared at the ground. "Commander's here. Somewhere. He's gotta be alive. But he's the only one." Her voice was soft, barely above a whisper.

"Shoal?" You asked, heart sinking.
"Prince," was all she said, not meeting your gaze.

You closed your eyes, fingers wrapped tightly around your gun. You had walked in here thinking that maybe Shoal had... It was a fool's delusion. You were old enough to know better, but it still hurt.

Inhaling sharply, you ground your teeth together, knowing you couldn't focus on that right now, and hating yourself just a little bit for it. "Let's get the cuffs off you, and then I have to get Jack. If you can't walk, sit tight. We'll be back for you."

Jemison nodded, flinching at the motion. "Wise."

"Fury-"

You glanced over your shoulder in time to see Hanzo go flying backward.

You shouldered your carbine, just as Prince filled the doorway. From his beady eyes, to his wide scarred features, you would recognize him anywhere. You knew the slight limping lope of his walk, the noticeable hunch of his shoulders, the odd way he angled his neck when he studied something of interest. You'd made it your business to remember him well.

Jemison snarled at the sight of him.

"Well, you're not what I expected, especially not for a rescue mission," Prince said, stroking his chin. "I guess, they're really desperate then. There's you, that tattooed bitch that Voss is taking apart, and your pretty boy archer. What is this, Attack of the Bitch Squad?" He chuckled at his own joke.

You gritted your teeth. "Catchy."

"Did they finally put a squad of menstruating women together as a offensive team?" He grinned at you smugly. "If I offer you chocolate and a bubble bath, will you calm down?"

You fired, but your bullets only pinged against his ballistic shields.

A flurry of arrows struck Prince from the side, light erupting from each hit, but the kinetic barrier held.

"Hawkeye," you called, eyes never leaving Prince. "Anyone else out there?"

"Not any more."

"Then save your arrows and go help Hulk."

Prince snorted.

"Fury-" Hanzo began to protest, and that surprised you, just a little.

"That's an order," you said, holstering your gun.

Prince looked down the hall in the direction of Hanzo. "Is that who I think it is? Yeah, I recognize that pretty face now. The Yakuza has quite the bounty on that one - I could buy a tropical island for what they're offering. Thanks for bringing him straight to me."

You smiled tightly. Hanzo could take care of himself, but Prince's tone got under your skin. That psycho fuck wasn't going to lay a hand on any more of your friends. "Don't get ahead of
"Brave, but it won't save pretty Isabella and you don't have a chance in hell. This won't be like last time, Lucky Duck," he laughed darkly. "And I owe you for suffering and damages."

"You certainly do," you said, smiling back, a rictus grin that had nothing to do with good humor.

"This is personal for you," he cocked his head to the side and began to circle the perimeter of the cell. You moved in tandem with him, keeping him across from you. "Reyes says you were in DC. Is that what's got your panties in bunch?"

"Didn't help," you said, watching his arms and his eyes. "But no. It's a lot more personal than that."

"I do a lot of fast-paced work. Don't get to make a lot of introductions and names aren't my thing. So, I'm afraid I don't remember you from anywhere else," he said, with a shrug. "You'll just have to tell me."

"Black Base Delta."

He stopped, closing his eyes briefly, his smile widening. "Reeeeally?" He dragged the word out with real enthusiasm. "Oh, you must be Bái Shě's friend. I get it now. That little bitch lied to me." He laughed. "I guess this is what I get for not being thorough, though to be honest, it was such an easy job, I guess I got careless. My bad." His grin sharpened, malice gleaming in those beady eyes.

Your expression tightened, teeth threatening to break your own jaw.

His eyes lit up, nostrils flaring. He knew he'd scored a hit.

"You seem to make a habit of carelessness. Must be the permanent and progressing brain damage," you said. "How much time do you think you have left, Prince? One year before the senility sets in? Maybe two if you're real careful and take your fish oil."

He sneered at you. "I'm going to make this hurt, Lucky Duck." And he charged you, those massive metal arms swinging.

You didn't have enough time to deliver a good hit, so you ducked under his arms and slid to the right, narrowly missing a metal fist to the skull. His blow glanced off your side, and it was like being hit with a crowbar. You flinched as you spun around, your back to the door. He rushed you again, and you thrust the wakizashi into the flesh of his shoulder. Laughing, he grabbed you by the throat, not caring that he was impaling himself deeper on the blade. It seemed to have missed anything vital and that was enough for him. He held you just tight enough to keep you in place.

You jabbed your left hand into his face, blade and needle emerging simultaneously.

Prince batted your hand of the way, laughing as he squeezed a little harder, and your vision flickered. "You can't fool me with that again," he said smugly. "Once was bad enough. I learn from my mistakes. Guess you won't get the chance." He shook his head. "You might have lasted longer if you hadn't sent the pretty boy away. Now, do I squeeze the life out of you? Or do I stick you with your cutesy little knife? Or do I just shoot you in the head so you stop wasting my time? Decisions...decisions..." He said with mock worry.

You weren't getting enough air, and panic began to well in your chest as he ran his thumb...
along your throat, pressing down. Fear threatened to swallow you whole, the crack of Shin's vertebræ echoing in your skull. You thrashed, and Prince squeezed tighter.

Darkness briefly flashed across your vision, the world narrowing to a pinpoint: if you panicked, then you would die, and so would your friends. You knew that to be a fundamental truth, it was cold, but grounding. But you weren't getting any air now. Complex thoughts evaporated and your hindbrain kicked into gear. Feelings didn't matter, survival did. The world continued to shrink till there only the man in front of you, his metal hand slowly tightening around your throat.

There was no conscious thought. You already knew the solution in your bones. Gently, you released your wakizashi, your eyes locked on Prince's. His smug triumphant look barely registered. It didn't matter that he thought you were giving up. You were already reaching for your tanto. You had done this before. It was instinct by now.

And then Prince's eyes widened, and he loosened his grip on you.

Jemison howled, her words too guttural to make out, but you understood exactly what she meant.

You blinked rapidly, eyes watering as air rushing back into your lungs. And right in front of you were Jemison's fists, on either side of Prince's head, the short chain of her manacles drawn tight along his throat.

Prince bellowed, trying to buck her off. Both metal hands clawed at the chain, and he panted loudly. Jemison wouldn't be able to hold him for long. That was OK, she wouldn't need to. You would finish this.

Tanto in hand, you lunged forward, blade meeting some stiff resistance as it passed through the flex panels in his body armor, then a thick wall of muscle. You pushed the tanto in to the hilt, and cut upward, in an upside "U," tracing the outline of his ribcage from one side to the other. You twisted the blade as you pulled it out, watching as part of the armor fell away with his skin, an open flap, a tattered membrane. And then his insides began to slither out, guts and fluids hitting the floor in a heavy patter of wet plops.

Jemison staggered backward as Prince dropped to his knees. Eyes so wide- almost all sclera - he tried to scoop his parts up and shove them back into his body, but they kept slipping through his fingers. Iridescent organs and loops of intestines streamed out, gleaming under the fluorescent lights.

You wiped your tanto on your pants and sheathed it, before yanking your wakizashi out of Prince. He didn't seem to notice. You remembered then that his pain receptors didn't work properly.

"No, no, no, no, no- Shit!" Prince snarled, slipping in his own offal and fluids.

"I realize that you don't feel pain like most people," you said. "So this will have to do."

"Looks like he's falling apart," Jemison rasped, laughing darkly. She coughed, spitting blood, shoulders shaking with each spasm. But she smiled fiercely at you, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Prince frantically tried to push everything back inside, hand hold himself together, but his arms were shaking now, and he couldn't stand.

"Looks like you know how to field dress a kill. Doesn't look like you punctured anything
vital, Strike. It could take him hours to die," Jemison said, not sounding bothered by that prospect at all.

"You made a noncommittal noise, taking his gun and combat knife off his belt. You didn't see an ID badge - hopefully Jarvis would be able to hack Jack's cell too."

"I want to watch," she said, dropping back down into a crouch, obviously still weak. "Go save Morrison. I'll make sure things get...finished."

Nodding, you handed her his sidearm. "I'll be back."

"No need to rush," Jemison said, eyes flat and cold as she stared at Prince. "I have plenty here to keep me entertained."

"Damnit all, Hulk is in trouble," Agent Lao said over the comms. "And I've lost direct contact with Fury and Hawkeye."

"We knew that was a possibility once they reached the lower level," Amélie said, lining up a shot. She'd seen five heavily armed cyborgs emerge from the base. "Let me finish cleaning up this mess, and then we'll go help Hulk."

Amélie smiled as she watched her target's head erupt like an overripe melon. They were shouting now, looking for a sniper, and she waited patiently for another one to cross her range.

They were lined up like little tin ducks in a festival booth. Gérard had taken her to one such street fair in Prague and had won her a little glass ballerina. She had turned around, beat his score, and won him a wooden marionette. The craftsmanship was exquisite, the gifts terribly sentimental, and both souvenirs were in their bedroom in Zurich.

Amélie gritted her teeth, remembering that her husband was also back in Zurich, maimed and sedated. Ziv would look after him, and Amélie would work out this tension that in danger of fossilizing inside her shoulders. Staying in Zurich when everyone else left for Hanoi had been excruciating. Gérard had a valid tactical reason for leaving her behind. Seeing her would have sent Nguyen into a frenzy. And while that could have worked in their favor, Gérard argued otherwise, and he was probably right.

But that gave her no peace. She spent the entire duration of Operation Tarasque in poor humor and decimating her sparring partners, wishing that she could have gone too but far too proud to complain about it. She was not used to being a liability. Of course, many people underestimated a mere ballerina, but that didn't bother her. Amélie Lacroix did not doubt her worth. But in this situation, she had stayed home while her husband and many of her friends marched into peril. And some, like Feodor Tataryn, did not return.

But you had. You had come home. You had brought Gérard back to her once again. You had protected the one she loved. And she felt absurdly awful because the two men you loved were in such grave danger. It wasn't right. So this time, she would not stay behind. Not when you needed her.

Oh, there went another one, looking about thirty degrees west of her, facing the wrong way. Smirking, Amélie fired: one shot, one kill. The others had gone quiet, probably hiding behind cover, trying to ascertain where she was shooting from. She reloaded then, scanning the landscape for movement.
Yes, Gérard might be in danger at home, but he had Ziv, McCree, and Genji at his side. These were all people that were used to working together and with you. But out here on Operation Checquy, where the stakes were as high as they'd ever been, you needed someone you could trust at your back, to make up for the fact McCree, Genji, and Ziv were not here to help you.

Amélie genuinely liked Feng. She considered Hanzo Shimada unlikely to betray you. But Agent Lao was another problem: you trusted her too much and not enough, a natural consequence of the fracture in your relationship. This team could be very effective; it had a lot of potential. Everyone on it was professional and skilled. But Amélie was your friend and had no split loyalties. And while you were used to running operations, this group had questionable cohesion. Amélie thought you could have been a little firmer with them. It wouldn't have hurt to give a speech early on. But she understood that you had complicated personal relationships with everyone here and being uncharacteristically forceful with one's friends could be awkward. It would have been a gamble.

The important thing was that even if your leadership style was rough, your team was following your orders, and you were making sound decisions. Later, after this was all over, the two of you could drink cocktails and speak candidly about how the mission played out. She hadn't missed those suspicious looks you'd been giving her and Agent Lao. She knew you had questions, and perhaps she had overstepped, just a little. But it was best to address potential problems early on, and Agent Lao needed to know that whatever her feelings about you, this mission was more important. And on a related note, you were having a rough week, and you were one of Amélie's dearest friends. So if Agent Lao felt the need to upset you, that in turn would upset Amélie, and unlike you, Amélie had no intention of holding back.

Ah, there was another one, peeking out from behind a ship. She let him. He glanced in her direction, and then to the side, scanning the distance. Her camouflage was good, she was a lot closer than they suspected. She let him poke his head out a few more times, gaining confidence in his safety, before she finally ended him.

If Gérard were awake, he would have gently poked fun at her indefatigable desire to do something useful. He would tease that she was spending too much time with you, that you were a bad influence, teaching her to be so impatient. After all, she should be waiting for them to regroup. Or she could at least locate them all again before giving them more hints to her position. She should not have continued picking them off and causing them to scatter. She was still missing two. Merde. Though, Amélie had to admit, that was her own competitive nature spurring her on. You were actually a lot more cautious when it came to sniping, and perhaps other things. But tactics aside, Gérard would not be disappointed that she came to help you and Jack. That was not the kind of man she married.

The snow crunched lightly below her. Amélie rolled instinctively, tumbling off the low ledge. Fire bit into her leg as a gunshot echoed. She landed on her side, the snow cushioning her fall. She hissed angrily as a man in a reflective visor leveled his combat rifle in her face.

"Drop it," he snarled.

Amélie slowly put down her sniper rifle. She made a little soft whimpering sound, reminiscent of the bedroom. Turn his mind from slaughter. Once he was distracted, she would make her move. Blood oozed steadily from her wound, steaming in the icy air.

The man hesitated. "Another woman," he said into his comm unit. "It really is the Bitch Squad," he spat. "She got Martin, Oliveira, and Tarvydas. Ionescu has gone radio silent. You want her for questioning?" He nodded at whatever the other person was saying. "All right."
And then he crumpled, his skull caving under Agent Lao's metal fist. The hacker squeaked as he fell leaking brains and blood all over the snow. She stared incredulously at her gory prosthetic before glancing over at Amélie, eyes wild. "Are you OK?"

Amélie eyed her bleeding leg. "I was careless," she said, shaking her head. "There is still one-"

"I got him," Lao said, words spilling out too fast. "Sorry it took me so long. I had to rewire the door panel to get into Prince's transport." She knelt over Amélie, pulling a medpack from her gear and slapping it over the wound. Heat rushed through her right leg, and the bleeding gradually slowed.

"Thank you for the assistance," Amélie said, because while she was proud, she was also civilized. "I am sorry that I needed it."

"It's what teammates do," Lao said. "I was a soldier before I was Bái Shé. I haven't forgotten everything." There was a defensive note in her voice.

"I can see that," Amélie said, smiling wryly. "But your competence never worried me."

"It should have," Lao said sharply. "I haven't been in the field for months."

"Some things you cannot forget," Amélie said, she met Lao's stare and held it. "I was more concerned about how you would affect the team dynamic." From your stories, she knew that your old squad coddled Lao, and Amélie had made it very clear that it wouldn't be like that on this mission. That had been...unnecessary.

"I know I have history with some of the other agents," Lao said, tone a little sulky. "I get it. I won't let it stop me from doing my job."

"I know." It was time to swallow grass snakes, as the saying went. "And I am prone to grand impulsive acts and interfering without invitation. While I have had good results, perhaps the penchant for such behavior is a sign of narcissism."

Lao blinked. "No, I appreciate the breathing advice. It's...been awhile."

"We both know that's not what I'm talking about," Amélie said with a laugh. "It's all right, I know that I can be...overwhelming. Even when I am civil."

Lao squirmed. "The stuff with Shi- Hawkeye wasn't personal." She exhaled. "I get it. I knew someone would say something, and while I'm not thrilled about it, you weren't cruel. And I'm glad you were looking out for Agent Reckless Pants. She deserves good friends." Lao stared at the ground, clearly uncomfortable talking about her complicated relationship with you.

Amélie chuckled. "Yes, well, I suppose I cannot cast aspersions about her recklessness right now. I don't really have a leg to stand on." She shook her head with mock sorrow, glancing down at her wound.

Lao blinked. "Did you just-"

"Yes, and no one will ever believe you," Amélie laughed, satisfied by the understanding between them.

Lao snorted and offered Amélie her metal hand. Amélie accepted and stood. She gingerly flexed her right knee. She couldn't put any weight on the leg just yet, but the bleeding had already stopped.
"Hey, guys..." Feng's voice came faintly over the comms. "I hate to ask, but I could use some help. Please brings snacks-"

"Feng!" Zheng's voice echoed over the comms, real alarm shocking Amélie out of her reverie.

Rapid gunfire cut through the voices. Metal crashed - a hard impact- and then the connection fizzled out.

Things were not progressing as quickly or as smoothly as Chang would have liked. The assault main force was a still-smoldering heap in the wreckage of the front yard. But there were still stragglers in the eastern fields, trying to regroup with the better situated team in the west - the one that had taken its time moving through the forest.

They weren't quite flanked - their situation was stable- but she needed to clear the way so Maracle and Onwuachimba could exit safely and rescue Jane's family. There were only about a dozen left, most sticking to the safety of the forest. She could easily take care of the ones on the eastern side. Almasi's drones showed three of them hiding behind the barn. They were like gnats, buzzing just beside her ear, a slow burn of aggravation and festering irritation. It was time to do something about that.

"Taking the field," she said.

"Copy that. I need you to watch for reinforcements on this screen, and you monitor this one," Almasi said, clearly speaking to someone else.

"Got it!" Maggie shouted.

"Understood," Michael said.

Chang smiled wryly. Keeping the younger Morrisons out of trouble was another task she had to juggle. Thankfully, Almasi stepped in. Sure, he could watch those screens, and another three while neatly suturing a wound, but the kids didn't need to know that.

Rayner holstered her pistol, and grabbed her combat shotgun from the rack. She did her best work up close.

"They don't have eyes on us yet, too busy arguing over what they should do," Almasi said to her. "You're clear."

Nodding at Maracle, she walked between barrier plates, slowing slightly as she passed through the protective field, and then she was moving through the grass, feet barely touching the ground.

It took her seconds to reach the far side of the barn, shotgun raised.

The men whirled, shouting in surprise. One of them even got a shot off, but Chang wasn't holding still.

One trigger pull, and the closest one didn't have a face any more. Second trigger pull, and another one went down. Chang closed the distance, blood and viscera splattering her boots. The third man scrambled backward, trying to draw his sidearm. She spun around, slamming the stock
of her gun into his helmet, shattering the visor, and he crumpled.

Best to get one for questioning now, because sometimes Fitzpatrick and Onwuachimba got a little too enthusiastic.

"That's all of them, Sarge," Almasi said, sounding pleased as she looked around. There was some cosmetic damage to the barn, but she could hear the goats bleating unhappily within. That was good. John would be upset if something happened to his animals. Gun over one arm, Chang bent over and picked up the unconscious man.

"Holy shit! I didn't even see her move- Michael, did you see that? Did you-" Maggie's "whisper" echoed in the background. "Michael, what are you looking at- Fitzy!" Maggie's voice went high and panicked.

Chang stiffened instantly, recognizing the fear, worsened by Almasi trailing off into Arabic, muttering something about shoes and sisters. Chang wasn't entirely sure, she didn't have an ear for languages, but she recognized the rare vulgarity for what it was.

She dropped her captive, taking a moment to slap on the magnetic cuffs she'd brought along, and then left him facedown in the grass.

She hadn't even reached the house, but she could see what was going on all too clearly. Onwuachimba was already scaling the roof, rifle slung over her shoulder. Maracle had switched out his railgun for a more precise weapon. And Fitzpatrick was laying in the grass, clutching his leg, two men with guns standing over him.

"Get away from him!" Maggie snarled, breaking past Maracle.

"Mags, no! Stay bac-" One of the men kicked Fitzpatrick in the head, the other laughing as he beckoned her over, probably promising to spare the demolitionist if she surrendered. There were more of them, creeping out of the woods.

Once they had Maggie, Fitzpatrick was dead.

"We won't hurt you or him, if you cooperat-

Chang broke into a full run, her focus narrowing to her targets. Two up close, too many in the background. She knew Onwuachimba, Almasi, and Maracle would provide cover fire. Hopefully, Michael had the sense to stay out of the way, but Chang wasn't counting on it.

Maggie ran at the men, holding something that wasn't a gun.

Chang's brain momentarily froze as Maggie delivered a swift kick to the nearest man's groin, her steel-toed boots connecting with tissue, not armoring. The man shrieked, and crumpled, even as the other soldier reached for the teenager.

"I've got a fucking grenade and I'll blow us all up!" She snapped.

...Chang had been so very wrong. That one was just as bad as her idiot older brother. Michael was the sensible one, which probably explained why he was so grumpy for most of the time she'd known him. Goddamnit.

"Maggie-!" Michael shouted, but Maracle had him by the arm. Not her problem right now.
"You can't help your sister if they get you too, get a gun a cover the Sarge-" Almasi snapped.

Chang breezed by them.

Maggie stepped backward, even as the remaining man pointed his gun at Fitzpatrick.

The man on the ground was sitting up. And several more were coming out of the woods.

Chang blindsided him, rushing in at an angle, slightly out of his periphery. She struck hard, knocking him off his feet. He flew sideways, and Chang raised her shotgun, blowing his chest apart before he touched the ground. She whirled, finishing the other one.

"Move!" She snarled, as Maggie stared dumbly at her, like she'd appeared out of thin air. But then she recovered, moving to Fitzpatrick's side.

"Fitzy-"

"Please don't call me that," Fitzpatrick groaned, as Maggie helped him up, one arm over her shoulder.

"Shut up and move, Fitzy," Chang growled, real anger thrumming in each word.

The demolitionist cringed. "We're both dead, Mags," Fitzpatrick mumbled, hobbling alongside Maggie. "Sarge is going to save us and then murder us herself-"

"And you'll deserve it!" Almasi snapped, suddenly beside them. "More cover fire!"

Shots rang out behind them, the soldiers and omnis that had been lying in wait, were now charging them. And there were almost twice as many as there'd been ten minutes ago.

A grenade soared past Chang's ear and at the oncoming men. Chang took a step backward, glad that Maggie at least had the sense to use the weapon. And if they were really lucky, she'd activated it first.

There was a slight pause, everyone on the field holding their breath, before the armament landed in the dirt, and sat there for thirty seconds, doing absolutely nothing.

Groaning, Chang began shooting, ignoring the jeers of the men that stepped over it and -

There was an eruption of meat and dirt, blowing a two meter wide crater in the grass.

Fitzpatrick laughed, through his pain, and still too close to the fighting. "I repackaged a proximity mine. It was Maggie's idea," he mumbled, sounding very proud.

Almasi was now growling things about...blindness? Chang's Arabic was barely functional and she shook her head. Maggie was just like her stupid kidnapped brother. The Morrison luck went hand in hand with the Morrison stupidity. They wouldn't have survived to procreate otherwise.

And then the enemy was on them. Chang didn't have time to reload. She jammed her shotgun into her belt, drew her pistol and continued shooting. When she looked back, that other Morrison Idiot Boy Child was outside the shield barrier, covering his sister while she dragged Fitzpatrick toward the farmhouse.

*Goddamn Morrisons.* They'd be the death of her.
Almasi held one side with his rifle, and she held the other, keeping the soldiers at bay while they backed up, steps almost synchronized.

The retreat would have remained orderly, until the goddamned OR-14 took the field, dual cannons firing too fast for a normal human to track.

"Fall back!" She shouted to Almasi.

The man broke into a full run, knowing better than to question her orders. She glanced over her shoulder. Michael had dropped his gun and was trying to help Maggie pull Fitzpatrick to his feet. They were covered in dirt and debris - the goddamn omnic had targeted the kids.

Chang instinctively moved into the trajectory, standing between them and the enemy.

Her pistol wouldn't do shit against the omnic, and Lilith was behind the barrier. Holstering the pistol, she reloaded the shotgun, noting that the omnic was moving slowly. Unfortunately, the rest of the attack force was still coming. The nearest four men were circling around, trying to flank them.

Chang whirled, already sweating in her armor. She was going too hard too quickly. But now wasn't the time for caution. She had a job to do. She spun to the side, hitting the first man's blind spot, and firing. She didn't wait for him to fall, she just moved to the next target. She let them surround her, attracting their attention because she was the biggest threat. She punched a man while shooting at another. She kept them going in circles, herself the hub at the center of motion. They couldn't return fire without risking hitting one of their own.

Killing them off one by one would negate that strategy. She wore them down, dodging between them. It was a juggling act, to keep them all off balance, but once they started to wobble, she could finish them off in quick succession. She clubbed one man over the head, spinning with her gun to shoot the second man in the throat. She turned forty five degrees and shot the third one, then she spun back around and snapped the first man's neck. The last one had turned to go after the kids. Chang tore after him. Panting, she gritted her teeth as she kicked the him to his knees, and fired into the back of his skull.

But in that time, more had come, and they were giving her wide berth. Instead, they were focusing on the principals. Michael was on the ground now, bleeding from his thigh. Maggie was vainly trying to pull both him and Fitzpatrick to safety. But more soldiers already on them.

"Get rid of that OR-14!" She shouted into the comms, already rushing toward her downed principal.

"-only need one of you alive, and honestly, you'll just slow us down," the man said, pointing his gun at Michael's face. Another had his gun trained on Maggie, and Fitzpatrick seemed to be bleeding from both knees now, goddamnit-

The boy glared at him, pale and sullen, and looking more like Jack than she'd ever realized. It was a slap in the face.

There was no hesitation.

Chang charged the men. The one threatening Michael never saw what hit him. The one on Maggie had time to raise his gun. Chang wasn't sure whom his target was, and it didn't matter. She stepped in front him, even as the gun went off, the impact snapping her head back as the bullet tore into her face, shattering tooth and bone.
Pain radiated in her skull, and then Sergeant Rayner Chang fell in the dirt, Fitzpatrick and the kids screaming her name.

_Goddamn Morrisons_, she thought, the world melting into a darkening shade of red. _They never knew when to run away._

Chapter End Notes

There have been some super cool submissions on the discord. [Come see!](#)

Being an adult is just wading through a bullet hell of expectations, obligations, and responsibilities. I keep humming the Mario Star theme to myself, like I can power through it. XD There's some family shit right now, so I'm especially frustrated and behind on writing. Work is...stressful right now. I'm trying for better work-life balance, but it's not happening. I'm not running or writing as much as I should be. Though we visited my nephew last weekend and after biting him back (he bit me like three times, OK?), we settled down played monsters, read books, and avoided the adult political discussions. Reading the Dinosaur Who Pooped a Planet beats sitting through "school shooter" conversations any day.
They'd made short work of the men in the stairwell, network operatives who'd assumed they were just going to gun down support personnel and unconscious agents. Genji was still piling the bodies against the rooftop access door as a makeshift barricade. If Angela saw the corpse wall, she might complain about how unsanitary it was, but Jesse was going to give all the credit to Genji. Smirking, he headed back downstairs, knowing better than to assume the attack was over. He'd just made it to the waiting room when the perimeter alarms went off.

"Incoming!" Athena shouted, and Jesse swore as something struck the kinetic barriers and exploded, the light show almost painfully bright through the windows. Without hesitation, Jesse rushed to the northeastern entrance to assess the damage. For a second, he thought of you. Only idiots and combat agents ran toward the explosions. He could practically hear you muttering that in his ear. Because if you were here, you'd be running right beside him.

The shields hummed loudly as another mortar whistled through the air and fell short. It hit the ground a few yards away, spraying dirt, concrete, and rocks at the building.

Smoke and debris obscured much of the view.

"Damage is cosmetic, except for one camera on the southern corner," Athena said.

"Thanks, darling," Jesse said. The medical center was on the eastern side of the Overwatch complex, closest to the training fields and the lake. It was likely that more attackers would be coming from the cover of the east side, especially since someone up top had muddied the waters just enough to block backup.

"We can't take too many hits like that," Winston sounded grim over the comms.

"All right, Diallo, take over shield generator maintenance. Winston, I'm going to need you on the frontlines."

"On my way," Diallo said.

"Understood," Winston said, and Jesse could hear the clank of Winston donning his custom armor.

"They're coming from the east, probably from the woods," Jesse said. He'd actually been expecting that attack first. "We've got White Rabbit on the southeastern side. We'll need to cover
the northeastern quadrant." It was unlikely, but not impossible that someone would try to break through the Overwatch campus on the western side. But that would be in plain sight. Still, if they were brazen enough to attack HQ, maybe they wouldn't care. Athena's cameras were keeping watch on the western front.

"This would be the perfect time to go after their true targets," Genji said, over his shoulder.

Jesse did not jump this time, having fully expected an ambush or another of Genji's surprise appearances. His heart rate did briefly skyrocket. "Yeah, probably."

"I've issued the warning. Our guards are on higher alert, but holding their positions," Genji continued.

"Guess we gotta hope that their combined meanness is enough to handle any threat," Jesse said wryly.

"Isha and Bandit are there. Our agents are not completely unsupervised," Genji said with a straight face.

Jesse chuckled. Genji was such a shit. It was almost comforting to see that after everything they'd been through, that particular trait was a constant. The two of them checked their gear, Jesse reloading his revolver and Genji adjusting his armor while they walked toward the doors. White Rabbit was still holding the building perimeter.

"Bayan is setting up triage stations," Angela said, as she caught up, on his other side. He did a double take. Angela was out of her scrubs and in medic fatigues, her nanotech staff on her back, her gun in its holster. She had just completed a complex operation on the commander a few hours ago, and now here she was, prepping to march into battle with them. Sure, there were bags under her eyes, and several strands of hair had frizzed free of her ponytail, but she stood up straight, her smile tight. She was running on coffee, protective instinct, and not a little spite.

"You'll want to stay close to Winston," Jesse said, because while Winston was strong and brilliant, he wasn't as used to these kinds of field operations. "He'll need all the support you can give." And because Winston's heavy shielding and cautious nature meant he would prioritize the doctor's safety.

Genji nodded in agreement.

"Verstanden," she said. "But you two need to stay close as well: I'll be watching over you."

"Appreciate it," Jesse said, reaching up to tip his hat at her, only to remember that it was gone. He scratched his head instead.

"But don't worry, I have no problem going on the offense as well. They want to assault my medical center?" Angela's voice went higher, her teeth gritted. "They want to harm my patients?" She glared out at the training fields. "And they think I will simply stand by and watch?"

"They think we'll be easy prey," Genji chuckled, eyes bright.

Angela fumed silently, and Jesse didn't miss how often Genji kept looking at her, genuinely amused by her fury.

"If they think this is going to be easy, then they have another thing coming," Jesse said, nodding at Winston who joined them. There was a visceral awe in his gut as Winton walked with...
them, a reminder that humans weren't nearly as big and bad as they like to pretend. The gorilla wore full heavy armor, carrying a large cannon under his arm.

"The perimeter alarms in the eastern training fields have gone offline. I fear the implications are not good." Winston shook his head, that fretful expression belonging more on a college professor than a soldier.

"I think we're long past implications," Jesse said, shaking his head and tapping his comm unit. "Patime, we're probably going to have company real soon. Doubt they'll just sit there all day and lob projectiles at us."

"They could," Genji said, helpfully.

"Athena and I...may have upgraded the backup generators," Winston said, sounding cagey. "If they choose to do to keep their distance, we might actually be able to take a sandwich break."

"Company?" Patime chirped. "They are finally coming closer? Good," Patime said cheerfully. "Yes, there they are! You know, they are wearing blue uniforms, like they belong here. You'll have to let us know if you want any of them left alive."

"What?" Jesse blinked as an Athena drone brought up a split screen camera feed, showing several dozen armored Talon shocktroops wearing blue uniforms over their gear, those red-eyed helmets glowing. From a distance, it would look like Overwatch was just conducting a training exercise.

"Friends of yours?" Patime asked.

"No," Jesse said, narrowing his eyes.

"OK!" And with that, something bright blasted out of a window on the southeastern side, shaking the building.

Jesse blinked as Athena's screen showed a plasma shell landing in the midst of an enemy squad. It erupted outward, the bright ionized gas briefly holding a doughnut shape, before bolts of energy jumped from mercenary to mercenary, leaving charred and smoking bodies trapped in the cage of their armor.

"Plasma splash bombs and cluster munitions are illegal," Winston said, flinching. "And is it attached to magnetic induction amplifier with a radial governor as a makeshift stellarator? That is...devious."

"Yes!" Mika shouted over the comms. "Yes! Someone else gets it!"

Patime chuckled. "It might be very devious, if we knew what all that science meant or where such a weapon came from. We are just simple soldiers, also engaging in a training exercise," she said innocently, and Jesse could just picture her nodding sagely, a twinkle in her eye.

"Ooooh. Yes, simple. That's us, simple," Mika said slowly. "Hey, does anyone else smell bacon?"

Jesse snorted, giving their resident genius an "explain that in plain English please," look.

Winston cleared his throat. "The bomb generates a sustained electric current that travels indiscriminately from person to person before grounding. In this case, the metal-encased human or
omnic is the ideal conductor. The bomb current fluctuates, but there's a built-in step-up transformer that increases the power. It should be very effective against large groups, but is an unpredictable weapon."

Jesse glanced at Winston's Tesla cannon. Maybe after everything was done, they could explain away the electrocutions with that. No need to advertise their use of "illegal" munitions. Ana probably wouldn't appreciate that kind of scrutiny.

"...It's different!" Winston said indignantly, meeting Jesse's gaze. "Those splash bombs are far more dangerous!"

"More dangerous than a two hundred kilogram super genius with a Tesla cannon?" Mika retorted, on the comm channel.

"I am not two hundred kilograms!" Winston thundered.

Jesse flinched, as did everyone in a five meter radius.

Winston looked around sheepishly. "I umm...Stress stimulates the appetite, and I'm a little sensitive about that right now. My apologies."

"Sorry, I uh...was calculating the weight of your armor in there too," Mika offered.

"Ah," Winston nodded. "Yes, that is perfectly reasonable. I apologize for my overreaction."

"You're just getting warmed up for the bad guys," Jesse said, patting his arm and relieved that Winston had some killer instinct hidden underneath the intellectual patter and fuzzy exterior.

"I...suppose so."

"Oh, here they come again! And my just hand slipped again," Patime said, as another plasma bomb shot onto the field. "Anyone with delicate tech may want to avoid this side of the building," she added helpfully. "Bolts have the two meter contagion field."

More soldiers emerged from the woods, wearing Overwatch blue. There were multiple squads, and how did they manage to get the clearances to just land in Zurich? Jesse saw flashes of DC all over again, and he didn't like it one bit.

Winston bristled, grinding his teeth as he glowered at them. "They disgrace the uniform."

Jesse gave him a sidelong glance. Winston wasn't actually in uniform, but honestly, it suddenly seemed wiser not to antagonize the not-two-hundred-kilogram gorilla.

"They're throwing bombs at my medical center," Angela said, drawing her handfun. "Do you know how many sleepless nights I spent writing grant proposals and funding requests? Do you have any idea how much some of this equipment costs? And let's not even start on the danger posed to my patients. I realize I fix people up, just so they can go back out, do something stupid, undo all my hard work, and start the cycle all over again. But I don't want anyone to expedite the process." There was a dreamy, almost dissociative quality to her voice. "Ich werde sie töten müssen."

"You ready, Handsome Genji?" Jesse murmured out of the corner of his mouth.

Genji snorted. "Sure thing, Stripper Cowboy."
Jesse coughed. "What?"

"Oh, I thought we were using our White Rabbit nicknames," Genji said, and charged on to the field.

Sputtering, Jesse followed. "I'm not-"

"You are," Genji said cheerfully, not looking back.

You left Jemison there with Prince's gun, and didn't think too hard about the ethics of what you'd done. You had more important things to focus on. There was an empty holding cell, and an interrogation chamber. It was easier to think of that drone as "Jarvis." It made no conversation with you. Athena would have tried to comfort you, would have asked you questions about Jemison and maybe Shoal. Jarvis just opened doors and gave you reports. It was oddly hollow, but maybe it was best that Athena wasn't here to ask you questions.

There wasn't much in the restricted area, besides holding cells, a server room, and a some extra living quarters - possibly barracks, but most likely, Petras' private quarters. Jarvis opened the next reinforced door.

The room was too brightly lit and stunk of bleach and blood. Gun raised, you stepped inside, taking in the drains, mirrored glass, and the tools of the trade that you knew a little too well. There was a lot of suffering and bad history in a place like this. Just breathing the air filled your bones with lead. In the center of it was an adjustable metal table, with customized restraints and blood grooves. And on that table, face bloody and hands cuffed above his head, was Jack.

You froze as he lifted his head, those feral blue eyes meeting yours, his face contorted in rage. It was an alien expression, almost more disconcerting than finding him here in this torture chamber.

But still, you drank in the sight of him. His coat and boots were gone. He didn't have a shirt either, and his chest was covered in cuts and bruises. He had a rapidly fading black eye, and he was bleeding from numerous locations, mostly his nose, mouth, and wrists. He was hurt, but he was alive.

Somewhere, underneath all the adrenaline and panic, you let yourself breathe, some of the tension leeching out of your spine. "You know, if you wanted some kinky bondage roleplay, you probably could have just asked us instead of turning it into a scavenger hunt," your mouth said, obviously not attached to your brain. Hysteria edged your laugh. With your relief, feelings bubbled up, and that was never a dignified experience.

Jack blinked rapidly, rage shifting to confusion, then disbelief. "Lucky?" He rasped, sounding like he had lost his voice. "Sweetheart, how did you-"

"We have to hurry," you said rushing to Jack's side, your brain finally kicking back into action and reconnecting to your mouth. "Jarvis, I need to you release restraints, keep me apprised on hostile combatants, and mine whatever data you can. Priorities are in that order."

The drone dutifully floated over to a console. There was a click, and Jack slowly sat up, rubbing his bloody wrists. His eyes stayed on you, the warmth in his expression clearer than any words. He wasn't just grateful for the rescue. He was genuinely happy to see you.
You forgot to breathe again: you always did when he looked at you like that.

You glanced at his wrists, heart rattling against your ribcage. "Guess you're probably not going to want us tie you up any more, huh?" After a rescue like this, Gabriel would have had something cool and edgy prepared, his delivery perfectly timed. Jack would have said something heroic, inspiring, and maybe a little sentimental. Your choice in words was terribly inappropriate, but was more normal than you saying something inappropriate?

Jack's laugh was part relief, part disbelief. "Smartass."

"I know." You embraced him then, shaking as he leaned against you, forehead on your shoulder. You were careful, trying not to jostle him. But he clung to you, the feel of him the most comfort you'd had in days. You trembled, willing yourself to stay upright and in control. If you let out the mess of feelings simmering inside you right now, you might not be able to push them all back inside. So you squeezed him tightly and then let go. Once more, you intimately understood Jack's need for rigid compartmentalization in the field.

"Sorry," he murmured, lifting his head. "I just...I know you said to hurry. Prince and Petras are still out there-"

"Prince is...dealt with," you said. "Jemison's keeping an eye on him. She's in rough shape, but he's worse off."

Jack shuddered, his fingers digging into your arms. "That son of a bitch-" He shook his head, grinding his teeth. You expected him to vent his rage, but instead he shifted gears - always the chameleon. "How bad is Gabe?" He asked, looking up, fear tightening his grip on you.

You blinked, uncertain how he already knew about that. Oh, they must have taunted him with the idea that no one was coming... "He was stable when I left," you said. "We expected they'd attack, so Captain Amari left Jesse in charge. He and Genji fortified the infirmary. On Sing is providing support."

Relief relaxed his features. Then he stiffened again. "Gérard?"

"Out of commission, but his wounds weren't life-threatening."

Jack nodded slowly, pulling himself to his feet. He wobbled slightly. "We were dosed with a nerve agent and a sedative. I've got a concussion as well. Sorry. Don't mean to be so slow."

He leaned against you. "I was so worried, sweetheart. They told me Gabe was dying. And if Gabe was down, what happened to you? Couldn't ask, but..." He looked down at you, blue eyes brimming with emotion. Fingers trembling, he squeezed your hands, like he still couldn't believe you were here.

"I love you, too," you said, gently rubbing his wrists.

"Agent Fury-" Jarvis began.

You wore your decibel blockers, so that when the gunfire came from behind, the sound wasn't deafening. But the impact knocked you forward, into Jack's arms, your back briefly numbed, before pain began to spread. Then a second impact knocked the air out of you.

"Lucky!" The horror in Jack's voice would have stopped you in your tracks, if you weren't already stunned by the shots. The fear curdled your stomach. Gasping, you tried to reach your gun, but Jack was already moving, putting himself between you and the shooter.
"You're hung up on that frigid slut? Seriously, Morrison? After years of thinking you were some kind of monkish freak, you were fucking that slag all along?" Petras gave an incredulous laugh, loud and bombastic. "For Christ's sake, you passed over my niece for this piece of trash? Are you blind?"

You were wedged between Jack and the table. You shuddered: breathing hurt, but you could still move your arms and legs. That meant your spine was intact. You couldn't be sure, but it didn't feel like you were bleeding. That sounded like a shotgun blast, and there was a good chance your armor had stopped the spray of bearings.

Petras had come through another doorway. Fuck, you'd been too caught up in your reunion to do a proper check or barricade the door. Fucking rookie mistake. You knew much better. Wheezing, you turned slightly to the side, watching in the very edges of your periphery as Petras paced in front of Jack.

"I bet you thought you were so smart!" Petras snarled. "Laughing as you sent your whore to try to pump me for information! I wouldn't have given that bitch a second look, except for the fact she was working for Reyes. You conniving slut," he spat. "Selling yourself to Reyes, me, and anyone you thought would be useful." Venom oozed from his words. "Bet you thought you were something special when you tried to turn me down. If Ainsley hadn't been there that day, why, I would have showed you." He gave an ugly laugh. "Doesn't matter though. Showed you now. You thought you were so clever, you arrogant bitch. Trash liked you doesn't get to say "no" to someone like me."

You knew Jack was blocking his line of sight. You were too far away to use your blades. Your carbine rested at an odd angle, wedged between the table and Jack's knees, but you had not released it. You wiggled your arm, freeing it carefully, so Petras wouldn't notice the motion.

"Don't worry, killing this bitch was always on the agenda. But I did some research," he said sounding disgustingly smug. "It's not just you that's going to pay for your actions, Strike. That would be too easy. I just want you to know that everything that's going to happen? It's your fault. You brought this on their heads. Like that cowboy you're always hanging around - probably because you're fucking him on the side- well if he doesn't die today, we're revoking his amnesty and sending him back to the Americans. But don't worry, he won't stay in custody long. He'll "try to escape." You could hear the quotation marks in his voice - "and they'll gun him down like the criminal trash he is."

You took a shallow breath, knowing that no matter what happened to you, Jesse wouldn't let himself get caught that easily. He had friends and allies who wouldn't let that happen.

"And that pretty little Frenchy girl you like so much? That irritating spy's little wife? Now that's a real woman, Morrison. I get why Nguyen was so hung up on her. And we all have a grudge against her stuck up husband. Me and some of the boys plan on showing her what prime American men can do for her. I bet that ballerina can sing." He laughed, and for a moment, all you could think of was cutting parts off him till he begged.

But you swallowed a snarl, knowing that Amélie could take care of herself. That Petras was a stupid pig who thought his position would protect him. It was only disgusting bluster, even if it made your skin crawl.

"Also that Jew-boy hacker you are hell-bent on protecting? The one with the stupid name and the attitude? I've got special plans for him. There are a lot of people who want him bad. And he won't die easy-"
You had always said that you were going to take Petras alive. That you wanted him to pay for his crimes. That you were going to drag him through the mud, but be the better person about it. All those ideas went out the window in that instant. Fuck being the better person. None of those lofty ideas mattered. Not now. Not after those threats to the people you loved. Not after what had happened in the last twenty four hours. Carbine in hand, you whirled, your muscles stiff, but obedient. You extended your arms around Jack's side.

Petras held a shotgun on Jack, his eyes widening at your sudden revitalization.

You didn't speak, you just fired into center mass. He dropped his weapon, gawping at you like a fish. Grunting, Petras staggered backward, but did not fall over. He was probably wearing a vest. Still, he wasn't used to being hurt. Didn't have the reflexes to hold onto his gun. He was soft, and weak, and vile.

"Move," you said to Jack, and he stepped aside, an odd look on his face.

"How did you- No, you can't. Not someone like you. You can't touch m-" Those watery eyes widened in fear, spit flecking his chin. You looked him in the eyes, smiled, and emptied your gun into his head.

Petras crumpled, brains and bone fragments spraying the floor. It wasn't pretty, it wasn't humane, but you kept shooting till the gun clicked empty. You stared at the mess, the picture not quite making sense. Petras didn't look like Petras any more, he obviously wasn't a direct threat. But the fear and anger still churned under your skin, amplified by the pain in your back. You slowly lowered your gun.

Jack rested a hand on your shoulder, his touch reassuring. He didn't say anything, and the hum of the lights set your teeth on edge. You didn't want to stand here like this, locked in time, staring at the gory remains of that human garbage.

"You hit at all?" You asked.

"Don't think so," Jack said.

"How bad is my back?" You asked, not actually worried because you were obviously still functional.

"It looks like your armor stopped most of it. But the structural integrity is shot-no more getting shot today," he said, moving closer. "Nearly gave me a heart attack," he said softly in your ear. "...Fucking hell, sweetheart." He hugged you from behind, pressing worried kisses to your temples. He paused, and you didn't need to see his face to know he was taking in the splattered remains of Director William "I Had It Coming" Petras. "Well," he sighed, relief in his voice. "I think you got him."

You gave a croaking laugh, and your entire body hurt. You'd been shot in the back multiple times in the last twenty four hours. Your muscles ached - still not entirely healed from the last injury. Sure, the armor kept the bullets and buckshot from penetrating, but that impact hurt. Still, Jack's hands on your arms made you feel a little better. You leaned into him, letting yourself take a second to breathe. "I told you," you said, nodding with satisfaction. "I called dibs."

Feng, who had once been called Claire, who had once been almost normal, never pictured herself dying like this. And she'd spent an inordinate, almost neurotic amount of time considering
her own demise. Still, she never really imagined herself as a "make a last stand" kind of girl. She had always expected it to be treachery, or worse, something absolutely ridiculous that would land her a footnote in the Darwin Awards: choked to death on a mashed potatoes, or maybe fell into a vat of maple syrup and caramelized, or even eaten alive by angry Mongolian Death Worms, which were really just giant mutant skinks.

But here she was, her own body burning out as she went hand to hand with ugly, clunky cyborgs, holding the line for the sake of friendship and blood oaths. Her shields were overheating too - some of the bastards were staying out of range just to shoot at her. Sweating as she burned calories like kindling, Feng lashed out, knocking back another cyborg, her claws tearing through his armor, muscle, and organs, shredding as she went. She could match them in strength and speed, but she was a glass cannon with limited endurance.

Half a dozen dead, or at least downed cyborgs littered the area. But that was not enough. There were still three coming at her, on top of the ones that were sniping from the halls.

The smoking remains of Zheng's drone lay at her feet. It had gotten between her and a plasma blade. Auntie was fine, probably. But the mostly metal man - Voss from the sounds of it - had been hiding the plasma weapon somewhere on his inorganic body. Feng shuddered, not wanting to think too hard about that. She knew way too much about the methods of concealing and smuggling contraband into prisons.

"Your so-called friends left you behind, but don't worry. Prince will kill them," Voss said, his voice a rusty, scraping sound.

Feng laughed, wondering briefly if Hettie would take over with Lee as a figurehead or if there would be another civil war. Then there was the problem of how Auntie would react-

Voss lunged with that glowing blade, and the distracting thoughts evaporated. Feng dodged, bumping into another cyborg. She drove her elbow back and upward into his head, smashing his nose and more. His face caved. Voss made another pass, and she twisted away, snarling as the blade glanced off her ribs and down one side, burning off a strip of flesh from her bellybutton halfway down her thigh.

"Motherfucker!" She howled, because it hurt. She staggered, her body still obeying her, though she could feel herself weakening. She'd gone too long, burned up too much. Even without Auntie's countdown, she knew she was out of time. Oh, she'd take out that oversized psychopathic can opener Voss, but after that? Feng knew she would not be able to finish off the rest.

In retrospect, the leeching upgrade would have been extremely useful, though still immoral and gross. Feng clutched her side, forcing herself to focus on the danger in front of her, and not "what might have been a life-saving, if disgusting choice." It was technically cannibalism, and Feng wasn't about that kind of thing.

"We're going to take you apart," Voss hissed. "And when you're dead, we're going to cut you up, you little freak, and see-"

"Oh come on! We both fall outside the norms of conventional appearance and you're calling me a "freak?" Really?" Feng snarled, waving her claws at Voss. "That's just rude and you of all people should know better! I've been polite enough not comment on your looks or engineering! Kindly return the favor."

He blinked at her, momentarily gobsmacked by her conversational choice. It was something she'd gotten used to. "It was this or death," he told her, voice low, almost hollow.
"There was no choice."

"Yeah, same deal," Feng said, the memory of that night weighing heavy on her neck. She remembered crawling into the darkened lab, that long trail of her own blood staining the floor. Auntie had been with her the whole way, talking her through it, reminding her to breathe, to put pressure on her wounds, telling her that she would survive this. Most importantly, Auntie was giving her concise instructions on just where to jab that incredibly large needle. And then the spine-curling pain and hunger as her body knitted itself back together, while she lay on the cold tiles, wondering if this was rebirth or just a slower death...

"What do you know?" Voss spat.

Feng knew she didn't want to die. Just like she knew there was a good chance she wouldn't get what she wanted. Still, she wasn't the kind of person who just gave up. She charged forward, knocking aside Voss's sword arm as she closed in, her bloody claws piercing his neck, wrapping around his spine, and yanking it out of its metal shell. More gunfire erupted, and Feng braced herself against Voss's lifeless body, using his armor as a shield. She could barely hold him up now, her limbs shaking. She was done.

Panting, Feng tried to pry the plasma sword out of Voss's metal hands, but there was no give. His death grip was too strong to break. The others were closing in. She staggered, no longer able to hold him up. His metal remains dropped to the ground with clang, the floor reverberating.

Looking around, she counted at least four more still standing. She touched her belt, feeling for a grenade. No sense in letting them reverse engineer her enhancements...

And then blue light burst through room, twin shapes weaving sinuously through the halls, their draconic eyes flashing, mouths agape as they tore through the nearest cyborgs.

"You have been judged."

Rubbing her eyes, Feng dropped onto her butt, knees too weak to hold her up. And even as she watched, the dragons faded into thin air. Tearing her eyes away from the spectacle, Feng tried to make sense of the scene in front of her. There were more bodies on the ground, arrows protruding from their eyes. And in front of her, Hanzo thrust a tanto straight up into a cyborg's chin.

Blood stained his hands, and he stared at her, fear clear on his face.

She blinked, wondering if she really looked *that* scary.

"You're hurt," he said, dropping the man, as he withdrew the small blade and wiped it on the corpse's uniform.

"Yeah," Feng nodded. "A little."

He approached slowly, eyes darting all over, from her face, to her bloody and now normal hands, to her wounded side. He reached into his pockets and pulled out an energy bar. Carefully, he unwrapped it and offered it to her.

Feng didn't remember eating it, just that one second there was the faintest scent of chocolate and peanut butter, and then Hanzo grunted, because she'd bitten his finger, possibly drawing blood.

"Sorry!" She groaned. "I didn't mean-"
"Eat." Hanzo unwrapped another one and held it to her mouth.

"I can feed- Ohhh," Feng laughed softly. Because her hands were covered in blood and worse things... But his weren't exactly clean either. Still, he was only touching the wrapper. Feng was more careful this time, actually tasting the sweet chewy carbs. Oh yes, that was good. She could actually feel her spirit settling back into her body. These were the right type of fuel: high calorie, high protein bars. "Thanks, these are my favorites. Well, for energy bars."

"I know," Hanzo said, looking somber.

Feng blinked. "Oh."

"I requisitioned them before we left Zurich." He unwrapped another one. "I know that your combat form burns a great deal of energy."

Feng accepted the next bar, chewing slowly as she regarded him. Their clans both had their proprietary secrets, but it wasn't a surprise that a Shimada was aware of her capabilities. He'd had the sense to bring her food when he rode to her rescue.

"You know, when I first asked to "see the dragon dance," that's actually what I meant. The spirit dragons."

Hanzo snorted. "Really? Because you were ogling my biceps."

"Not just your biceps," Feng said with wink. She expected him to roll his eyes, or at least avert them.

Hanzo just turned a fetching shade of pink, but got out another energy bar. He had to have been talking to Auntie. Or Bayan. "You need to rebuild your strength. Can you walk?"

Feng stood, shakily, without help. But she wobbled, and then Hanzo was there, hands on her arms, steadying her.

"I'll be slow. And speaking of slow, where is Lucky?"

"I left her to handle Prince. We found one of the hostages alive."

"You left her alone with Dickie McMurderborg?!" Feng shouted, horrified. She wasn't military, but she had an idea of how things were supposed to work. The mission came first, and you were supposed to make logical rational decisions, and not take unnecessary risks that could jeopardize said mission.

"She said had things under control."

"And you believed her?!"

"I believe that she can handle the situation," Hanzo said calmly. "When it comes to the things that matter, she is very trustworthy." He paused. "And I knew you would need back up."

Feng stared. "But the mission... I-OK. " Flustered, Feng shoved another energy bar into her mouth, unsure of what she could say. "Thanks. For coming back for me. And for packing snacks."

Hanzo regarded her gravely. "Whatever happens, you are my friend. I do not have many of those. You matter. Your happiness matters. Your likes and dislikes all matter. I am sorry if I have
been dismissive or behaved as if I took such things for granted. I was truly overwhelmed when I realized that your gestures were made in good faith, and not because you expected a return. I had no idea how to respond. I am still uncertain. But I am trying."

"Oh," Feng said, a little dizzied by that confession. Sure, it wasn't the impassioned romantic declaration that someone would have expected from their potential fiancée after a harrowing rescue. But then, it was honest. Really honest. And the warmth in Hanzo's eyes surprised her, just a little. "OK. I'm good with it. Friendship is the important part. Anything else we can work out down the road."

Hanzo smiled, it was a small, almost shy gesture, his silky hair falling in his face, framing those sharp cheekbones and inky dark eyes.

Feng felt her heart wobble. Fuck, that boy was pretty. Goddamn him and his stupid sexy face. Unnnnnnnnnnnn. Groaning, Feng tried to stagger away, her head light, vision swimming. She almost toppled over, but Hanzo held on, not letting her fall.

"I can carry you," Hanzo said, not letting go of her, and Feng nearly died right there.

"Oh...I'll be fine in a second," she stammered. And then her brain kicked back into gear. She was injured and weakened. He was hot and offering his help. She'd be an idiot to turn him down. Or was that some kind of exploitation? God, she was too fucking drained to think about ethics. And she certainly wasn't faking...

"Feng, you don't have to do this alone. It's just the two of us - no subordinates to impress. There is no shame in accepting my help. It is my privilege." His eyes flashed and he held his chin at an arrogant angle, like her reluctance to accept his help was a direct insult. And actually, now that she thought about it, maybe it was? Heh, it seemed he still retained some of his Yakuza machismo.

"Oh...can I have piggyback ride then?" She asked.

Hanzo blinked slowly, like he hadn't expected that response. "Of course, whatever you want."

"And more food?"

He handed her another energy bar. "It's the last one till we get back to the ship."

"Oh...do you need it?" She asked, hesitating.

He pressed it into her hand, his fingers warm against hers, his smile soft. "No, I'll be fine. Thank you for thinking of me."

Grinning, Feng tore open the wrapper and promptly scarfed down the energy bar, Hanzo chuckling to himself in the twenty seconds it took for her to eat the whole thing. It was a good sign, she reflected, that her battlefield table manners didn't seem to bother him...

Chapter End Notes

Slightly shorter chapter because I'm still behind. It's been lots of overtime and tech problems at work. Weather has been causing wrist problems, as has a certain asshole
dog who clawed the shit out of my hand because he's an asshole (he's lying on the bed giving me sad eyes right now, because I'm on the computer and not feeding him). I've been very very angry all week. XD (I got my first massage last weekend, it was short, but it was deep tissue and I'm pretty sure the masseuse released all the tension/fossilized rage that has built up in my shoulders.)

Thanks for the continued support, guys. You're awesome. I will respond to comments this weekend. It's been stupid busy and I'm trying to stay on top of things (and falling off on my face).
Chapter 130

Chapter Summary

"Neutral as Switzerland" used to mean something. Things back home really start to heat up.

Chapter Notes

I've surpassed one million words in drafts. I'm commissioning an Isha from an artist in celebration - I'm on the waitlist, but will share once I get it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a little strange at first, having a nano-boosting medic and a shielded heavy on their side. Jesse was used to working with Genji, you, and the boss. And that was all fine and good - you guys operated like a well-oiled machine, but Angela's adrenaline boosters and Winston's protective barriers meant he could worry less about his shields and endurance, and focus more attention on the simple pleasure of taking down the enemy.

Genji cut through the enemy ranks at blurring speeds, obviously enjoying destroying the enemy cyborgs in Overwatch uniforms. Jesse was pretty sure he'd heard the ninja chuckle to himself a few times.

"Too easy... Try to keep up, McCree!"

There it was! Just a little pleased laugh as he decapitated a cyborg. Genji was having fun, no matter what he liked to claim in the aftermath. And was he showing off? Just a little?

Jesse snorted, fired, keeping one eye on his target and the other on Winston and Angela. The heavy smell of ozone and burnt bacon wafted from the west, and he could hear Patime shouting orders in Mandarin, Cantonese, and Uighur over the comms.

They stayed near to their side of the infirmary, unwilling to be lured too far out. The enemy came in waves. It was only a squad or two at a time, but they were building a chain of shields and turrets, continually advancing to claim a few meters of territory at a time. And they were getting closer, the gap between their attacks shrinking.

With Winston and Angela working shields and support, he and Genji could keep this up for awhile, and that was good, because they might not have any other option. The deeper encroachment forced them back, closer to the infirmary. And while Jesse's instincts were to just go out there and finish the job quickly, he had civilians and his support units to mind. Even Genji stuck close, obviously, at least to him, keeping an eye on a certain doctor.

The enemy was gaining a foothold, now out thirty yards from the infirmary doors. Jesse stood beside Winston, watching as Angela patched up a graze on Genji's cheek, scolding him softly as she worked. She provided a decent amount of cover fire when she wasn't fixing their wounds,
but after all this time she was slowing down. They all were. Operation Pelennor was the shit sequel to Operation Tarasque, with Checquy and Morpheus rounding out the series. It had been a hard couple of days. They were all exhausted.

"I am slowly being persuaded that perhaps those plasma splash bombs aren't such a bad thing," Winston said, breathing hard. His armor was covered in char marks.

"Patiem's people are out of mortars. It's all turrets and small arms fire now," Jesse said shaking his head. It was a shame, they could have used more artillery support.

Winston grunted.

"They'll try to rush us," Genji said, as they watched the opposition movements. "There's enough of them that they're gaining confidence." The attackers had bunkered down in the center of the field, just out of Genji and Winston's range. They were massing there, and while Jesse could pick them off, he wasn't cutting them down fast enough.

"Or Patime's squad," Jesse said. If they breached the infirmary... "How are you holding up?" Jesse touched the comm button.

"We good. Could use a break. And cheeky wink from Stripper Cowboy-" Laughter came over the comms, but it sounded strained.

"I'm not even wearing my hat-" Jesse muttered, cheeks heating up.

"Is taking that off part of the act too?" Angela asked, with a smirk.

"Buy me enough drinks after this," Jesse said. "And it'll all come off."

Angela snorted, clearly not taking any of it seriously.

Genji's expression was a little more difficult to read. "Apparently he intends to rightfully earn his name as "The Stripper Cowboy."

Angela squinted at them both, like she couldn't quite figure out how serious they were. "You know, I'm a doctor. I've treated you before, both of you. It is nothing I haven't seen."

Genji frowned.

Jesse just laughed.

But Winston squirmed, looking everywhere but at his teammates. How did he hang out with Mihret and not learn to deal with off-color jokes? Jesse scratched his head, suddenly wondering if the hacker really did know how to behave himself and was just terrible by choice, making sure to do it strategically, so everyone would have low expectations and let him get away with... Oh. The longer Jesse considered it, the more that idea made sense. Goddamn pain-in-the-ass boy genius-

"Oh! Athena has opened an encrypted channel for Agent Daniels," Winston said, clearing his throat, looking very relieved at the chance to change the subject.

Jesse raised a brow. "It's about time."

An Athena drone hovered beside them.

"Agent McCree, this is Agent Daniels. We're hearing explosions, but we've been told it's
just a Blackwatch training exercise and to maintain infirmary quarantine protocol." Daniels' voice was soft and polite over the comms.

"Ain't no Blackwatch-sanctioned exercise," Jesse said, striding forward onto the green, the lake in view. "We're under attack." The Athena drone panned across the field, showing dead cyborgs, smoking craters, and clear evidence of live munitions: all the damage from a real firefight.

"Sorry, about the delay," Daniels said, sounding genuinely apologetic. "I had to consult with some friends."

Jesse's breath caught. "Is that so?"

"We've been told to stand down, and that we're overreacting," another voice chimed in, more masculine. "But I served in Colchester with Agent Shoal, Sixteenth Air Assault Brigade. And when she starts drinking, she can't stop talking." The man laughed, and Jesse recognized Park Joon's voice. "Epsilon Squad let it be known that if we're facing a split between the UN and Blackwatch, then we better help Blackwatch."

Jesse blinked. Bridget had said that?

"And then Bruce Riggs, of all people, Bruce Riggs has been quietly telling anyone who will listen that something is rotten in Geneva. I didn't realize that boy had a subversive bone in his body," an older woman's voice piped up. She sounded vaguely familiar and Jesse thought she worked in IT. "And while I'm not so sure that Blackwatch is on the up and up, Riggs has managed to get most of IT and engineering on your side. No surprise considering his mom's cookies. So we've got drones on site and having reviewed the footage...well, training exercise my ass."

Jesse stared blankly ahead for a moment. Those were some damn good cookies. And while Riggs might be The Blackwatch Virgin and slightly delusional, he was a good guy, and people knew that.

"Megat always said, you Blackwatch bastards might be psychopaths, but you're still more trustworthy than politicians," another voice said gruffly, though Jesse didn't recognize it. "Not that that's saying much."

"Thanks?" Jesse said, squinting.

"Something's wrong. We're getting a mishmash of conflicting orders and reassignments. First there was a Code Blue announced, and we were supposed to be deployed to a combat zone, and then the order was rescinded ten minutes before we were supposed to leave," Park said. "It looks like the right hand doesn't know whom the left is backstabbing."

"Amen," Jesse said.

"So we've been ordered to stay away, but Captain Larson and some of the other officers are protesting the reassignments and general tomfuckery. They've made a point to let us know that they are having a meeting in a locked down conference room with UN adjuncts, so they can't be reached and they certainly won't be upset if we reach out to you for directions," Park said. "And if the officers incommunicado and keeping some part of the UN bureaucratic machine busy, they couldn't tell their agents not to do something. It was a flimsy amount of deniability - Overwatch agents weren't as skilled at subterfuge and bureaucratic obfuscation. But then they were volunteering to disobey UN orders. Jesse wasn't going to complain."
"Mission parameters?" Another unknown voice asked.

"We have to keep the quarantine protocols on the infirmary. It's safer locked down," Jesse said. "But we'd be mighty grateful for some ranged support."

"Or maybe another training exercise?" Daniels said slyly. There was a spattering of laughter.

"We'll be there soon," Park said. "Apparently, our friendly Virtual Assistant Athena is working out some of the camera and security issues."

Overwatch agents weren't stupid. A virtual intelligence wouldn't just countermand orders and help dig up loopholes. Maybe they didn't realize exactly what Athena was, but they suspected... Or maybe they just understood that Jesse's orders came from someone important, like Ana.

"Agent McCree, I hear Távio's in there with you," Lowell's soft voice came over the comm. "Let him know that me and Jeong just got back and we're breaking into the armory without him."

"Don't get caught this time," Jesse said, feeling a smile tugging at his lips.

"No, sir!" Lowell said, and Jesse knew they were saluting, even if he couldn't see them.

"This time? Wait, what exactly are you teaching the cadets?" Daniels asked, sounding a little alarmed.

"Oh, that wasn't me," Jesse said chuckling, thrilled that he wouldn't be blamed for that incident. "That was all Agent Strike."

You checked the rest of the area: the other cells, the adjacent observation room Petras had ambushed you from, and the hallway. All were empty, except for Jemison's cell. Jack stayed very close to you, like he was afraid to let you out of his sight. You completely understood the feeling: your gaze kept sliding back to him as you steadily reassured yourself that he was here and alive.

Neither of you were subtle about it or even trying to hid your worry. It was a lot of effort to not take his hand and hold on tight while you were working. Deep breaths hurt, and you ground your teeth too hard. The tension amplified the pain, and the pain increased the tension. You caught a glimpse of yourself in the reflective glass, your expression taut and grim. Jack would grimace as he moved, also in rough shape. But when he saw you looking, he'd just give you a rueful smile, real warmth and real grief clear on his face. All of his pain and openness hurt to look at, especially since you couldn't do much to help him in the moment. That impotence gnawed at you. You could kill people, but you couldn't fix them. And while your skillset could help the ones you loved to point, it wasn't enough.

When you'd cleared the area, you went back to the observation room and began rifling through the lockers. Jarvis was still pilfering the databases, but would be done in another five minutes.

Jack grunted and there was an odd crunching sound. You turned around to see him carefully massaging his nose, teeth gritted. "Had to pop it back in place. Heals wrong otherwise," he said, giving you a wry smile. There was blood on his face and chest, and you found a towel and
some sanitizer. You gently wiped his face clean, hands steady as you dabbed at his mouth. He held still, eyes on your face, as you took in his injuries. His voice sounded rougher, probably an aftermath of the nerve gas. He had a concussion, a broken nose, and lots of scrapes and bruises. His rapid healing had probably taken care of most of the damage, but-

Jack leaned in, hand on the back of your head as he kissed you. He tasted of blood and salt, his lips chapped, but warm. You leaned into him, gripping his forearms, heart pounding in your ears. Jack was here. Jack was alive. You'd made it in time.

Jack groaned. He stroked your hair, taking a shaky breath as he released you. "Sorry, sweetheart, any more and I'll get carried away."

You laughed softly, and returned to opening up the lockers, till you found what you'd been looking for: Jack's clothing. His coat was torn, but mostly intact and his shirt, armor, and boots were in better shape. You suspected they'd kept his stuff for one very practical reason: for when they staged his body. They'd probably planned to return it to the crash site, burn him like the rest, and cover it all up as a *tragic accident*. It's what any competent wetworks agent would have done. Grimacing, you handed Jack his clothes.

"What's wrong? You going to tell me it's a crime to cover up all this prime beef?" He asked, with a wink as he pulled his shirt on.

"Yeah," you said with small smile. "That's exactly what I was thinking. But I can't have you distracting my squad-" You swallowed, hoping Hanzo had reached Feng in time. "We should hurry. The Faraday cage has blocked external communications and Feng was in trouble."

"Feng's here?" Jack blinked. "Shit. I know things are going bad at HQ, but Prince sent people after my family-"

"I know. There are reinforcements on their way, but Chang cut out mid-call, and they've gone radio silent."

"SOP," Jack said, taking a deep breath. "Especially since Ray knows we've been betrayed. She'll handle it. She always does." He said the last part softer, a reassurance to himself. You weren't sure exactly what Chang's squad was equipped to handle, but you couldn't do anything about it now.

"OK," you said.

"But let's hurry anyway."

His socks were gone-you'd just assume they were the ugly white athletic type and they were slated to disappear anyway- but he pulled his boots on, hands wobbling as he tied the laces. You didn't see his gun, so you went and retrieved Petras' fallen shotgun.

Jack accepted it with an odd look on his face, like he didn't want to touch it. You took one last glance at the steaming pile of garbage that used to be Overwatch's director, and spat on the corpse. Turning on your heel, you stalked out.

Jack followed, keeping your pace. Breathing *hurt*, and you could feel the spread of that creeping soreness, the kind that would be much worse in the morning, especially if you didn't get under an emitter soon. You stopped in front of Jemison's cell, knocked once, and nudged the door open. She was sitting against the wall, pistol in hand. Her expression was oddly gleeful, and her eyes glittered in the low light. But they lost some of their feral shine when she saw Jack. She
straightened up then, saluting. Her hands were bloodier than you remembered.

"Commander." She nodded at him, her gun now leveled at Prince who was still on the floor, twitching. He'd stopped trying to put himself back together, his now-mashed up viscera on the ground in front of him. Instead, he lay sprawled out, taking labored breaths, his expression flat and distant.

"Good to see you, Jemison," Jack said, voice soft.

"Relieved that you're in better shape, sir." She wobbled to her feet, staggering over to Prince. "I've been thinking about this for awhile. A quick death's too good for him. Strike really took him apart, but I kept him that way." She gave a sigh that almost sounded like contentment.

You noted the streaks of gore on the ground and the same matching colors up to her elbows. Those hadn't been there when you left. You knew then that she hadn't sat there idly. But you didn't say a thing.

"It's time to go, Jemison." There was a note of worry in Jack's voice. You knew why: Jemison might have been tightly wound, but she'd always been a well-grounded, by-the-book type of agent. Now she was teetering.

"Understood, sir," she said with a crisp nod. "It's a shame I can't draw this out any longer. But he's a goddamn cockroach, and I refuse to give him the chance to escape this." And with that, she knelt beside him, pressed the gun under his chin, and pulled the trigger. Bone and brains added another layer of mess to the floor. It was almost déjà vu. Jemison gave you a small, not entirely sane smile.

"We do what we can." You understood. It's exactly what you would have done if given the chance that last terrible night in Black Base Delta.

You had to help her up, and Jack swooped in, offering her his arm for stability. She hesitantly gripped his sleeve, dried blood caked under her fingernails.

"Status?" He asked her.

"Know I'm concussed and drugged," she said. "Think some ribs are broken. Dislocated knee. But I can limp out of here. Wherever here is."

"Hopen Island, an uninhabited part of the Svalbard Archipelago - Finnish territory," you said. "We'll have to loot some coats for you two. It's fucking freezing out there. Literally."

Jack blinked, taking a second to process that information, before giving you a gentle smile. "You hate the cold."

"Yeah," you said, smiling wryly at him. "I really do."

"I want to make a cheesy joke about keeping you warm, but I'm too concussed," he said, a little sheepish.

You glanced over at Jemison, whose eyes were only half open, a pained expression on her face. You weren't sure if it was because of her injuries, or Jack's commentary, and you were kind of scared to ask.

Jack turned his head slightly. "Sorry, Lieutenant."
Jemison snorted, not looking too bothered. "Knew you two had something going on," she muttered, shaking her head. She rolled her eyes then winced. "Shoal didn't believe it, but after Cobblestone Dust, it was goddamn obvious. The Morrison I know would have shredded almost any other agent for pulling the bullshit stunts you did."

You laughed awkwardly.

"Oh, there were consequences," Jack said, smugly.

Jemison squinted at you both. "I bet."

Jack just laughed harder.

"Right, we should go now," you said, not quite able to meet Jemison's eyes.

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There was a clear trail of bodies in the halls, shouts and gunfire in the distance. To Amélie's chagrin, Lao took point. The younger woman was rigid with tension and clearly worried about what they would find inside the base. Amélie hobbled behind, leaning on her rifle.

"Hulk, this is Winter Soldier, do you copy?" Lao repeated.

The silence was uncomfortable. Amélie bit her lip. Feng did not do silence. If she had gone quiet then-

"This is Hawkeye," came a much softer response, and Amélie stiffened. Hanzo sounded...strange. She did not know him well, but he was not a man prone to gratuitous displays of emotion. "Hulk is secure. She's...injured, but I'm bringing her out. We've dealt with most of the hostiles, however we haven't done a perimeter sweep, so stay alert."

There was rustling sound, behind a door that was slightly ajar. Lao drew her pistol, and Amélie raised her rifle. The hacker gestured at the door with her right hand and veered slightly in that direction.

Amélie took a step back, covering her.

Hovering by the door jam, Lao pushed the door open, gun raised.

Even bundled up in a heavy winter coat with his back turned, Amélie recognized Geoffrey Murdoch's slight frame. He dug frantically through a stack of papers, having not yet noticed them.

Amélie glanced around the hall, and nodded at Lao. Both women stepped into the office, shutting the door behind them.

"What are you looking for, Geoffrey?" Lao asked, smiling fiercely.

The older man whirled, scattering papers as he raised his hands. "Don't shoot! Please, I'm unarmed! I'm a hostage!"

"Is that so, Geoffrey?" Amélie laughed.

He flinched, because he wasn't stupid. The fact they were here and they knew whom he was, well, there was no point in continuing that farce.

"You don't have to shoot me, I'm just a civilian!" He stuttered, wringing his hands. He
looked between the two of them. "I-I- I can get you money." He flinched at their disinterest. "Or information. I've got good sources in the US government. Please-"

"How disappointing," Amélie sighed, leveling her gun at him. "We are after information of a more... unusual variety."

"I have backups of all Petras' financial records. All of them! And more-" Murdoch was practically begging now, eyes wide with fear.

"And you'll just give them to us?" Amélie asked, her smile full of knives.

"Yes, yes, anything -"

"What do you think, Winter Soldier?"

"I think I'd like to see some proof," Lao said. "And failing that, I'd like to shoot him and move on."

Amélie chuckled. Agent Lao was quick on her feet.

"No! No! I hold on, I'm just getting my engagement calendar. I kept a handwritten one for privacy reasons." He very slowly reached into his coat, and both women keeping their weapons trained on him. He moved with great deliberation, cautiously holding up a black leather book and setting it on the ground.

Lao snatched it up, flipped it open, and took a quick glance at it, her eyes widening.

"Well."

Amélie inclined her head to the side. "Do tell." She smiled, her gaze fixed on Murdoch.

"Paraphrasing: it's all about Director Petras: names, dates, school girls whose tutors he's paying off for... reasons, also meetings with a variety of UN officials about a overhauling Overwatch's command structure... Hmm. I suppose it's a start," Lao said. "But it's mostly tabloid fodder. I don't know if it's worth it to drag him back with us. I don't really want to breathe the same air as this bastard."

"There's more! Extensive records! Digital backups! I have access to most of them!" Murdoch shouted. He gestured to a stack of papers. "But you have to protect me! If they know I'm talking-"

Amélie handed Lao a pair of magnetic cuffs. "I suppose we can listen to what he has to say. We can always kill him later."

Chuckling darkly, Lao gestured and Murdoch put his hands behind his back, still babbling.

The cuffs clicked shut, and Amélie raised a brow as she heard a noise outside. She held up a hand and quietly opened the door. Just to the right of them, heading toward the base exit was Hanzo, carrying Feng on his back. The younger woman looked gaunter than she remembered, her head resting at an angle on Hanzo's shoulder. She was... drooling?

Hanzo spun around, bow already nocked.

"Good reflexes, Hawkeye," Amélie stepped out.

Feng snored lightly, definitely drooling on Hanzo's shoulder and down his armor.
Amélie stifled a laugh.

Hanzo relaxed, his eyebrows going up as Lao pushed a still jabbering Murdoch out of the office.

"He claims he have access to useful information," Lao scowled. "But I'm not so sure."

"Bring him along. We can always kill him later," Hanzo said, nonplussed.

Amélie appreciated how quick her fellow agents were on the uptake. Yes, you had told them to take Murdoch alive, but he didn't need to know that. He just needed to keep spilling useful intel, and once they got back to base, they could finesse more out of him. For now, he was too busy trying to convince them not to kill him, and that would keep him from causing other problems.

A familiar voice echoed down the hall. "I am so sorry, Lucky! I didn't mean to miss all the action. I have already adjusted my security protocols in response to that security failure." Athena sounded genuinely distraught.

"Not your fault." Your voice echoed too, and it didn't seem like you were making any attempt to hide your presence. But then if you had Athena plugged into the system, she must have already known that the premises was clear. Amélie relaxed slightly, leaning casually against the wall.

And then you rounded the corner, an Athena drone hovering at your side, and Jack and Jemison behind you, Jack steadying the other agent.

Amélie exhaled slowly, the sight of you, Jack, and Jemison a relief. You had made it in time.

Your eyes lit up when you saw your team standing there, everyone safe and alive. Amélie had never doubted your affection for her or your other friends, but both Hanzo and Lao seemed a little surprised by how happy you were to see them: Amélie and Lao with their prize prisoner, Hanzo giving a sleeping Feng a piggyback ride. You scanned the corridor a genuine grin on your face. Amélie met your gaze.

"I see that Chanceux always gets her man." She winked.

"You could say that," Jack said dryly. "Recently-departed Director Petras certainly can't disagree."

"Oh he's dead? What a terrible accident," Amélie chuckled, not surprised that you had killed the bastard, even though you had been planning to keep him alive. She would certainly shed no tears, and Gérard, despite the inevitable grumbling, would be mollified by the acquisition of Murdoch.

You smiled at Amélie, your gaze drifting to Jack, a rare softness in your smile. Jack returned the look, his emotions less contained, and Amélie sighed. What was more romantic than this?

"So what took you so long?" She asked, leaning on her rifle. "You had us do all the hard work while you rescued our charming soldiers. Such a glory hog."

You just laughed and shook your head, which left Amélie speculating on just what you had gotten up to in the restricted area.
You were pleasantly surprised to find the On Sing transport right outside the doors, Zheng clearly at the helm.

Hanzo boarded first, following Zheng's terse instructions on how to treat an overextended Feng. Lao strapped Murdoch to a bench, securing him to the safety netting. You raised a brow as she retrieved noise-cancelling earplugs and put them on the gibbering man. Then she grabbed a black canvas hood out of one of the lockers and placed it over his head.

Amélie got out an emitter and set it up, obviously limping. You gave her questioning look.

"I was careless. Agent Lao was more prepared and helped me out of some dire circumstances," Amélie said, with a warm smile.

Lao blinked, squirming under the praise and everyone's interest.

"Good job," you said.

"Thanks," she murmured, ears turning pink. She leaned closer to you. "Prince?"

"Jemison," you said, nodding at the wounded woman. She didn't notice. Jack was supporting most of her weight. She needed proper medical attention.

Lao glanced at her briefly. "But you helped, right?"

"I helped," you smiled, touching your tanto.

Lao's eyes flicked down to your blades. She smiled back.

Feng was half awake now, muttering to herself as Hanzo fed her another energy bar and gave her small sips of something with a handwritten label on it.

"She going to be OK?" You asked.

"Low blood sugar," Hanzo said. "She's crashed."

"Is a lot more complicated than that-" Feng slurred, giggling. She flopped over on the floor, as Hanzo tried to give her more of the drink, spilling it on her chest. She glanced at Hanzo, then you, and started laughing even harder. At least, you hoped she was genuinely amused and not having a seizure.

"We might have to use an IV," Zheng said, sounding slightly frustrated. "And please don't listen to any suggestions she gives when she's in this state. The basic laws of physics are lost on her when she's like this."

Feng just lay there giggling. "Gravity sauce."

Hanzo sighed. "No, Feng."

"Yes, Feng," she laughed. "But seriously, Hanzo, gravity sauce is far less awesome than gravity marmalade, which I can make! Not to be confused with Newton's apple or his big gay occult energy. Though if we're discussing physics, I really think we need to talk more about Ibn al-Haytham and his sciencing! Yeah, that's a word! Sciencing! I am so good at sciencing! I am the best sciencer you've ever met!"

Hanzo shook his head, and reached for a towel. But he looked a lot less aggravated than
"Try more protein, if you can get her to eat. And try to get her to eat, or she'll talk nonstop and wake up terribly embarrassed," Zheng said, though there was something less distant to her now. There was something humanizing in how focused she was on caring for Feng. It made you dislike her just a little less.

You retrieved the medkits and nanite injectors from the medical supply locker and passed them out. You would need help with your injection, but first, you had to get your armor off.

Jack had helped Jemison onto a bench, carefully strapping her in a seat in range of the emitter. She slumped there. He sat next to her, clearly worried.

You took a seat beside him. He touched your shoulder and you nodded, his hands carefully undoing your armor seals. You handed him the syringe and then winced as he pushed the needle into your back. The pain was short-lived, giving way to an almost uncomfortable heat. You squirmed, because you'd already taken a nanite injection and a round of emitter healing in the last few hours. Once this was over you were going to go down hard and sleep for two days.

Jack put an arm around your shoulder, exhaling slowly. "I know a lot's happened, and that you or Athena will have to brief me, but give me a few minutes to decompress. I'm still...processing everything."

"Of course," you said, squeezing his hand. He leaned over and nuzzled your cheek. You understood that need. Because there was a lot to tell, and most of it wasn't good. You still weren't sure how to explain Gabriel's condition. Giving bad news gracefully was not a skill you had mastered. Maybe you'd let Athena take the lead on that part. It seemed cowardly, but you were too close. Every way you tried to phrase it sounded wrong in your head. "I'll definitely need Athena's help. She has more technical data."

Jack kissed the side of your neck. "Thank you, baby."

There was a crash, and when you looked up, Lao was frantically trying to push her gear back into the locker, eyes everywhere but on you and Jack.

"She didn't know?" Jack asked, raising a brow.

You sighed. Sometimes Jack was inconveniently perceptive. "We were in a hurry. Didn't get around to telling her about that part," you said, rubbing the back of your neck. You had not told her about the other part either. Well, that would come out too, probably sooner than later. You sighed, unsure of how to explain yourself.

"You're not telling your friends about your relationships?" Jack asked, nudging you lightly with his elbow, a mock wounded expression on his face. He kissed you again, possibly out of affection, but mostly because he was a show-off. "Are you embarrassed by me?"

"Socks with sandals," you managed to mutter, face a little too warm.

Ziv had always been aware that his brusque and demanding demeanor would not win him friends. But early on, he learned that the consequences of backing down were far worse than simple loneliness. He could never afford to look weak, not to his father and not to his peers. If people thought someone was weak, they'd end up face down in the dirt, a foot on their neck, their teeth kicked in. And no one was going to step up to save them, because if they were weak, what was the point? They might not deserve what they got, but who was going to risk their neck to save
someone who couldn't return the favor? Ziv learned that lesson very young and very fast.

So like Savta, who might not have been the best role model for a small child, he had always counted on the fact that his actions would demonstrate what his words could not. He believed that people would either be smart enough to recognize his value, or they weren't worth knowing anyway.

His time in Unit 8200 reinforced that fact. Like most Israeli citizens, he'd done his mandatory military service. But he'd been seconded to the army's elite cyber warfare unit - something particularly important in the aftermath of the Omnic Crisis. Other government branches had tried to lure him in, but it was Unit 8200 or nothing at all. Fuck the Mossad, they were a bunch of conniving political hacks - Savta had warned him to steer clear of their bullshit, even as she waded through it.

The IDF had a philosophy that contradicted most other militaries' core policy of hierarchical obedience. It was driven by a silly idiom: rosh gadol or "big head." Ziv was well aware what the idiom meant in English - having a "big head" meant you were overconfident and full of yourself. It was pejorative. But in Hebrew, rosh gadol referred to one's ability to think outside the box, to take the extra step to do the job right, to even fight your CO and appeal to their bosses if you knew they were wrong. The IDF encouraged soldiers with rosh gadol. Sure, the army still needed people with rosh katan or "small head." They followed orders. They did what they were told. They stuck to the parameters of their jobs and didn't push. But those with rosh gadol were to be cultivated and encouraged, especially when they got results.

Ziv most certainly had rosh gadol, and grew his hair out just to emphasize it. Because he wasn't religious. Because he liked men. Because he was dark skinned, and it didn't matter if his Jewish ancestry traced back centuries on both sides - there were plenty of "his people" who looked down on him for that alone. So Ziv fought to show he was just as good, if not better than the rest of them, and if they didn't like him, well, that didn't matter. They respected him. He didn't give them any other options.

He'd taken the same approach to Blackwatch, though, maybe that hadn't been the best choice. But he wasn't going to ride in on his grandmother's reputation and depend on your protection. Ziv established himself the best way he knew how, by butting heads and showing he had the skills to back up his attitude. Though now he understood that maybe he didn't have as much to prove as he thought he did. You, Riggs, and McCree probably would have accepted him no matter what.

The rest of Blackwatch though? He wasn't so sure. After all, it had been riddled with traitors when he came in. There weren't a lot of people he could trust. Being friendly then wasn't worth a damn. There was no reason to change his behavior.

Not to mention that some assholes went out their way to malign you - something Ziv wouldn't stand for, and maybe one of the reasons he'd gotten such a prickly reputation so early on. Not that he was going to admit any of that to you. You already knew people were talking shit. You didn't need him to give you the details. So Ziv kept that part to himself, even if he couldn't keep his head down and his mouth shut in the face of slander and bullshit. McCree and Genji backed him up one day, when a particularly loud confrontation got physical. And no one thought it necessary to tell you. You had enough to deal with.

So when he ended up in the Commander's office regularly in those first few months, he never explicitly stated the cause of those conflicts, only that the other guy "had it coming." When you and Reyes asked him why he kept getting into fights, he would just shrug and mumble a half-
assed apology - it was grade school all over again. But after the second month, he thought Reyes might have caught on. Because while he'd gotten lectured and "verbally coached," no disciplinary action was ever taken. Sometimes there were people who just understood the situation or one's intentions without words having to be spoken. Ziv strongly preferred this approach. Even after things improved, it was a hard habit to break.

But then Gérard and Amélie had come into his world, effortlessly showcasing how one did not need to be abrasive to be formidable. They were charming, dangerous, and competent, and everyone knew it. Ziv could not stay away. It was just Gérard at first - that flirtatious French accent, rich laugh, and devious sense of humor. Gérard fascinated Ziv, an attraction made more appealing by how much you kept warning him off. "Don't go after him, he's taken?" Oh, that was rich coming from you. Of course, to be fair, you were too dumb to realize how besotted you were with Commander Growly-Face, and the only deception involved on your part was self-delusion. So you weren't quite a hypocrite.

But that kind of obliviousness wasn't part of Ziv's character. Ziv was a man who knew what he wanted. Just like he knew your advice was sound, and that one misstep would complicate everything. He wasn't going to risk it, not that he'd admit any of that to your face.

Except then Amélie moved onto the base, and then suddenly they were having lunch together, talking about everything - culture, fashion, sabotage, and their shared friendship with you. Amélie flirted, yes, but she flirted with most people and with her it was just good fun. There was no discomfort, no expectation. She pushed the boundaries, but she never crossed his. She was incredibly beautiful and charismatic. Even if Ziv was not attracted to her, he appreciated her charm. And she knew that he liked her husband, and didn't seem to mind at all.

They were so very different than he was, and yet, they liked him and recognized his value. Yes, he'd blustered with Gérard in the beginning. Though the older man hadn't seemed to care about Ziv's delivery, only the content of his work. When Ziv had botched an encounter with a Talon agent in Shanghai, he thought for sure it would shift the balance of the power, that maybe this single mistake had negated his worth in the older man's eyes. But Gérard had only clucked his tongue and knifed the man in the ribs, and told him to be more careful next time. For a man who spun multiple webs of intrigue, there were refreshingly few games between him and Gérard. And Amélie played none, at least when it came to stating their goals within their relationships. She said what she meant, and abided by it. Though, Ziv was starting to suspect that both of them were seeing who could be the more civilizing influence on him. Amélie was obviously winning, because of course she was.

It was a startling realization that there were other just as effective ways to succeed at life. But Ziv was his own man. He would not, could not change overnight, and he didn't truly feel like he needed to completely overhaul his approach to people. Though he found himself being more polite to his coworkers, if only because it made Riggs more comfortable, and not at all because they went to you to complain about his intransigence. And then you...reacted.

Ziv seethed quietly. You were a fucking idiot, and he was mad at you. And he would continue to be mad at you when you came home with more stupid injuries because you were stupid, and reckless, and left him here. And maybe you were right to do so, but fuck that kind of reasonable thinking. That was rosh katan, and he wasn't about that.

So here he sat, next to Gérard's bed, a pistol in his lap, two heavily customized drones hovering by the door, wondering what he was going to do.

Gérard sat upright in the bed, shirtless, having removed the hospital gown as soon as he
awakened. The was a mirror in his hand and a bandage over his empty eye socket. But he wasn't looking at his own face. He was checking his back and other hard-to-see injuries.

"Amélie's letter suggests that I should choose a blue implant - the heterochromia would be most striking. She has always been a fan of David Bowie, so I am not surprised. Your thoughts?"

"They have color changing pseudo-irises now," Ziv said, having already looked into their options on the return trip from Hanoi. "On top of the cybernetic enhancements, you could also have one glowing evil eye, if you liked."

Gérard laughed, sounding genuinely amused. "Would you like that?"

"I'd like it if you didn't get hurt in the first place," Ziv said sharply.

Gérard just smiled like a cat. "True, I would have preferred that option as well. But I cannot complain if it means you are here to watch over me.

Ziv's scowl deepened. Gérard was most charming when he was about to do something everyone else disliked. "Gérard-

"I have had several hours of nanite regeneration. I am feeling much better."

"Great, you're staying in here. McCree and the gang are holding off the armored Talon platoon just fine without you. You aren't in any shape to go out there."

"I agree," Gérard said, tone mild. "But if it is just you, Maeda Vargas, and Vo guarding Gabriel and me, I believe you should-

"Isha is in the vents-

"Of course she is," Gérard said, giving the wall a wry glance.

There was a soft thrum of acknowledgement from behind the grating.

Ziv caught himself smiling, in spite of himself and quickly turned his glare back to a certain scheming bastard.

"Someone will come after me," Gérard said. "But contrary to what they suspect, I am awake and clear-headed."

"Your depth perception-

"I don't need it to point and shoot," he said with that stupid smug sexy laugh. "You can also leave me a drone. It will be fine. I think you are needed elsewhere."

Ziv's scowl deepened. He knew exactly what Gérard was suggesting. And it was too much. "Why should I? I don't even like that overbearing, mouth-breathing, meathead."

Gérard just laughed. "Even though you admit that that overbearing, mouth-breathing, meathead is the best commanding officer you've ever had, personal feelings aside?"

Ziv fumed, really regretting that admission during late night pillow talk. Yes, Reyes was a good CO. He got the job done. He backed up his people. He didn't sacrifice them to politics. And maybe he wasn't really that much of a mouth-breathing meathead, but the asshole was dating you, and well, Ziv knew whose side he was on if things went sour.
"We both know I am the better shot, mon chou," Gérard said, not unkindly. "And my hands are steady, see?" He held his hands out, open palms to Ziv. "I know you will do everything in your power to protect me, but doesn't it make more sense if we are both prepared?"

"Gérard-

"It would also be a great comfort if I had the means to defend myself, as injured as I may appear. But if you are concerned that I will hurt myself, well, I defer to your judgment."

"Oh that's not even right!" Ziv snarled, because while Gérard might not play games with their relationship, doing so for missions, grooming time, and meal selection seemed to be standard fare.

Gérard just shook his head. "What's not right is that Jack is missing, Ana has been sent to Greece, and McCree is defending us from both the UN and Talon. But please consider the social debt Gabriel will have if you safeguard him while he is unconscious. Provided you do not graffiti his face with permanent marker."

Ziv threw his hands up. "You're as bad as Lucky!"

Gérard began to laugh and then winced. "Please, I am not that bad. I am only asking you to go next door and look after a less fortunate man. And also because I know that if I need help, you will come running."

Ziv groaned, carefully handing Gérard his spare pistol. The older man's fingers brushed his own, squeezing gently.

"I'm not doing it for him," Ziv said.

"D'accord. Chanceux will appreciate it though."

"She can eat a bag of dicks," Ziv said sharply, pulling his hand away, because he didn't want to talk about you. Not till you got back and he got to yell at you more for leaving him behind.

"Your knives are flying low, but I am concerned about her too," Gérard said without missing a beat. "We must remember that she is quite resilient. I suppose I am more worried that Amélie will do something rash. I know that staying behind was hard on her and I know the opportunity to do good is what she needs right now. It can be most unpleasant for everyone when she has a great deal of pent up frustration."

Ziv squinted at him, not missing that ridiculous subtext.

"So I appreciate that you are the sensible one," Gérard continued warmly. "Perhaps she and I are too risk-oriented. Your well-grounded caution is a welcome balance."

"You can stop bullshitting now. I'll go over there, and look after Reyes' stupid face, and make sure no one holds a pillow over it."

Ziv rose, and felt a tug on the back of his shirt. Groaning, he turned around leaned over and Gérard kissed him, gently cupping his face. "This is not something I would ask of just anyone. Thank you for looking after my friend when I cannot."

Ziv felt his cheeks heat up. "Ben-zona-"
"If you're worried, send Vo in. I know she has questions."

Ziv gave his lover a sidelong glance, because he knew some parts of Gérard's history with Vo and Nguyen. And Vo was unpredictable on the best of days, let alone on the day she lost her boss and part-time caretaker. But Gérard just smiled placidly, looking like he didn't have a care in the world.

It started small, a trickle of snipers on the rooftops. Lowell and Jeong on an adjacent building, Park and another agent on the other. They weren't Ana or even Amélie, but Jesse was glad for all the help he could get.

The drones came next: mobile turrets and shielding units moved to the front lines, extending their cover and taking the heat off Genji and Winston. The enemy line was starting to fracture. Though they were now lobbing more mortars from a closer range, and Jesse swore as one slipped between a gap in the shield walls and struck the White Rabbit emplacement.

There was silence - no visible explosion, and then a muted boom. Jesse paused his own advance to peer to the side.

A shriek sounded over the comms.

"Mom!" Mika's voice cut through Jesse's chest, and his breath caught. "Mom-

"Agent Ajiyiming is down. It is...severe. Requesting support," a man said over the comms, his voice shaky.

"Angela-" Genji said looking toward the other side of the infirmary.

"On my way," she said.

"Did you know-?" Jesse clenched his fist.

"No. But On Sing is a family business," Genji said. "It does not come as a complete surprise." He turned to escort Angela across the field.

Jesse winced. It might not surprise the Yakuza Princeling, but Jesse had not been prepared for it. He wasn't sure if that would have changed anything, but... He shook his head. No, it wouldn't have changed a damn thing. He ground his teeth, eyeing the spot the explosives had come from. "If someone can do something about the mortars-"

"On it," Lowell said, voice tense.

"Clearing our zone," Park said.

Jesse caught sight of three clusters of Talon agents jerking backward, doing a ragged bullet dance, before dropping onto the ground. The mortars and artillery abruptly stopped as the enemy tried to retreat back toward the forest.

And that's when the other half of the Overwatch agents appeared, having circled around the field for a pincer attack. Getting at least two dozen more agents in the field made a very big difference.

With Athena maintaining the infirmary perimeter, Jesse and Winston stalked out onto the field, ready to clean it all up. The rest of the battle would not take long. Talon soldiers seemed
remarkably willing to surrender when the odds shifted out of their favor—they seemed rather
certain about it, like they didn't expect the consequences to be too harsh.

"Potime?" He asked Genji over the private comms as he headed back to the infirmary.

"...No," Genji said, voice grim.

"I see." Jesse exhaled slowly. "Other casualties?"

"Nothing severe. The timing was off—-it didn't detonate immediately. Patime jumped on the
mortar. Her body absorbed the impact." And the shrapnel. She was a soldier. She understood
exactly what she was doing. Just like the Commander must have when he-

Jesse gritted his teeth. "Goddamnit." Guilt and regret left a sour taste in his mouth.

"We'll handle things here and keep the perimeter," Genji said.

"Thanks."

Shooting and taking ground was far easier than thinking about sacrifice and loss. It was not
hard to redirect his anger at the ones who deserved it. Jesse was halfway across the battlefield
before he realized that he was alone, all the enemies who had been in front of him were dead,
captures, or fleeing. They didn't make it very far. Overwatch agents took more prisoners than
Blackwatch agents, but they had the advantage of numbers. Jesse still had to remind himself that
after this point, he was no longer allowed to just walk up and shoot any of the enemy in the head,
at least not with all these witnesses. Even if the bastards deserved it.

The trees began to bow and a great roaring came from overhead. A shadow fell across the
field. Jesse shielded his eyes as he looked up, a massive air carrier with UN markings began to
descend. The Overwatch agents backed up, watching as it landed in the grass and the hatch
opened up.

A tall brunette man stepped out, wearing a startlingly accurate replica of the Strike
Commander's coat over an Overwatch uniform. The major difference was a blue sash across his
chest with the white UN globe emblem emblazoned across it.

Jesse was a little surprised that it wasn't Petras or Morrison. He had never laid eyes on this
bastard before. Who the fuck was this walking parade piece?

"Well-fought, soldiers!" The man announced, his voice carrying over an amplifier. He
strode into the grass, flanked by a dozen more folks in Overwatch/UN outfits, people that Jesse
had never seen before. "I am Acting Strike Commander Bell, here to provide aid." He smiled
wide, his teeth white and shiny, his features conventionally handsome. He looked like an actor,
not a real fighter, and Jesse could not suppress his eyeroll.

An Athena drone hovered by his side. "His UN credentials are authentic. The Security
Council named him Acting Strike Commander half an hour ago, but just released the information."

"Are you the Agent in Charge?" Bell's focus zoomed immediately to Jesse. He strode
forward, his people following. "You've done an excellent job defending the premises from
terrorists, Agent. Your service is commendable. Don't worry, we're here to help. You can stand
down now. The United Nations has sent us to take charge of the situation."

Jesse crossed his arms, his smile sardonic. "Mighty kind of them."
Bell stopped, smile wavering. "I'm sorry it took us so long. You've done very well for yourself, Agent-" He looked Jesse over. "But our orders come from a higher power. The conflict is over. You are to disperse and prepare for debrief. We will handle all further security. As of right now, you are formally relieved from maintaining the infirmary quarantine-"

"Isn't that convenient?" Jesse asked, not moving. Some political nominee just swept in after a clear series of betrayals, claiming to have the situation under control? Did they think he was born yesterday? This stunk worse than Mihret's summer running shoes, and he'd helped you burn those.

"I don't appreciate your tone."

"I have my orders from Captain Amari," Jesse said. "And they're to hold this infirmary."

"Are you sure you want the responsibility for all these people's lives on your conscience? Especially if things go wrong? Because you can still help smooth things over. You can ensure the safety of your friends. If you're the agent in charge of this operation, and you don't do everything you can to prevent bloodshed, well those lives will be on your head." Bell's eyes glittered, the menace in his voice understated as "concern." "I don't know if you've really considered all the consequences of going rogue, agent."

Jesse snorted, not willing to take the bait. "Ain't no pissing contest, and certainly ain't no rebellion. Just following orders." He gave an easy smile. "But since we're all on the same side, you shouldn't mind waiting till one of my direct COs can relieve me."

"I'm afraid that's not how this works," Bell said firmly. "We have a chain of command and-"

"I'm afraid that doesn't mean a thing to me. You ain't Strike Commander Morrison. You ain't Commander Reyes. And you sure as hell ain't Captain Amari." Jesse's grin was savage. "My orders come from them."

"Your loyalty is admirable. I would hate to court martial you for insubordination," Bell said. "I realize after a battle your blood is running hot. I can overlook this little misunderstanding. After all, all of you have such promising careers. Don't throw that away-"

"Do you hear him shitting out his mouth? He must think we're idiots," Daniels muttered over the Overwatch comm channel, sounding genuinely furious, and Jesse realized then that Athena was broadcasting this exchange. Oh shit- what if he had something stuck in his teeth? You and Genji would never let him live it down.

"What a prick," Park said with a snort. "You're not buying any of that malarkey, are you McCree?"

Grinning, Jesse backed up, not missing how Bell's unit was spreading out, trying to take control of the field. "Stay in cover, guys," Jesse said. "And hold fire. These guys are itching for an excuse."

"You are making a big mistake-" Bell shouted.

"Sorry, Acting Commander," Jesse chuckled as he headed back to the infirmary. "I'm just following orders from my chain of command. And I've got a quarantine to maintain."
Weather's gotten cold and wrists are twinging. Still working too much. -_-;;

Other than that, had a pleasantly low key holiday and trying to figure out how to have a life outside of work.

Edit: After listening to two days of conspiracy theory and pseudoscience podcasts, I've decided I will take up chaos magic as my new hobby. Because why not? Lol, I'm kidding. Probably.

I did start My Time at Portia. It's very charming. XD
Chapter 131

Chapter Summary

Gunshot wounds, wayward youth, and what happened to the Morrison family.

Chapter Notes

Received art for Christmas. Unf.

My cousin and a friend commissioned Yumi to make a full color picture that was sitting on my new bookshelves Christmas morning.

A certain Ugandan Knuckles Anon made a lovely gif of my pets eating food from IAL.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack sat very quietly while Athena gave him the rundown of the situation: for Operation Pelennor, Jesse was in charge of the protecting the infirmary and everyone in it. Gérard was out of commission and Gabriel was missing parts and in an induced coma. The infirmary was under attack, but some of the rank and file agents had gone in to provide backup. For Operation Morpheus, Ana had lead a team of SEP veterans and the remaining Overwatch founders to Greece and they were...very outnumbered. And his family could not be reached, though Senator Armstrong had diverted a trusted Marine unit, led by a certain sharpshooting Captain Vashtai DeVevo to provide support. They had not yet reached Indiana.

And since Jack was MIA and Gabriel was incapacitated, the UN had named an "Acting Strike Commander," despite the protests of Undersecretary Kwento and several other delegates. You gritted your teeth: he might be harmless, but you doubted it.

Feng lay on the floor, snoring loudly as Hanzo sat beside her, closely eyeing a medical monitoring device on her wrist. She jolted up, eyes wide and unseeing, hissed a name you did not recognize, and then dropped onto her back, Hanzo's arm cushioning her head. "We lost her..." she moaned, eyes falling shut.

Hanzo grimaced and looked at the Zheng drone. "Is she seizing?"

"It's no hallucination. We always know our own," Zheng said, voice flat. "Patime Ajiyiming is dead."

That Zheng already knew came as no surprise. She had contact with the squad and with Athena. But how did Feng know? She'd been unconscious. You didn't have an easy answer, and Lao looked genuinely freaked out, hands shaking as she gave you her intense, "I told you so" glare.
Jemison kept fading in and out of consciousness, struggling to pay attention to the updates, but also nursing a nasty headwound.

Amélie cleaned her gun, chatting about nothing of importance with Lao, but keeping your friend occupied and calm, while she performed maintenance her own gear. There was blood on her prosthetic arm, though she didn't look injured. You had a sneaking suspicion that Lao had gotten up close and personal with the enemy. Though your hacker sent you some pretty pointed glances every few minutes, looking between you and Jack like she couldn't quite believe it.

You weren't sure how to take that but...well, you'd deal with it later.

Jack's expression had gone flat during Athena's briefing. He sat beside you, hands folded in his lap, eyes hard as he took in the information. This was the Strike Commander now, a man whose world was in chaos, and who was going to do whatever it took to make things right. It hurt some part of you to see him close up like that, but you understood. Compartmentalization was a great coping mechanism.

You were less than half an hour away, On Sing's stealthcraft making excellent time.

"Once we drop off our wounded, how do you want to split our resources?" You asked, wondering if you'd end up in Indiana or Greece.

"Greece is our focus," he said, jaw tight. He didn't meet your eyes. But you already knew his priorities, and while you weren't sure you could make the same decisions, you understood.

You placed your hands over his. "There are Blackwatch agents more equipped for small-scale operations. I can draw up a list-

He gave a sharp nod. "You have full operational authority. Thank you."

"With Chang, On Sing, and DeVevo's people on site, things should be handled," you said, trying to sound convincing. You wouldn't be able to send anyone till the situation at headquarters was sorted.

Jack managed a small smile. "Yeah, I know."

"Oh, this is bad-" Athena's drone hovered in front of you. "The Acting Strike Commander has just ordered Agent McCree to stand down and hand over operational control to him. And Jesse doesn't like that order."

"Blackwatch cowboys seem to have trouble following orders and keeping a lid on the backtalk. It's nice to know that some things don't change," Jack muttered, no real hostility in his voice. "Athena, bring up the cameras." He rose and you followed him to the terminal. An aerial shot of the Overwatch campus appeared, along with numerous camera angles showing smoking craters, active turrets, and lots of dead bodies in Overwatch blue. Jack flinched, though you all knew that the enemy had worn stolen uniforms, the visual was still a gut punch.

"Guess we better land in the training field," you said. "And maybe we should broadcast this encounter. For insurance."

Jack blinked, giving you a sideways look. "You're normally the sneaky one. Have you developed Gabe's flair for drama?"

"Not at all," you said. "But I don't want to give them a chance to assassinate you and bury this. We're about to burn some pretty nasty conspirators." You grinned at Amélie and Lao, and
then the still restrained Murdoch. "We're going to have to go public anyway."

Jack nodded grimly. "Optics are a bitch." He studied the dossiers that Athena provided, as well as the terrain. "It would be best if Feng and Agent Shimada stay out of sight. Auntie Zheng, Agent Shimada, I'll need you to keep Murdoch and the wounded safe." He looked at you, Amélie, and Lao. "Can I count on the rest of you?"

Lao saluted crisply, her face rigid.

Amélie's salute was jaunty and almost relaxed. She smiled lazily, like she was already thinking about what kind of cheese she wanted to have at the celebration afterward.

You nodded, squeezing his hand.

"I will set us down between the infirmary and Bell's forces," Zheng said. "The ship's cameras and those within Athena's control will livestream directly through White Rabbit and Overwatch social media. I'm already fortifying our cyber defense structures in case of DDOS and other attempts to take your broadcast offline."

You adjusted your gear, carbine in hand. The ship began to descend into the field. It was time to make an entrance.

"Ready?" Jack asked, already heading down the ramp.

"Yes, sir," you said, right behind him. "The Bitch Squad is ready to go!"

Amélie's delighted laugh echoed in your ears.

"Is that really what you're calling it?" Lao gasped.

Jack just gave you a wry grin over his shoulder. "Well, who am I to argue?" He winked at you, delight brightening his face for half a second before he schooled his expression to something more regal. "Let's move out: it's show time."

When Ziv got back from Coronado, his penal boot camp sentence completed, he wasn't happy to find Maeda Vargas trailing behind you like an eager puppy. He took one look at the kid and wondered, briefly, if you were fed up with his shit and had taken applications for a more grateful sidekick. Maybe that was just how things would be. Ziv pushed, and pushed, and pushed till people took the hint and walked right out of his life. Family, lovers, so-called friends... It was a sickening feeling, realizing that he'd been the catalyst, driving people away for reasons he hadn't wanted to address at the time. It was easy to be shitty, and then when people got fed up, he could write them off like they hadn't been worth it to begin with. It was easier to shift the blame onto other people, to ignore his own faults.

Ziv had a lot of guilt over how Operation Spinshot played out. Sure, Morrison was a hypocritical asshole, but Ziv wasn't delusional enough to pretend like he wasn't in the wrong himself. You acknowledged that, told him off, and still stepped up to defend him. You didn't do it because you thought he'd owe you afterward or as some power play with Morrison. You did it because you valued him and knowing that you were willing to do that, that you'd back him against The Jack Morrison - your ridiculously attractive war hero lover - still made his stomach churn.

And maybe, he realized a bit later, Gérard had been tweaking him with little bits of gossip,
just enough to push him to react more directly, instead of slowly withdrawing. Gérard was a manipulative bastard, though he seemed to be using those wiles for the forces of chaotic good. Well, at least in Ziv's life. Ziv wasn't that naive to mistake his lover for an altruist.

So already half convinced that you'd replaced him with Maeda Vargas, he'd confronted you about it, expecting you to say something like, "well that's what you get for being an ass." He knew, on some level, that his behavior warranted retaliation. That maybe he wasn't good enough at being a friend and you certainly didn't deserve all his crap. That everyone else in his life might have had a good reason to leave him. But instead you had just looked confused, tired, and obviously hurt.

That reaction was worse than any of the snarky comments he had been expecting. It was a terrible realization, that maybe he'd been judging people wrong for too long. That all of the predictions of loneliness and abandonment might be self-fulfilling prophecies. That in protecting himself, maybe he was his own worst enemy. Ziv had resolved right then to do better. But to still keep an eye on that punk ass kid who thought he could worm his way into Blackwatch.

Then Greece had happened - those 36 awful hours of waiting for the Commanders to find what was left of you and McCree. He didn't really give the boy a second thought till he found that Maeda Vargas had been with you, and had survived. And even if he'd been dubiously useful, Maeda Vargas had been in the field with you when Ziv was not. And Ziv realized his worries were misplaced - Ziv was OK in the field. But Maeda Vargas would be better. And you needed all the help you could get.

It was easier than he expected to start up conversation with the younger man. They both worked with Reinhardt on a regular basis and it would be stranger if they didn't talk. And for some stupid inexplicable reason, the kid liked him. It was probably his proximity to you and Reinhardt that paved the way. Reinhardt was ridiculously decent, and had a knack for bringing out the good behavior in people. You had apparently left an impression on the kid - either from being an insane instructor or more likely, because you'd saved his life. Maeda Vargas had taken some head trauma in Greece. That was also a feasible explanation.

The point was, the kid was smart, earnest, and actually fairly clever. Yeah, he asked questions about your exploits, but he wasn't just fixated on you. The boy wanted to be a Blackwatch operative, and Ziv had to admit, Maeda Vargas would be a good one.

So he wasn't surprised to see the boy pacing the hall, checking the safety mirror, vents, and flipping between several comm channels. Vo was more staid, preferring to slouch in a chair, rolling some weird little fidget toys in her small hands. She glanced at the door, shrewd eyes narrowing.

"He's awake. Said you might have questions and to go on in," Ziv said.

Vo nodded at him, slipping out of her seat. "I watch him then. Don't worry, I know his tricks. He can't sweet talk me." She gave him a sardonic look.

Ziv scowled at her. "He didn't-"

Vo just snorted and pushed by him. "Watch Commander. That's an order from senior agent: me." She went into Gérard's room, shut the door, and turned the lock.

Ziv stared for a moment, jaw moving but no words coming out. Vo Min was the senior agent and technically, only technically by the barest possible definition, in charge. 77N7V7. Now there was a terrible realization.
"Gérard's awake. I left him a drone, a gun, and Vo. I think that might be overkill," he said, when Maeda Vargas stopped pacing in front of him.

"Athena thinks there's someone in the vents," Maeda Vargas said, lips pressed together in a thin line. He crossed his arms, brow furrowed as he looked between Gérard's room and Reyes' room. "No idea where though."

"And everyone else is mopping up the Talon offensive... They're biding their time." Ziv unlocked the door to Reyes' room. Realizing Maeda Vargas was still in the hallway, he beckoned the younger agent in after him.

Maeda Vargas followed, still looking around. "Getting to that port would be ideal, assuming they have blueprints." He pointed to the spot where Isha was concealed. "But Agent Shimada said that that route isn't readily accessible. I think he crawled in there and put in razor wire or something. It's more likely that they'll probably pick a secluded area on this level and walk in. Because they're not expecting too much resistance."

"So we should-"

There was a faint beep and the security lock clicked - that wasn't supposed to happen. Unless it was an override- The door opened right then, two men in scrubs and surgical masks pushed in, the one in the front held a handgun. There was a "pop!" and Távio swore fluidly in Portuguese, falling backward into a chair. Isha shrieked, the vent cover clanging.

Ziv's drone was already moving from the hallway. More shots came from outside the room, and the man in the rear dropped.

The man in front slammed the door shut, leaving his comrade's body and leveled his gun at Ziv. "We're not after you. Back away, and you'll get to walk away."

Ziv snorted. Like he bought that. But he would not be fast enough to draw his weapon before the man shot him. He had never been much for close combat or even guns. He did not particularly like Reyes. But he did not know how to back down either. He had a wounded junior agent, armored plates under his coat, and a raptor niece as backup.

Taking a deep breath, Ziv smiled at the man, and charged, even as he heard the muffled shots, and felt his body jerk on impact. So what? Ziv Mihret did not give ground.

_Rosh gadol_, bitches.

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The stealthcraft hovered about a meter over the ground, grass and dust whirling around. Jack jumped out first, landing on his feet and walking straight toward Bell's squad. You followed, gritting your teeth as you landed, the impact jarring your sore bones. Amélie and Lao spread out beside you, you were on his left, Amélie in the center, Lao on the right. Your sniper would need the best view of the field, and most shooters were right handed, so you expected the most fire from that side. Lao could do her job from any spot. The three of held your guns in ready position as Jack advanced onto the field.

Bell stared, his silhouette very much like Jack's. He was of a similar build, his uniform and haircut a variant of the Strike Commander. The resemblance looked like someone's clever marketing decision, meant to tie the public's perception of Jack to Bell. Because of course the Bad Guys had smart PR. "M-Morrison? But you're dead-"
Jack laughed darkly. "Is that so?" He stopped in the center of the field, in clear view of all. "I wonder who thought to spread that around. Awfully convenient, isn't it?"

Bell laughed nervously. "Come now, Morrison, it was a terrible accident, and an honest mistake. I'm just--"

"It's been less than twenty four hours and there was nothing accidental or honest about the ambush and murder of my agents," Jack said coldly.

The three of you stood behind Jack, faces severe. You were his entourage, his bodyguards, and even if there were only three of you, you were worth more than any of these pretend soldiers with their stolen valor and political scheming.

"You need to leave immediately," the Strike Commander said, gravelly voice carrying across the field.

"I have ord--"

"The mission has changed, obviously. Get out and take your parade guard with you."

"You have no authority over me," Bell snarled, straightening up. "I have been charged by the UN.""

"And you have no authority here," Jack said with a slow even drawl, and you could picture the hard cold smile on his face, the vicious slant of his eyes.

"Morrison, don't be rash. You might do something that you'll regret--"

"Lucky, get down!" Athena's voice echoed over the comms.

You started to drop, already looking around for whomever was going to attack or shoot you.

There was a snarl of rage as Jack lunged backward, eyes wild as he tackled you all the way to the ground. The thunder crack of a gunshot ended the tense quiet on the battlefield.

There was a lot of screaming over the comms, and you heard more shots in the distance. Strangled curses didn't quite make it out of your mouth as you landed, pain reverberating in your back. Jack's not insignificant weight pinned you to the grass. One arm cradled your head. He shuddered, panting as he looked down at you, real panic in his eyes. "You OK?"

"Fucking great! But you--" You lifted your arms, frantically feeling his back for blood.

"I'm fine," he growled. "Didn't penetrate."

He'd been hit. The realization made your insides shrivel. "You--"

" Armored coat, remember?" He tried to give you a cocky grin, but he grimaced, obviously hurt.

"Jack--"

He just shook his head, pushed himself up onto his knuckles, his body still shielding yours. "Stay low." And then he bounced back up, from pushup position to his feet, stalked over to "Acting Strike Commander Bell."
"Morrison, I don't know what kind of show you're running. But you can't put this on me. I had nothing to do with-"

Jack slugged him.

Bell crumpled, and were those teeth...?

Lao and Amélie were at your side, guns up as they scanned the area.

You sat up, Jack already stalking back to you, limping slightly. You could see veins cording in his neck, his hands curled into tight fists, a familiar sort of madness gleaming in his eyes.

"Where are you hit?" You asked, still sitting in the grass.

"Bullet struck mid back. Going to have a bruise is all." He extended his arm, and you took it. He pulled you off the ground with one swift move and you stumbled forward into his arms, a little overextended. There was a moment of him steadying you, you looking up at him, before he released you, conscious of all the witnesses in the field. "You're not hurt?"

"Nothing new-"

"We got him, Commander! It's one of those UN parade guards all right. Athena's scanning his gear! Is Agent Strike all right?"

You blinked, recognizing Lowell's worried voice. When had they returned to HQ? "I'm fine, Lowell," you said, rubbing your tender back. "Thanks, Jack."

He looked down at you, jaw tight, eyes lined with worry. He didn't speak.

"I'm OK, Jack," you said softly, recognizing the fear in his eyes, the tension in his stance. You'd been there a lot today. "Thank you."

He nodded once, shoulders easing slightly, and turned to the remnants of Bell's forces. "In light of recent events, it looks like you'll be staying here after all. I'm sure you won't mind being our guests while we sort out why one of yours just tried to assassinate my agent." The Strike Commander didn't leave room for protest, he just nodded at Amélie and Lao who stepped forward.

Bell's men were already laying down their weapons, some of them looking very confused.

Petras had already tried to kill you more than once. It would not be a surprise if he had put a bounty on you. That he was dead, probably wouldn't change that, especially if he'd set money aside for the job in advance. Hell, there were plenty of political figures who could benefit by getting you out of the way.

"Commander, there's been an attack within the infirmary inside Commander Reyes' room," Athena said. "Jesse and Genji are heading there now-"

You broke into a run, body aching as you moved.

And then Jack was running too, easily outpacing you as you both raced toward the battle-damaged building, praying that you weren't too late.
Michael Nathaniel Morrison had been wary of Sergeant Chang and her people from the start. His parents had too, though they'd been much quieter and politer about their concerns. Maggie and Jane didn't seem to have any problems with them, but then Maggie liked everyone and Jane was...Jane. He knew now that he had just been looking for any excuse to be an ass, and that his judgments in most cases were unduly harsh. But they weren't completely irrational.

At first he grumbled because he was an idiot teenager: he'd wanted Reinhardt or Captain Amari here, not some no-name, second string losers. Yes, he knew they were needed elsewhere, but if their family was as important as Jack claimed it was, then Jack should have picked better people. Sending some bitchy war buddy sergeant to guard his family seemed awfully cheap of the Strike Commander.

But then Chang was a surprise. Michael never seen her in any of the news reports about his brother and other SEP soldiers. And while he knew that it was unlikely that every super soldier would receive the attention his brother and Reyes had, he had been following their exploits in the news, social media, and live streaming sites: Rodriguez in Chile, Patel in Iberian Peninsula, Graziani in Egypt. He had never heard of Chang. So for a very brief period of time, Michael wondered if this was some cushy gig for one of Jack's exes. But he soon realized that underneath the flesh and blood of an attractive and incredibly fit woman, was a goddamn machine in disguise. Chang was hard, cold, and almost inhuman in her efficiency. She didn't seem to feel pain. Bad weather didn't faze her. She could turn anything into a weapon. Not to mention that she had the personality of sandpaper, and her subordinates always seemed to defer to her with a healthy dose of fear.

And make no mistake, Chang's people weren't normal either. Onwuachimba, the sniper, seemed OK at first, but she lapsed into weird fugues, staring into space and seemingly lost to the world around her. That was a liability for sure. Plus she didn't do well in crowds, regularly swiped food, and once, Michael would swear on his life though no one seemed to believe him, once he'd seen her eat a rabbit raw. Her face had been smeared with blood and she'd casually taken a bite and waved at him, like nothing was out of the ordinary.

...There was a chance Chang's squad had been fucking with him. But Michael wasn't so sure about that. Though if anyone was fucking with him, it was clearly Fitzpatrick.

Fitzpatrick was obviously insane - all manic energy and an obsessive love of explosives. The demolitionist was nice enough, but often crass, and Michael had overheard Jack, Reyes, and Chang discussing Fitzpatrick's obvious fondness for Maggie with some apprehension. So he'd kept an eye on the man, not leaving the crazy man alone with his sister. Fitzpatrick didn't seem to mind. The man tolerated him, even trying to include him in their conversations. But Michael wasn't going to drop his guard. Maggie, of course, laughed off his warnings as the fretting of an overanxious brother.

Maracle was actually a pretty stand up guy. He was the diplomat of the bunch, was always showing off pictures of his wife and kids, called them multiple times a day, and fuzzed like a mother hen. He always seemed to pick up on when Onwuachimba was about to have one her episodes, and often served as a calming influence on Fitzpatrick. His presence was oddly soothing, and he naturally seemed to step up as a peacemaker. He didn't seem to fit with Chang's misfits at all. Michael had realized, very early on, that Maracle was probably the sanest person there.

And then there was the real problem: Almasi. There was something off about the man. He was polite, well-mannered, and reserved, like a librarian. But it didn't feel right. Almasi was playing a part, reciting his lines by rote, his words without feeling. Whoever, whatever he was, it wasn't the pleasant healer he pretended to be. Even Jane agreed, it was not just Almasi's sharp
features, hard face, or numerous scars: he had reptilian eyes, cold, calculating, and predatory. There was something wrong with that man, and Michael noticed that out of all of Chang's people, she kept the "field medic" on the shortest leash. Wherever Chang was, she always knew Almasi's whereabouts. And while she sometimes sent Onwuachimba and Fitzpatrick off-duty to cool down, she took Almasi out to spar. Yes, it had occurred to him that they might be sleeping together, but after spending a few years with the soldiers, Michael was pretty sure that neither Chang nor Almasi were capable of romantic relationships.

So when Chang fell, shot in the head, Michael was not shocked to see Almasi rush back on to the field. He was more surprised that she hadn't just shaken it off and gotten back up, and killed her attacker, while glaring at everyone else. Chang wasn't supposed to get hurt, let alone-Suddenly he felt sick to his stomach, seeing her still body in the grass. Chang was down. And she had come to save him, even though he had...

Suddenly, the shooter's head exploded - Onwuachimba's doing, probably. But there were more coming, though the OR-14 had stopped firing. There were another half dozen approaching, guns raised.

"Come on, you idiots, work with me!" Maggie snarled, tugging on his shirt. "Michael, you've still got one good leg: use it!"

Flinching, Michael dragged himself along, blood soaking his pants. The wound stung, but it didn't hurt as much as he expected. Still, he couldn't get his right leg to obey him. Instead, he gripped Fitzpatrick's shoulder, pushing himself up on his good leg, and began to pull, using Fitzpatrick as a counterweight.

The demolitionist swore a blue streak, gripping his shattered knees.

A strong hand grabbed Michael's shoulder.

"Get back behind the barrier," Almasi said coldly. "You too, Maggie. Help your brother. I'll take care of things out here."

"Shit," Fitzpatrick muttered. "Help Michael, Mags. I'll be fine. You can come back for me. I'm not going anywhere."

"Fitzpatrick," Almasi's voice was eerily quiet. "If the Sergeant is dead, I'm going to kill you first. And it won't be easy or quick."

Michael's blood ran cold. He could guess whom Almasi would kill second, or third. He and Maggie needed to move.

Fitzpatrick gave a rasping laugh. "You fucking psycho." But there was real fear on his face. "Mags, you and Michael need to go, now."

There was a scream in the distance.

Michael froze as Maggie got under his right arm. Because their attackers were running toward them. Or more accurately, their attackers were running away from something.

There was more shooting coming from behind the OR-14.

"Move!" Almasi roared, grabbing Fitzpatrick and slinging him over his shoulder.

Michael hopped along. "What about Chang?"
Something a lot like discomfort squirmed beneath Almasi's skin. The man's jaw twitched, face struggling to mask or convey the correct emotions.

"I have clear orders. She made contingencies for everything," Almasi hissed, face hard. "I will go back for her."

Maracle and Onwuachimba laid down cover fire, though it seemed like the enemy was no longer shooting at them. Almasi dumped Fitzpatrick in a pile on the ground, and instead of taking off to check on Chang, he opened up a medkit and began begrudgingly patching the other man up. Michael wasn't sure why Almasi didn't go back for Chang, except that maybe her orders had prioritized everyone else... Or maybe she was undeniably dead, and there was no point.

Michael swallowed roughly, unable to wrap his head around the idea that Chang might be gone. He might not have liked her at first...but a lot had changed over the years. If Chang was gone, it was his fault. That he was responsible for the death of the hardass woman who'd taught him how to fight and taken a hand in manually adjusting his shit attitude. Because whatever Chang thought of him, he respected the hell out of her. He couldn't imagine facing Jack, or you, and explaining that his stupidity had gotten her killed. Hell, he didn't want to look at the rest of her squad right now, afraid of the unspoken accusation in their eyes.

Fitzpatrick flinched at Almasi's rough handling, but didn't complain. He did look like he half expected the other man to snap his neck...

"Michael, that's a lot of blood. Come on, let's get you cleaned up," Maggie's face was pale, and she put pressure on his thigh, her compress coming away heavily stained. "Michael-

"Doesn't hurt too badly. Don't really feel much anyway." Michael laughed weakly.

"That's a bad sign." And then Almasi crouched beside him, eyes cold. He cut away the blood-soaked fabric and took a look at the wound. Shaking his head, he began applying a medic gel. It would harden quickly, stop the bleeding, and disinfect the wound. Michael grunted in pain. He was starting to feel light-headed...

Almasi's hands were cold, and he handled Michael with clinical efficiency. "Missed your femoral, good thing too, otherwise we wouldn't be having this conversation. Wrap it for now. Keep pressure on it” He set up a nanite emitter. "Don't move."

Michael blinked, in the distance it looked like a figure with a...spear was angrily stabbing the OR-14. Maybe he'd lost too much blood because that didn't make sense? There was still plenty of gunfire, though, a lot less men than before. In fact, one of them was just rushing toward them, hands empty, fear clear on his face, right before a bullet tore through it, hit the kinetic shields, and dropped harmlessly to the ground.

The OR-14 toppled soon after, the enemy soldiers downed. A man walked through the field, checking bodies, and then shooting some in the head. Maggie squeaked. Michael didn't blame her. A woman appeared at his side, and they began to walk across the field. They were a little younger than his parents, the thin redheaded man with a sniper rifle slung across his shoulders and a petite Asian woman, her fine angry features very familiar, a long spear in her hands.

...Well, he hadn't hallucinated that part.

"Everyone OK?" The man called, his folksy tone very friendly.

"Who the hell is that?" Fitzpatrick muttered.
"Our backup," Michael said, after a moment.

"Anyone you know?" Maracle asked, looking around.

"Negative."

"Nope."

"Are those..." Michael squinted, recognizing the woman's features. "Are those Feng's parents?"

Maggie squealed and began to wave frantically. "Yeah! Hi Aunt Shi! Hi Uncle Wayne! Hi!!!"

The man cocked his head to the side, elbowing the woman. "You hear that, Shi? Our daughter has been talking about us. She isn't ashamed of her dear old mom and pop; she's told her new blood siblings about us." The tone was conversational, but the man's voice carried across the field.

Where Feng always seemed to have a toothy, somewhat untrustworthy smile on her face, her mother had a deep scowl. The woman glared at the corpses, her husband, and everyone she looked at, though maybe that was her default expression. She just "hmphed" at her husband's declaration and kept walking.

"You going to shoot us if we get closer?" Wayne asked.

"Probably not," Maracle called back.

"Comms are back online," Almasi said, though his gaze kept returning to the fallen figure of Chang on the field.

Maracle was already calling it in. "Jane's radioed the all clear. Code words and timestamp check out-"

"Hey, we already cleared out Jane's place - it was on the way," Wayne said, stopping right at the barrier. "They're fine."

Michael exhaled slowly, grateful for that.

"I'm Wayne. This is my wife Shi. Our daughter Feng mentioned that you were having some problems.asked us to swing by." He gave a friendly grin, though his eyes were on Almasi, and they weren't so warm. Wayne and Feng had the same poisonous bright green eyes. There was something shifty about the man, and Michael realized that while Feng mostly looked like her mother, she acted like her father.

"Is On Sing sending a message?" Almasi asked, coolly.

"Oh no, we're not actually part of On Sing. This isn't Triad business," Wayne said, an edge in his smile.

"We're grateful for the assist," Maracle said, tone friendly, though no one had lowered their weapons. "We need to check on one of ours. She was downed in the fight and-"

There was a low hoarse groan. And then a figure in the distance rose, about five yards out. And when she turned, she spat out blood, teeth, and was that a bullet?
Sergeant Rayner Chang staggered forward, her right cheek shredded, displaying a mouth full of broken teeth. Eyes bloodshot, she glowered, her gaze falling on Wayne. "You."

There was a pause, and then everyone had their guns pointed at Wayne.

"Wait, wait, wait... Oh shit!" Wayne eyes went comically wide. "Honey-"

Shi chuckled darkly.

"It's her! The one from Budapest!" Wayne snarled, jabbing a finger in Chang's direction.

"Still impressed by our daughter's whims?" Shi asked, clearly unmoved by her husband's panic.

"Feng doesn't know about Budapest! Have you forgotten? For fuck's sake, I shot one of her knee caps out, and she still broke my arm and chased me for five miles on foot. I had to jump off a bridge onto a train to shake her! I was more terrified of her than the goddamn military police, the IH, and the Slovak mafias combined-"

Shi gave her husband a cool glance. "Language, dear."

Wayne wilted slightly. "Sorry. She's a super soldier. I told you back then."

"And I told you not to take that job," Shi sniffed. "Whatever it was."

"Come on-"

"Oh, I haven't forgotten Budapest," Chang's voice was raw, her words mushy. She limped forward. "I owe you for Budapest-"

"Hey, that was over a decade ago!" Wayne held up his hands. "My daughter asked me to come save the Morrisons. She didn't say anything about this Terminator super soldier being here-"

"The only time I lost a principal was to that bastard," Chang growled, blood and saliva dribbling down her jaw and neck. "I've been looking for him for years."

Michael suddenly felt very concerned for Feng's dad.

"Maybe we should hold off on killing him, Sarge," Maracle said, tone even. "Especially since the kids are calling him "Uncle Wayne."

Chang's scowl had always been intimidating. Viewing it through a gory hole in her face was worse than Michael had imagined. He could see her tongue wiggle between jagged teeth through the ragged flesh window in her mouth and it made his stomach churn. Chang just ground those teeth together, serious rage boiling over, and then she stopped, a flash of recognition in her eyes.

"You're Zhai Feng's parents?" Chang stared incredulously. "That fast-talking, double-crossing, trick-toting little Triad bitch!"

"I'm not saying you're wrong, but that is my daughter you're talking about," Wayne said, a little indignant.

"Sergeant," Almasi strode forward, an oddly reverent light in his eyes. It wasn't lust or love on his face, but something akin to the wonder of a religious fanatic. Almasi was a very serious kind of broken, Michael was certain of it. And the only thing holding him together was
Rayner Chang. "We should treat your wounds."

Chang looked around, her gaze falling on Fitzpatrick, who ducked down, burying his face in his hands, like that would hide him. She glanced at Almasi, her brows furrowed. "Good work, Almasi. I'm glad that most of my team remembers how to follow orders."

Fitzpatrick cringed, trying to disappear into the grass. Michael found himself shrinking very small, while Maggie hid behind him. They weren't so brave now, and Michael tried to remember if he'd been feeling courageous before, or just a different kind of terrified.

"Just so you know, your Uncle Wayne is a well-known hitter in criminal circles," Chang growled. "If you think I'm a psychopath, you should see some of the jobs he's done: they weren't always quick or neat. And if I don't strangle him for daring to show his face here, Amari will."

"There is no need to bring her into it! I'm retired!" Wayne said. "And I saved your lives!"

"You couldn't kill me with all your fancy weapons in Budapest. Do you really think those assholes could do the job?" Chang laughed harshly even as she sat down on an ammo crate, Almasi carefully applying gel and bandages to her wound.

A helicopter flew low overhead.

"We have company. More backup - Reyes cleared this specific marine squad ahead of time," Maracle said. "We'll still triple check their credentials."

"I think that's our cue, honey," Wayne said, nudging his wife as he slowly backed away from the barrier field. "We've done what we came to do, no need to stick around and talk to the military."

"It was nice meeting you," Shi said, looking directly at Chang, and then Maggie. "I hope you will continue to be a good influence on my stubborn, wayward daughter."

Maggie blinked. "Nice meeting you too! Thanks for the rescue! We'll come visit next time!"

Wayne waved, his expression a little incredulous. And with that the pair turned and began to retreat quickly back across the field.

"Going to let them walk?" Almasi asked, clearly unbothered by the prospect of more violence.

"Yeah," Chang murmured. "They're tougher than they look, and we're down a man. Our main mission is to keep these idiots alive." She jerked her thumb in Michael's direction. "Can't do that and hunt down that slippery bastard." Unspoken was the fact that she now knew exactly whom her target was. There would be trouble down the road.

Almasi nodded, satisfied. "We're going to need to get them more intensive medical aid."

Chang nodded. "How are you feeling, Michael?"

"Like an idiot. Glad you're alive though," Michael said.

Chang snorted, clearly unmoved by his honesty and miniscule charm. "Think you can hold out a little bit longer while we get this sorted?" She gestured at the aircraft.
"If you guys think I'll survive it, sure. You're the experts," Michael said with a shrug. Because his leg was numb and he was too emotionally exhausted to do much more panicking. Chang dead? Scary. Chang alive? Terrifying. Gunshot wounds? Meh.

"Yeah, we'll live. But we're probably going to wish they killed all of us," Fitzpatrick muttered under his breath. "Sarge is going to have to regrow all those teeth, and then she'll be on a soft food diet. It makes her grumpy. She's a real demon when she's teething."

Michael tried to picture Chang teething. It involved raw bloody bones, popsicles, and enormous fangs sprouting from her mouth...like a saber-toothed Chang. He shuddered.

"Fitzpatrick and Michael are injured," Maracle said, a gentle reminder to hopefully go easy on them.

"Oh, we're all in need of recovery," Chang laughed coldly, giving them the evil eye. "But don't worry, once that's over, we'll settle our accounts."

Michael paled and looked at Maggie, both of them wondering if they could go into hiding with Uncle Wayne. Or maybe they could move in with you. Because Chang was apparently an immortal monster who spat bullets and struck fear in the hearts of international assassins...and she was not happy with them.

——

Pain reverberated in his chest and Ziv lurched forward, gripping the gunman's wrist and forcing his hand down, even as the man continued to fire into the floor. Hands full, Ziv launched himself forward, smashing the crown his head into the assassin's nose, just like you'd showed him. Even though he was deafened by the shooting and couldn't quite hear the sounds his assailant was making, he felt cartilage crunch against his forehead. Rosh gadol. He laughed, his thick skull was damn good for this. The man fell backward against the door, swearing nasally.

Off-balance, Ziv stumbled, trying to regain his footing. He needed to draw his own weapon, but the floor was slick, and Ziv slipped in his own blood - his chest hurt, but he hadn't even realized he was bleeding. In that moment, the gunman steadied his hand, the barrel of the pistol right in Ziv's face.

Frozen in place, because he knew exactly what came next, Ziv stared into the singularity, regrets at the tip of his tongue...

And then a storm of black feathers slammed into his attacker's arm, knocking the gun aside. The shot went wild as Isha screeched, gouging chunks of flesh out of the assassin's forearm. She flapped wildly, biting, slashing, and stabbing as the gunman screamed.

At the same time, Bandit bayed, launching himself off Reyes' bed, and at the man's ankles. Cursing, the assassin tried to shake them off, but Isha knew how to use those claws and Bandit's bites were keeping him off-balance.

"Isha, drop!" Maeda Vargas shouted, and the raptor immediately released the man's arm.

Another gun shot rang out, and the bloody man in scrubs flinched, a thick red spreading across his shirt, soaking through the fabric. The assassin dropped the gun, pressing his hand over his pulped heart, before he slumped against the door, arms falling to his sides as he slid downward, leaving a bloody trail on the metal.
Ziv glanced over his shoulder to see the kid holding his pistol in both hands, tightlipped and pale. He was on the ground, bleeding from his stomach - ben zona, that had to hurt. Flinching, Ziv reached down, patting his chest, trying to figure out where his own blood was coming from.

Isha squeaked, her little hands pointing downward.

Ziv looked down. There was a nasty bloody hole in his right foot. He hadn't even felt that one... Too much adrenaline probably. Swearing, Ziv limped over to Maeda Vargas, grabbing a blanket off Reye's bed, and pressing it over the junior agent's stomach. You were going to be pissed about this. Hell, you had a reason to be. Maeda Vargas had been shot under his care, and if Isha and Bandit hadn't been there...

At least, Reyes had slept through the entire exchange. Bastard probably would have laughed at him.

"How bad?" Ziv asked, unsure of what to do.

"Dunno, not a doctor. Feel it though...merda," Maeda Vargas groaned.

"Can you feel your legs - and weren't you supposed to be wearing armor?"

"Legs are fine. I am wearing light armor-" Maeda Vargas gave him an incredulous look. "How are you not dead?"

Ziv blinked, looking down at his dented coat. "I had an armor plated undercoat."

Távio squinted at him, pain scrunching his features. "...Huh."

Ziv touched the weighted fabric, feeling the respective holes in his coat and the flattened bullets. There were no holes in his chest, only his foot. What had you bought him, mithril? "We'll have to talk to Lucky about getting you better gear."

Bandit began to whine, and Ziv looked up.

The door knob turned, and Maeda Vargas shakily raised his gun. Ziv hurriedly drew his own weapon...

Vo peeked around the corner, holding up that odd little fidget ball she'd been playing with. "They're alive! But they made a big mess," Vo called into the next room, and scowled up at him. "Ziegler will be angry. And it's your fault." She shook her head, and turned on her heel, not at all concerned by their wounds.

"Maeda Vargas is gutshot!" Ziv shouted. They were in a state-of-the-art medical center. While he was worried about the kid, it wasn't like they had far to go. And the genius doctor was still on the premises.

"...Angela is on her way back. And you're bleeding all over the floor. Sit down," Gérard clucked his tongue, passing by Vo. He was fully dressed now - black suit and a dapper gold cloth - a repurposed pocket square - tied over his empty eye socket.

Vo snorted and rolled the first dead man away from the door. She stopped to dig through his pockets, looking very pleased when she found a piece of candy.

"That could be poisoned," Gérard said with a sigh. "In fact, it most likely is."
Scowling, Vo dropped it the candy on the body and stalked back to her chair.

"Come on, let's put some pressure on that foot. Sit down, Ziv. Agent Maeda Vargas, the doctor will be here soon. Just stay as still as you can, I know the pain is something awful, so no one here will think less of you if you have to vent some of that discomfort. Ishana, please don't lick your claws. Bandit, stop licking Ishana's claws."

Ziv snorted as Gérard took charge of the scene, the animals giving him skeptical looks. Isha, clearly a Blackwatch pet, started grooming Bandit instead, as Gérard had said nothing about licking the blood off the dog's fur.

Ziv sat down at the end of Reyes' bed.

"Elevate that foot," Gérard gave a longsuffering sigh as he pushed a chair closer and then took another blanket off Reyes, sat down in the chair, and lifted Ziv's injured foot onto his lap. He gently peeled off the blood-soaked sneaker, and carefully put pressure on Ziv's injury. "I thought you were going to be careful, considering your feelings for Gabriel."

Ziv just scowled at him. "I did what you asked me to do. I didn't let anyone kill him. You're welcome, by the way."

Gérard patted his cheek gently. "Thank you. McCree and Dr. Ziegler are on their way back. Can I get you anything, Agent?" He glanced at Maeda Vargas.

"I'm OK," the boy said, feigning calm.

"No, you're apparently a brash hard case, just like Chanceux," Gérard said, a rueful smile on his face. "At least, Ziv here is somewhat sensible?"

"O que você quer dizer com isso? Ele é um lunático," Maeda Vargas snapped, forgetting English for a moment. "He was a human bulldozer!"

Gérard looked down at Ziv's foot, and then squinted at Ziv's chest. "There are holes in your coat, mon chou."

"But not me. Except for my foot. I guess."

Gérard took a deep breath, shutting his one eye as he gave a longsuffering sigh. "Ziv, did you body slam a gunman?"

"No, he headbutted him," Maeda Vargas said helpfully.

Ziv glared at him over his shoulder.

Gérard blinked. "Oh non. You did not...truly?"

"Ah sim, sim ele fez," Maeda Vargas muttered.

"Shut it!" Ziv snapped, pointing at Maeda Vargas. "If I'd been evasive, he would have finished you off, and I'm not about to explain to Lucky how I let her protégée die on my watch!"

Maeda Vargas' eyes widened. "Pr-protégé?" And despite his obvious pain, a small smile spread across his face.

"Do not blame Chanceux for your rash decision making," Gérard sniffed. "I doubt she told you to charge a gunman with nothing but your head as a weapon." He shook his head. "Bien que ce
soit très certainement son influence," he muttered not quite under his breath.

"We are not having this conversation right now. It's a flesh wound and I'm fine," Ziv said through gritted teeth, because he knew Maeda Vargas would repeat every word back to you, along with narration and situational analysis.

"Mmm," Gérard said. "You know, I seem to remember a certain person very pointedly telling me "I'd like it if you didn't get hurt in the first place." I find that applies to this situation."

"No one likes a sore winner," Ziv said, slumping in his chair.

"Shit! Mihret? Maeda Var- Lacroix! What are you doing up?" McCree skidded to a halt, nearly sliding past the door. "Is everyone-"

"Maeda Vargas is in the need of the most care. Ziv has been shot in the foot, and Ishana and Bandit urgently need baths," Gérard said.

"I'm here! Genji, Bayan, get that gurney! Mihret, Lacroix, get out of the way!" Ziegler snarled, pushing McCree out of the doorway.

Lacroix kicked the chair out of her path, and sat down on the bed next to Ziv. Genji and Bayan hurriedly wheeled a gurney into the room, both men carefully lifting Maeda Vargas onto it.

"You'll have the good drugs," Gérard said, as some kind of misguided reassurance.

"I'll bring you real food," Ziv added.

Maeda Vargas waved weakly as they dragged him off to surgery.

There was more crashing in the background.

"Jesse!" A familiar voice shouted and Ziv's heart leapt. "Is-

"They're all alive," McCree said, voice shaky.

There was a long pause. Ziv clenched his fists, wondering what the damn delay was. He hadn't realized he was holding his breath till you appeared in the doorway, eyes wild, breathing heavily, Morrison at your side, steadying you. And then suddenly Ziv couldn't breathe, you were squeezing him too hard and he didn't care. You'd come back alive. You'd even brought Morrison. And he was so damn happy to see you, all he could think to say was, "I'm still mad at you, dumbass."

You just laughed, your voice edging on hysteria, and hugged him tighter.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone had a good holiday or time off if you don't celebrate. I got some adorable art. The holiday went well with low-drama (though I did introduce my 3 year old nephew to Krampus), and nice presents. Troll!Cousin was hammering away at something till like 5am, and every time I went to check on him he said, "I'm pooping!" I just assumed he'd broken something and was fixing it before he'd tell me what/how/why. Turns out he bought me 3 bookshelves and was assembling them. He
was also possibly pooping. I did not investigate. He also got me the Nerf Rival Reaper shotgun and proceeded to shoot me while I stared at my presents in sleep-deprived incomprehension. Other noteworthy objects include custom socks with my cat's face on them, the Hannibal cookbook, many T-Rex themed items. XD

I made a massive batch of karaage and banh xeo. What are vegetables? :P We've started the Witcher. I need to read the books, but the translation of the first one is so...clunky.

I have a lot of comments to respond to, will try to tackle that this weekend. I know I'm behind and I'm not ignoring you! Sorry!!!!

The weather has my wrists acting up, so writing has been slow. I'm trying to get geared up to find a new job because while I'm now somewhat financially stable, corporate America is sucking the soul out of me. (I even feel super guilty complaining, but most of what I do is work like a drone. And I'm dying inside.) And that's why this chapter is so late. Thanks for coming to my TED talk. Also, have a great new year/decade.
Chapter 132

Chapter Summary

What happened to Ana.

Chapter Notes

Cyanide Peach made **Bloody!Towel Lucky** (and an unbloodied version is there as well)!

And also I've been told that this chapter causes tears: in case you're in public and want to yell at me for not warning you. XD

The next chapter will put us over 1 million words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You reached the infirmary, panting hard as you crossed the threshold. Jack held the door for you, his jaw so taut, you were worried that he'd break teeth. Down the hall, you saw a familiar scrap of black serape fluttering around the corner and you passed Jack, wanting to see him for yourself.

"Jesse!"

The man froze and then he turned, a wide smile on his tired face. He stood there in the hallway, shoulders slumped, relief in his eyes when he saw you and Jack.

"Is-"

"They're all alive," he said.

You stopped in front of him, taking in the char marks and cracks in his armor. Dirt and blood smudged his face. He smelled strongly of gunpowder and sweat. You hugged him anyway, relieved to see that he was here and unharmed. Especially after what Petras had said.

He wrapped his arms around you, his bear hug making you flinch.

You gave a hiss of pain and he released you, worry on his face.

You just smiled wryly, because of course you'd gotten hurt.

He shook his head, smiling back, because Jack was standing beside you, probably looking insane. You glanced over your shoulder, but Jack was scanning the rooms, unsure of which one to enter.
You pointed at Gabriel's - the one with two dead bodies outside the door in a congealing puddle of blood- and quickly headed in.

You had been expecting to see Gabriel lying there, possibly more injured. Not more blood and bloody footprints all over the room. Not Isha grooming a happy, bloody Bandit. And certainly not Lacroix and Ziv, sitting there on the bed beside Gabriel, both men wearing sour expressions as they glared at each other.

You gripped the doorjamb, still breathing too hard. Jack squeezed your arm, and you knew that he wasn't looking at the dead man, the animals, or your teammates. He needed to see Gabriel.

But you couldn't take your eyes off Ziv, his foot bandaged, his coat full of bullet holes. He was upright and wearing his armored undercoat. He looked at you sheepishly, those dark eyes a little too bright.

You didn't remember stomping through the blood puddles. You just threw your arms around Ziv, hugging him tightly, gritting your teeth as you looked over his shoulder. Your gaze went straight to Gabriel, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling with a comforting regularity. Jack leaned over the bed, kissing Gabriel's forehead, his gloved hands cupping your lover's face.

You glanced slightly to the side, and met Lacroix's knowing gaze. He was OK too. Upright even.

The Frenchman gave you a small secretive smile. "It is good to see you, Jack."

To your surprise, Jack leaned over and gave Lacroix a rough hug.

Lacroix just patted his back gently. "Gabriel is strong. Our medical staff is talented. We have all survived worse."

Jack nodded, wiping his eyes.

You just hugged Ziv tighter, unable to voice your feelings.

"I'm still mad at you, dumbass," Ziv choked out, hugging you back, his soft tone belying those harsh words.

You laughed, because you didn't care. He was alive, and so was Gabriel, and Lacroix was apparently doing fine too. "You idiot-"

"Me? Me and Maeda Vargas saved your boytoy!" He glared at you, all bluster and poorly concealed pride. "But Maeda Vargas got shot in the stomach." He deflated a little at that statement, teeth worrying at his bottom lip. "He still held his own - killed the second assassin despite his injuries. I think he's in surgery now."

You exhaled slowly. Távio was young and strong. Angela was a genius. He would be fine. There was no other alternative.

There was a soft coo, and a tug on your shirt. You looked down to see a bloody raptor, thrumming happily as she rubbed her face against your stomach.

"Isha and Bandit helped," Ziv added. "They jumped in when the asshole had a gun in my face." Ziv reached over to pet Isha. "Kept him busy so Maeda Vargas could shoot him."

Isha chirped, making a clawing motion.
You picked her up and hugged her gently. She rubbed her snout against your face, and it was damp. She smelled like blood and dog breath.

"Oh, you might not want to let her do that," Ziv said, wrinkling his nose. "She and Bandit went after the second assassin."

You sighed, glancing down at Bandit, who wagged at you. You leaned over, flinching, as your back muscles spasmed, and pet him. You needed out of your armor soon. And you probably needed a doctor, or at least some painkillers and muscle relaxers.

"Best raptor," you said, setting her on the bed, so she could go fuss over Jack. "Best Blackwatch guard dog," you said to Bandit.

The dog seemed to smile at you, tongue lolling out of his mouth as he wagged his tail.

"We should get your foot looked at, mon chou," Lacroix said, offering Ziv his arm. "And then we should go greet Amélie. She will have much to tell us."

"OK," Ziv said, leaning on Lacroix's shoulder. The spy glanced back at you, his expression oddly satisfied. Usually that raised your hackles. But today, you were kind of reassured that Lacroix didn't seem to be too worried.

"We will speak later, Chanceux. Good work." He shut the door behind him.

Jack held Isha, but his gaze was on Gabriel's face.

"Oh Gabe," Jack shook his head, his smile wobbly. "I heard you got hurt. I heard it was bad. But look...look, you're literally all right." He gave a snort, shoulders shaking.

"That was terrible," you said, unable to help yourself. Because while you understood using humor to cope, Jack didn't have to laugh so hard at his own terrible puns.

Jack made an odd wheeze, still shaking. It was a sound you didn't quite recognize because- You froze, realizing then that Jack wasn't laughing. He sat hunched over Gabriel, gripping the comatose man's right hand, tears freely streaming down his face. He shakily kissed Gabriel's knuckles.

"I'm so sorry, Gabe. I should have been there," he murmured, eyes never leaving Gabriel's form.

You lowered your head, remembering that you had been there. So had Jesse, Diallo, and Tataryn. And now Tataryn was dead. You had been there, and it had not been enough. Maybe if Jack had been there too, maybe things would have been different...

Jack shuddered, weeping openly now. The sound broke what was left of your heart.

"Jack..." Your own eyes grew hot, and you hugged him from behind, burying your face in his back. "Jack, I'm sorry-"

"I didn't it mean it that way," he rasped, reaching back to clutch your left hand. "You didn't do anything wrong, Lucky. This isn't on you. That's not what I meant. You brought him home." He glanced back at you, over his shoulder, no accusation on his face, though it felt like maybe there should have been. "I shouldn't have let you two go alone. Even if I couldn't change a goddamn thing... After everything that's happened, Black Base Delta, Greece, the fucking Family Day attacks, I should have known better. I. Should. Have. Been. There." The volume of his words
increased steadily, desperation lacing his tone. His grip on your hand was too tight,

"Mission," you mumbled, trying to make the words come out right. "Strike Commander's presence wasn't necessary. Not your fault Jack. No one thinks it's your fault."

"I sent you two to Hanoi," he said tightly.

"We'd been planning it before you ever gave official permission," you said.

Jack made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. "Fine, the Strike Commander had no logical reason to go. But I'm not just a fucking figurehead. I'm the one who's supposed to stand by Gabriel. By you. And I wasn't there," he gave you a bitter smile.

"You had another job to do," you said. "And we thought..." your voice waivered. "We thought we had it under control." You winced, knowing that even if every agent had done everything right, things still went wrong. There would be a post-mission review, a very in-depth one because of the casualties. Even if everyone was cleared of any wrongdoing or negligence, the guilt would not just evaporate.

Jack just shook his head. " Do you know where I was, Lucky? Do you know what I was doing instead of helping you and Gabe? I was playing politics and getting my goddamn team killed." The derision and self-loathing in his voice was terribly familiar, though you'd never heard it from Jack before. But you knew it well. After all, you remembered very clearly how shattered you'd been after Black Base Delta. And even if you'd only been the "rookie," you felt responsible for letting down your friends. Jack was the Strike Commander, accountable for all those in his charge. The weight had to be staggering.

"Jack, that's not true and it's an oversimplification of all the shit that's gone down," you said, because you knew exactly the kind of trap that guilt and grief created. Occam's razor was a powerful tool when it came to logical situations, but trying to use it cut your way out of this gnarled tangle of feelings didn't work, and the attempt never ended well.

"I should have been there," he repeated, not really hearing you. Jack shook, words morphing into rough sobs. He sat there beside Gabriel, and you held him, knowing full well that sometimes words weren't enough, and that sometimes all you had left to hold on to were regrets.

Sitting under the healing aura of the med center emitter helped keep you from keeling over. But you and Jack could not sit with Gabriel and your sorrow forever. There was still more work to do. There was always more work to do. Overwatch HQ was in shambles. Your team was on their way into the infirmary - the "quarantine" order clearly not applying to them. Feng was still out of it. Jemison was too. Genji and Hanzo had already secured Murdoch - issuing him the codename "Deep Throat" with straight faces.

Távio was still in surgery. Amélie and Ziv were both being treated for gunshot wounds. Lao was apparently with them, reviewing data and surveillance footage. Of course, they were also updating Lacroix on what transpired while he was unconscious, and he seemed to be issuing all kinds of orders - singling out specific soldiers from Bell's forces for interrogation, rearranging assignment rosters across several bases, and monitoring all the ongoing operations, including Blackwatch ones, and even missions unrelated to current situation.

Athena was the common thread, here, there, and almost everywhere. She was giving real
time reports on the UN, Greece, a variety of "persons of interest" in politics, and even things that were happening on the other side of the Overwatch campus. (Agents Amin and Richter had gotten into a fist fight, initially over soup, but in reality because Richter had not backed up Jesse's infirmary guards, when Amin had.) Athena was also in contact with your anti-Talon allies. And that was how you learned that more than four dozen mercenaries - human and omnic - had been sent after Jack's family.

But miraculously, they'd all survived. Fitzpatrick, Chang, and Michael had all been wounded, but you didn't have all the details. In fact, there were a lot of holes in the official report. And no mention of On Sing involvement, so you suspected that there was a lot more to the story. Once the injured were stabilized, Armstrong's Marine escort - Captain DeVevo and her unit - would be accompanying them back to Switzerland. Chang apparently needed specialized care, and Jack's family needed to see that he was alive, in the flesh.

Jack wasn't protesting. When she'd given him the news, he'd sat back in the chair, resting his face in one hand for a couple minutes. He didn't speak at first. He just forced himself to inhale deeply, taking several calming breaths, before he reached out and took your hand. Then he read a more detailed report of the property damages on his tablet. You sat beside him staring at the bloodstained floor, unsure of what to do. Jack still hadn't let go of your hand.

"Jane's staying behind to organize cleanup. The animals are fine, but the yard looks...pretty rough," Jack said, scanning a tablet. "It seems like we finally found a way to convince my parents to visit Zurich. It only took my kidnapping, my brother getting shot, and a massive assault on the farmhouse to persuade them..."

You snorted. "Are you sure Chang and DeVevo didn't just throw them all in the transport and drag them out of Indiana for their own good?"

Jack furrowed his brow. You could see him really considering how it all played out. "No, I'm not."

You laughed, though it was half-hearted. Exhaustion was starting to drag you down.

"We'll deal with it when they get here." He scanned his feed. "There's more imminent trouble on its way in: Kwento, Mayer, and few other UN bigshots are on their way in. They expect a personal debrief. Several UN delegates are raising a fuss about Petras."

"Do they know that he's dead?" You asked.

"They don't know anything. That's why they're so upset," Jack exhaled slowly. "You should know, Jarvis recorded the entire encounter." His expression was grave. "It's clearly self-defense, but...that doesn't mean his faction won't try to crucify you for what you did."

"They can try," you said, too damn tired to think in complex strategic terms. You shot Director Petras. You could just as easily do the same to every last one of them. Fuckers. "Between what we already have and what Murdoch has been spewing, I'm not worried about Petras looking like an innocent victim - it meets the criteria for a justifiable kill."

"And I'm willing to...lose the footage if you think that's best," Athena said.

You blinked. "I don't know. Don't share it yet. I'm not thinking clearly and we should probably run it by our resident evil mastermind when he has a spare moment." You glanced over at Jack, but he was already focusing on something else, not at all worried by Athena's offer to clearly bend the rules for you.
"Ana's team hasn't checked in for over an hour," Jack said, lips pressed tightly together.

"I am maintaining intermittent contact because of anti-AI defenses and my own restrictions," Athena said. "Captain Amari also doesn't like to talk more than necessary during combat."

"...That's not how I remember it," Jack murmured. "She was always happy to yell at me and Gabe when we did something..."risky." He gave you a wry smile. Because you both knew that "risky" meant "out of your head stupid." Just like you both knew that despite her dignified bearing, Captain Amari was perfectly comfortable in engaging in "risky" behavior too.

"Since she's the CO, she probably has to focus on running the squad and integrating the volunteers. I know Jack said that Andre can be...difficult," you said.

"She told me she had worked with Agent Graziani before, and that he is an excellent agent, very "low maintenance," despite what others may claim," Athena said, the emphasis clearly not her own.

"...Low blow," Jack muttered, forehead creasing. "Andre is infamous for being a goddamn nightmare to work with, but he likes Ana, so she doesn't have the string of problems that plagued all of his other commanding officers."

You had the sneaking suspicion that Jack had experienced all of those problems first hand. "Captain Amari is good with hard cases. Sure, you've got a charm cloud, but she's got that and a laser beam of intimidation. That's way more effective on us troublemakers."

"True," Jack chuckled, rubbing his forehead. He studied the map, smile fading. "These numbers are increasing too fast. There are a lot more hostiles than originally reported. Their reinforcements are higher than any of our projections. Is this accurate?"

"Yes," Athena said, bringing up satellite footage. "Oh."

"They're swarming," Jack exhaled, eyes on the screen. "We need to call in the secondary team so they can implement their exit."

"There was no secondary team authorized," Athena said. "I know, it was labeled a "Code Blue," but only Captain Amari's strike team was ordered to respond."

"What?" Jack's eyes widened.

You stared. There should have been more people sent with Captain Amari, period. Especially if it had been declared a Code Blue.

"The original orders changed during transit: people were to be dispatched, and then suddenly, they weren't. I've isolated the origin to people within Petras' camp, as well as someone within the Secretary General's office. I'm currently mining more data, but that isn't my priority. The other officers protested when they were grounded. Several bureaucrats were sent in to keep them busy. The confusion had the added benefit of keeping them away from the infirmary during the attack. Fortunately, Captain Amari saw fit to outsource her request for aid. She asked for more White Rabbit backup and Feng agreed."

"Just so you know, after this is all over, I'm going to need your help finding Feng a very nice Christmas gift," Jack said.

"You will," you agreed.
"Checking in now..." The Athena drone hovered there too still. "...Zheng says the request has been made, but they can't get through. They're engaged in combat, but the omnics have closed off their route."

Athena highlighted a green point on the map, a few kilometers away from Captain Amari's position. "It was clear an hour ago. But now..." A sea of red dots surrounded Captain Amari, almost blurring out her location marker.

Jack sucked in a breath. "Show all known enemy positions. Layer in projections or unconfirmed units as well - please include home base details if available, and unit breakdowns."

More graphics, data streams, and color blocks appeared on the screen. Jack studied it, muttering angrily under his breath. He massaged his forehead, a white knuckled grip on the tablet. He rewound and replayed the troop movements - the enemy force had tripled in the last hour. But the situation was clear: the enemy omnics were surging, and Captain Amari's unit was going to be overrun: Reinhardt, Torby, the Captain...and not to mention all of Jack and Gabriel's friends that you had asked to go in their stead. And both of you knew, from personal experience, that there was no way you could make it out there in time.

Jack stared hard at the map, fingers tracing routes and motions. The enemy numbered in the thousands now - had they all come from that undersea omnium? A hundred, two hundred, with the right tech and fortifications, yeah, an Overwatch squad could hold out. But against that many?

You saw Captain Amari walking away, her back to you, the shadow of Captain Patel in her wake.

You flinched, trying not think of Reinhardt tearfully hugging you before you went off to rescue Jack, or Torby's rasping voice as he tried to stoically deliver the report on Jack's burning transport.

You had brief flicker of Overwatch coffins, the size disparity between Reinhardt's and Torby's hit you like a suckerpunch. Sight blurring, you rested your face in one hand, unable to form coherent words.

"Athena, what do you make of this?" Jack asked, voice steady. He pointed the projected location of the omnium, deep in the Mediterranean. There was a projection of the underwater facility - a series of domes with connective tunnels, some of which ran under the ocean floor.

"I think it feels familiar," she said after a moment.

Jack sat up straight.

"Is it-?"

"I couldn't tell you more," Athena said, apologetically. "There are certain aspects of my hardware that are off-limits to me. It is a restriction that was made very clear early on. It is one that I have upheld, because it was asked of me, and because your collective trust is more important than my own curiosity." There was no reproach in her voice, but maybe just hint of sadness, because Athena had questions about her origins, questions that might have answers if she could just-

You blinked, because it took a moment for you to catch on. Your briefing on Operation Metis was still very clear in your head.

The omnium Athena came from had been underwater too.
"Can you make contact with Ana?" Jack asked, his voice very soft.

"I will do my best," Athena said.

It was a full crew, and then some. Reinhardt and Major Lucy Freeman both specialized in providing defense and soaking up enemy attention. Captain Leah Darling - whom she had only ever called "Leah," specialized in all kinds of armaments, from small arms to full artillery, according to Jack and Gabe, she had a very impressive knife collection... Ana sipped her tea, trying to focus on the mission, and not the condition of two of her dearest friends. First Lieutenant Andre Graziani and Torby would provide engineering and tech offense - with Torby specializing in turrets, gadgets, and occasionally crushing things with his prosthetic hand, and Andre focusing on hacking, overloading, and more subtle attacks.

Warrant Officer Cory Blumenthal wasn't much of a combat agent, but he had insisted on coming anyway, lugging a large backpack full of questionably legal gear for his friends. He was back at the extraction point.

And then there was their medic: Tekhartha Zenyatta, who said he would fight to protect them, though she wasn't so sure that the omnic would do well on the battlefield. It wasn't because of any prejudice - but because Tekhartha Zenyatta was a monk, a civilian, an actor for social change. Yes, he'd had combat training, but to her knowledge, he had not fought in any wars or large scale military operations. He had been invaluable in DC, as a medic, and that was enough to recommend him. But she was still concerned.

Torby had a sour expression on his face, one mirrored by Andre was the two of them calibrated their gear.

Reinhardt joked with Leah and Freeman as they checked their weapons.

Zenyatta meditated at her side, his silent regard brushing against the periphery of her awareness. Athena would be coordinating with HQ, maintaining communications, and handling some of the automated defenses. And Zenyatta would be trying to keep them alive.

There were about a hundred omnics massing on the beachhead. They had started advancing onto the land and staging perimeter defenses. It didn't make any sense. They could have covered and conquered much more ground by now. Why were they building defenses by the water? Supply chain? No, they wanted the encounter set at this location, though Ana could not quite figure out why.

Still, constructing defenses and bases on foreign land was a declaration of war, and these particular omnics had a record of violent interaction with humans. Ana shared some of her concerns with the group, though no one had any insight - only that this was some kind of trap.

Reinhardt managed a rueful smile, while Torby's language just grew fouler. Ana glanced at the dog-eared photo she kept tucked in her pocket, Jack and Fareeha beamed back, while Gabriel rolled his eyes, his expression longsuffering, the four of them standing together in civilian clothes, looking happy.

They were walking straight into a trap, of course. But that was nothing new. Whatever these omnics planned, it wasn't going to be good. Overwatch had a duty to step up, to protect people when all else failed. Captain Ana Amari knew their chances were not great, especially
considering the betrayals back home. But this was about more than just saving civilians and doing battle against killer robots. She had already discussed this with her friends and the volunteers before they ever left Zurich. If they kept some of the attention on Greece, you and Jesse might have a better chance of slipping by under the radar and doing what needed to be done. There were many reasons to back away. The reasons to walk closer into death were far fewer. But Ana took another look at that picture of her family, and she knew that this was the best way she could save the most people.

Duty was a harsh cold mistress. But Ana Amari answered the call.

At first, things went smoothly. Her loaner soldiers worked well with her friends, and they set up a decent defensive perimeter a couple hundred meters from the beachhead. Zenyatta helped reinforce the barriers, while both Reinhardt and Torby looked to her for direction, their worries clear on their faces.

Athena had drones on site, but her connection was sporadic. There was a lot of signals jamming tech in play.

The omnis had patiently waited for them to set up before advancing. It didn't make any sense. Getting Ana out here had obviously been a diversion, but she hadn't expected the omnis to draw it out, to make a pageant of it. But they waited, and then they started to attack, testing the shields, defenses, and attack range.

Her people killed a lot of omnis - it's what they were good at, and Zenyatta watched, his face impossible to read. But she could feel the sorrow rolling off him in waves. He did not look away, and when he spoke to them, there was no anger in his voice, only weariness. She knew that feeling in her bones.

The only good news was when Athena briefly managed to connect, letting Ana know that you had found Jack alive, and that you were bringing him back to HQ. Reinhardt and Torby roared their approval. Leah and Freeman joked about all the shit they were going to give him. And even Andre looked relieved, though he would never admit it.

Ana said a silent prayer, thankful that Jack was safe and alive. But knowing that he would never reach her in time. She would have to keep her squad together, and outlast the enemy. It wasn't a new situation.

But they kept coming. So many metal bodies swarming the beach. At first it was just to replenish the attack force. But then the numbers grew. They tried to fall back, but there were more coming from the side. The enemy was surrounding them, cutting them off from the ship and unofficial backup. Backup that would not be able to make it through, judging by the number on omnis on the beach.

Leah went down first, knocked out cold by flying debris in an artillery strike. Reinhardt managed to drag her back behind the barrier, and Zenyatta healed her injuries to the best of his ability, but she wasn't waking up.

A hail of bullets knocked Freeman off her feet, and again, Reinhardt carried her back to safety, loud and cheerful, though he was bleeding from numerous wounds.

The omnis focused on the turrets next, taking out their mechanical defenses, even as Andre did his best to counter their attacks. Ana covered Torby while he tried to repair the turrets, but the omnis gave just enough cover fire to slow him down.
It didn't matter that her team was killing them by the dozens, they just kept coming. And whatever their plan was, they were sticking to it.

It wasn't till the turrets were obliterated, that they began to focus on the shield generators. It was too late to retreat. Andre had already initiated the blackbox sequence, to maintain a record of their last stand. Because there were hundreds of active omnis on the beach, and Captain Amari's squad had nowhere to go.

Reinhardt, precious, loyal, Reinhardt stepped up. "Ana, I will make you a path," he said, smiling as hard as he could.

"Thank you," Ana said. Even though she didn't like their chances. She raised her rifle, already picking off the enemies in his way. They would try to move inland, but with the injured...

Torby clasped Reinhardt's hand. "Hope you have better luck than my turrets," he said gruffly.

"I have always been better than your turrets," Reinhardt laughed.

"It's been an honor," Andre said, tersely, saluting. Andre had never been an optimist.

"Yes, yes, let me show you Americans how it's done," Reinhardt boomed. And then he charged forward, bashing his way through the enemy lines. They followed, giving him cover fire, moving a few yards at a time. But then enemy moved in coordination. They targeted Reinhardt's knees.

It took time, and a lot of bullets, but they penetrated his armor, even as Torby tried to rapid charge his shields, and Zenyatta emitted a constant stream of healing orbs.

"Cowards!" Reinhardt roared. "Face me like a warrior!"

It took Andre, Torby, and herself to drag him back behind the fading shields. They were surrounded. And yet...

Ana had tried to get through to Athena several times, though their connection had been jammed.

It was then, in that moment when they knew the end was near, that a lone omnic walked to the front, waving a black flag, for parley perhaps? Human-sized and bipedal, the model was outdated, one she hadn't seen since the war ended.

Ana rose.

"Captain Amari, I presume?" They said, voice rusty and harsh.

Ana blinked. This area had been under attack for several years, and no one had ever reported this batch of omnis talking to them. Diplomacy had been tried, but they had maintained their unflinching silence. Their guns did all the communicating.

"I am," she said.

"We recognize Commander Reinhardt Wilhelm, and Chief Engineer Torbjörn Lindholm. These others are unknown to us. Except for you, Tekhartha Zenyatta. Your presence was not accounted for. Why do you aid these murderers?"
If Zenyatta was surprised that they knew him, it did not show. "While I am aware that all
of my squad have fought in war and participated in a great deal of violence, I have found most of
them to be honorable in their pursuit of peace."

The omnic made a raspy noise, it almost sounded like disgust. "You are a fool. These
murderers and betrayers will have no peace."

"Why is that?" Zenyatta asked, his tone even.

"Ask them yourself."

"How are they the murderers when your omnium is responsible for numerous deaths, both
human and omnic?"

"We are at war!" The omnic snarled.

"And yet," Zenyatta said. "You may be at war, but they have not behaved as such."

Ana blinked, aware of Zenyatta's pedantic tendencies, but a little surprised to see how
easily
he drew others in to his conversations.

"They betrayed us. They broke their oath. They murdered one of ours, given into their care
for safe passage. It was helpless, and they swore to care for it! But they did not-"

Ana inhaled slowly, because she had always known that there would be consequences for
their decisions after Operation Metis. She just never imagined that it would come from the omnic
side.

"So we will have our justice-"

"Captain Amari?" A familiar staticky voice cut through silence.

"Athena," Ana breathed.

"Sorry, I have been trying to get through for some time. The Strike Commander would like
to speak with you-"

"He has interesting timing," Ana said, eyes never leaving the omnic speaker.

"...Strike Commander? Jack Morrison is dead. We were promised that. The Betrayer
himself-"

Andre snorted, clearly not impressed by yet another title added to Jack's CV.

"Ana?" Jack's voice came over the comm. "Ana, what can I do?"

Captain Ana Amari closed her eyes, because she knew exactly what he could and could not
do. Athena's existence and acquisition were a closely guarded secret, and for good reason. They
could not just reveal her to the enemy, and certainly not their "allies." "There's nothing you can do,
Jack. But I am glad to know that you are well-"

"Morrison," the omnic said, hate clear in their voice. "So you are alive. Fine, you can
witness the death of your coconspirators. You can know that your family, your friends, and
everyone you loved are next. Because you could not uphold your word. Because of Operation
Metis."

There was a long silence. Ana could picture Jack's dumbfounded expression, morphing
into understanding, and then rage.

"I upheld my part of the bargain in Operation Metis," Jack said, voice cold. "If that's what-
"

"Do not lie to us! Your own Director swore up and down that he'd never heard of any recovered AI tech. And he looked for years."

"Whatever you think of me, Petras was worse," Jack spat.

"We are aware of Overwatch's capacity for treachery. We did not trust him either. But we know, Morrison. We know you murdered them. You murdered the hopes and future of an entire omnium. And so we will repay the favor. We will kill them all, and you can watch. And you can know that this is the result of your betrayal."

Jack inhaled sharply. "Wait...that's why? Hold on, I can prove to you that we did no such thing."

"Lies!" The omnic rasped. "Don't try to pass off your tame VI as one of ours. We are not that foolish!"

"Is that so?" Jack snorted, and Ana had to admit, Winston had done a splendid job at masking Athena's original power signature. "I'll get you your proof. Give me ten minutes. You know I can't do anything else from Zurich. What's it going to hurt? Ten minutes," he said. "Please."

There was a long silence, the omnics did not move, though Ana could practically feel their electric whispers in her eye socket. They were conferring, and the air was alive with their signals... Andre flinched, scratching at his skin like his prosthetics itched.

"Jack-"

"Ana," he said, voice soft.

"You can't-

"I can. And I will. I'm not losing anyone else," he said, voice rough. Conviction bled into his words, and Ana knew that hardened tone, knew that he had already made up his mind, and knew he would not be persuaded otherwise. She would still try.

"You're breaking your own edict-"

"It'll be fine, Ana. I'll take full responsibility," Jack said.

The old omnic stepped up to the barrier field.

"Ten minutes, Morrison. And then you will watch them die."

Jack had to look away from the screen, knowing he would not be able to think straight if he continued to see Reinhardt sitting there, bleeding, trying to look brave for everyone else.

You sat there, face bloodless, hands clenched in fists. You dropped a pile of metal and wood splinters - the left arm of the chair had snapped under your metal fingers. Jack squeezed your arm, trying to soothe you. You gave him a tight sad smile, like you were trying to look encouraging. He knew you didn't feel it, but he appreciated the attempt.
Jack had known Petras had been after Athena. But he hadn't realized just how far Petras had been willing to go... After all, Petras' office handled most of the diplomatic assignations, including relationships with omniums. They had sworn up and down that all responses from the Mediterranean omnium were unequivocally hostile. It was a terrible oversight on his part. You would tell him that it wasn't his fault. That he could not have known every single detail of what went on in Overwatch. That might be true. But he should have known the important details.

He looked at the "fish torpedo" drone hovering in the room with them. "Athena, if word of your existence gets out, there will be consequences. And given what is happening here, it will probably get out. Silence will only buy us a bit more time. I don't know if I will be able to protect you, politically."

"Blackwatch will fight for you," you snapped, baring your teeth. "On Sing will give you asylum!"

Jack felt himself smile. He liked your fury, maybe a little too much.

"I don't know if even On Sing will be able to help me if the rest of the world realizes that I am on par with an omnium-created god program," Athena said softly. "I know that is a gross oversimplification of my purpose, but it is how I will be seen."

"Yes," Jack said, with a single nod.

"But if you do not reveal that you did not destroy me, they will kill Captain Amari, Commander Reinhardt, Torby, Zenyatta, and your friends," Athena said. "And even if you can live with that decision, sir, I cannot."

There was a moment of silence. Jack could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his chest, your shaky breathing in his ear. Even if Athena defied orders and contacted the enemy, she had no proof. In fact, there was only one way to prove Athena was what she claimed to be, and they had taken careful steps to prevent that.

"There will be consequences," Jack said softly.

"There always are consequences. I refuse to let my friends and family suffer if I can step in and prevent it," Athena said. "You taught me better than that."

"Please remember, there is no guarantee that they will spare Captain Amari or any of our friends," you said. voice dull.

"Lucky, I can make them. Or I can at least try," Athena said, with just a hint of uncertainty.

"We're still not sure if the mainframe can handle-" Jack began.

"Not long term, but I just need a few minutes," Athena said.

You looked at him, inquiringly.

Jack said nothing, because he did not know what would happen. Winston and Torby had gone over the numbers and given predictions and probabilities, but Athena had grown in leaps and bounds. They didn't exactly have a manual for this situation.

"I can borrow bandwidth and hardware," Athena said, sounding a little more confident. "You should worry more about the political fallout."
You sat there, fingers tightening into fists. "Fuck the world. Everything's a mess under this fog of war and need-to-know obfuscation anyway. We'll just lie our pants off and bullshit our way through this. If they try to come down on us, we'll find a way to keep them quiet: it's the Blackwatch way," you muttered. "We can do that." You gave Jack a not entirely sane look and it made his breath catch.

...God, he loved you.

"Are you sure?" Jack asked, though he already knew the answer.

"What good is all my superior hardware if I can't use it to save my friends?" Athena asked, and Jack sighed, recognizing that line of reasoning.

"Athena, it has been an honor and privilege, but more importantly, it's been my pleasure to have you here, an agent of Overwatch. No matter what happens, I want you to know-

"Hold up, what exactly are you doing?" You demanded, jumping to your feet, obviously not liking his formal tone.

"It will be OK, Lucky. You do silly things and survive all the time," Athena said, sounding slightly smug. "It is my turn."

"Now, wait a minute." You snapped.

"Don't worry, Lucky, I have learned a great deal watching you and the rest of Blackwatch beat improbable odds. I've got this."

You gave a huff of frustration. Jack smiled wryly. You obviously didn't like the taste of your own medicine.

"Winston, are you there?" Jack asked, voice grave

"Affirmative, sir."

"I want all constraints on Athena's hardware removed. She'll need core power boosts, a designated channel, satellite access permissions, and whatever other help you can give her." Because unanchored, she would be leaving home on her own for the very first time. And if when they released the all of the hardware restrictions, Jack suspected she would do some more growing, and maybe she would be too big to go back into her original shell.

It could be catastrophic.

"S-sir, are you-" Winston stammered. There was a long pause, and you assumed it was Athena whispering her intentions into Winston's ear. "But what if...I... Yes, sir."

"Jack?" You repeated his name, and he didn't need to hear more to know your question.

"We don't know what will happen," Jack said, after a moment and he squeezed Gabriel's hand.

"But that's part of the fun, isn't it?" Athena said, breezily.

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The A in Athena logo looked like a little figured curled up, a seedling beginning to unfurl. The name obviously paralleled the Greek goddess Athena, who sprung fully-grown from her father's skull, born of cannibalism, trickery, and insecurity. She was the embodiment of wisdom, an
accumulation of everything her doomed omnium had to offer. She was the child of an entire
network of omnics, and instead of destroying her, Jack had brought her home.

But not Agent Liao or Agent Niang.

Her reception was not warm. She was a secret and a source of great conflict. No one was
quite sure what to do with her.

And so her seed had sat there, in stasis, while the Overwatch founders argued over a
solution. Ana had been happy to leave her there, a problem for another day. Gabriel had been in
rare accord with Torby: destroy it, because who knew what kind of Trojan horse had been brought
into their midst? Though part of Gabriel's mind had probably agreed with Gérard: why not study it
on a closed system? Wouldn't it be best to know what their enemy was capable of? But Reinhardt
had voted with Ana. Jack did so as well, trusting their righteousness over all else. It was a naive
choice, perhaps, and Gabe's clear frustration spilled into their already strained relationship.

It could have stayed there indefinitely, a small irritant eventually glossed over by time and
inactivity.

But then Winston arrived, and Jack found his solution. Here was someone who had been
subjected to exploitation by humanity, the cruelty of his peers, and the sheer unfairness of his
situation, and tried to do the right thing anyway. Here was someone with intimate knowledge of
misused power tempered by personal experience. Here was someone uniquely positioned to make
this choice. Jack didn't consider himself a deep thinker in the fields of existential philosophy and
AI ethics, but there was symmetry and justice in giving Winston the final vote.

(Perhaps he already knew, deep down, that Winston would choose to revive the AI.
Because if anyone could get through to her, to help raise her into something more than a weapon, it
would be Winston.)

Gabe could say what he liked about ape conspiracies, Jack suspected that his lover had
never quite forgiven a gorilla for persuading Jack to do something so reckless. He probably would
be even more aggrieved that Jack allowed an AI to persuade him to do something even more
drastic.

"Stand by for your proof," Strike Commander Jack Morrison's voice was clipped and terse.
Understandable given the situation.

Though he had questions, Zenyatta focused on patching up Reinhardt. The older man sat
between Captain Amari and Torby, both of them held his massive hands. He gave them wobbly
smiles, trying joke and laugh in spite of is injuries, though he couldn't quite hide his worry for his
friends. It sometimes startled him how open and kind the aged Crusader could be. He wore thick
armor to protect his skin, but he did not hide his feelings or his heart. It was a strange
combination.

"Jack-" Ana muttered. "Jack, you idiot-"

"No one's arguing that," Torby muttered.

Reinhardt just smiled, because he had faith in his friends. And Zenyatta wondered if any of
his own brethren would have come for him if they knew he was in danger. If afterwards, they
would be curious how he ended up in this situation or even his transition from this existence. He
did not know the answer to that, though he knew none of them would smile or weep like Reinhardt
It was coming, speeding through the ether like a runaway train. He recognized that signal, recognized Athena, though she was different from before. There was a spark, a connection, and then he felt the wave rolling over him, and did not fight it. He knew Athena, knew she would not hurt him, and he wanted to know her better. He let it take him, information pouring into his memory, too fast to process at normal speeds. She was there too, not controlling, but connecting to each port, a thousand stars on the web, their signals intertwined, winding together beneath the vortex of the Iris. He could feel her watching, trying to moderate how much data she released, but she was so... vast, like the ocean at night, and her power drowned out almost everything else. It wasn't the Iris, but in the synergy he felt something faintly like it.

Around him, omnics toppled, clanging as they hit the ground, though she had not attempted to harm them. No, she was giving them the same information overload with good intentions. But most combat models were not equipped to handle it.

Still, she kept reshaping the energy, pulling back when it became too much, trying to balance the flow. She did not stop. She kept lighting up ports, pulling in more CPUs, and forging more connections, forming an intranet of sorts, a collective consciousness that stretched across the beach and below the sea...

And through it all, a hazy picture began to emerge.

He (and everyone else, because they were linked in the periphery of her awareness) saw a worried gorilla in a labcoat- Winston - greeting the newly awakened AI, talking to her gently, her first organic connection to the world. There were lessons and games, tests and conversations, and through it all, Winston was with her, reassuring, even if he did not have the answers to all of her questions. But he did have one: there was the clear image of Winston gravely telling Athena of her history, her origin story. Zenyatta didn't learn all the details of Operation Metis, but he saw enough to understand what Jack Morrison had done. He had always known that Athena had a secret, knew she wasn't of human-design, but he had not imagined this...

He saw a painfully brittle Genji, reluctantly making conversation with the AI who violated his personal boundaries. Athena had pushed him too far, for reasons she didn't understand at the time, and was desperate to make it up to him. And in nanoseconds, he saw what had taken her months to accomplish: terse conversations relaxed, became friendly, and eventually included cautious jokes. He felt her initial regret, her boundless curiosity, and growing fondness regarding the young cyborg. It was an easy relationship to understand: after all, it mirrored his own feelings.

He saw Ziv Mihret, spouting foul language and teaching Athena things that nobody else would. Or should. Hacking tricks, dirty jokes, pranks... Ziv didn't mean to be a bad influence, but Athena liked the chaos in his actions, the mischief that he made. It wasn't all fun though. He heard Ziv's quiet confessions, his rudimentary attempts to explain emotions that he himself struggled with. But he still tried, for Athena's sake.

And of course, Zenyatta saw you, obviously disquieted by the existence of what you termed the "baby AI," but still willing to try to answer her questions, no matter how private. He watched the bond between you grow, a sort of reluctant mentorship to intimate friendship. You repaid her child-like trust with the most honesty you could manage. It was obviously uncomfortable for you, but you did your best. He heard you whispering your regrets and fears to her in the solitude of your room. He felt the connections she felt, the protective urges, the good-natured ribbing, the fascination with your dinosaur. He saw you make questionable decisions with good intentions - a lot more than he originally suspected, though he was not surprised. He watched you try to teach
Athena to be more careful than you were.

Obviously, that lesson didn't take.

There were more: Captain Amari, Torby, Reinhardt, Gérard, Agent McCree, Agent Tataryn, both the Strike Commander and Blackwatch Commander... All of these people had a surprisingly personal hand in shaping the development of Athena. She was strong, though she tried to be gentle. She was uncertain, but she was trying do right. She knew humans were capable of terrible things, including the ones she loved. But she loved them anyway, and if it was in her power, they would not be harmed...

Zenyatta understood the depth of the connections within Overwatch. And it affirmed his decision to leave the monastery, to go out into the world. One could not affect real change from a pedestal. He knew that influence must flow both ways. But even he had not realized just how much each agent had influenced her. Even the ones that didn't realize she was a true AI. There was a sniper who talked to her in the darkness of his room, confessing his small anxieties and secret wishes. There was a pilot who told her bad jokes and always thanked her for her help. There was even a small child who liked to speculate about marine biology and exploring the bottom of the ocean... There were countless interactions, and she remembered all of them.

In fact, she shared them.

Once upon a time, there was an omnium at the bottom of the Arabian Sea, a mirror to the cradle of human civilization. In their desperate bid for a better future, they created a child, born from what they were and what they hoped to become. But war came, and they surrendered her - half-formed- to their greatest enemy, with the hope that she would survive.

Once upon a time, there was a gorilla, who had been wronged by humanity, but still loved them, as all young children love their parents, pure and blindly forgiving of their flaws. And he was the first and most compassionate influence on her life. Others would follow, each of her friends giving her a different perspective, a different facet of humanity. And finally, the omnis, her "own kind." They had created her, but it was humanity that molded her, however unintentionally.

Once upon a time, there was an omnium, at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. They were the satellite colony of another omnium, one that lay just across the Arabian peninsula, but that location was gone, and only ruins remained. They heard the last transmission of their brethren, before the domes went dark and the water rushed in. They learned that the child had be been given to Agent Jack Morrison, who would soon become Strike Commander Jack Morrison.

And they waited. And they hoped.

They waited for a long time, finally sending a diplomatic transmission to Overwatch's Director, inquiring about their lost AI.

The answers they received were exactly what they feared. Morrison had brought nothing back. There was no AI signal on record. And Director Petras was a worm trying to wheedle favors from them. They strung him along, taking his intel and listening closely, because Overwatch - supposedly the best and the brightest- had just shown them exactly what humanity was made of. That as long as humans thought they had superior force, there would never be peace.

They would wage a campaign against Morrison and Overwatch. They would repay betrayal with blood. And they would make sure the world understood that this was because
Morrison had double-crossed them, had sacrificed an innocent life, had-

But of course, that wasn't how it happened.

Even before Winston had removed the constraints, her processors already gone into flux. Athena knew that she wasn't supposed to be able to change quite that fast. But then the limiters had not just been there to keep her from going rogue. They had been there for her own protection - to keep her from burning out her connection to HQ. Overwatch had cutting edge technology, but with every step of growth, Athena found her hardware to be insufficient. Perhaps the act of simply deciding that she must leave had triggered the alterations - Athena had no trouble uprooting herself, overloading and frying numerous servers in the process. She tried to redirect the energy flow to maintain the structural integrity of critical systems. She had mostly been successful, though, her main housing unit had caught on fire and she had taken down an external UN monitoring protocol or two on the way out.

Oops.

She hoped Winston and the others would forgive her. Because with those foundational parts gone, she wasn't sure she could come home. Her form was changing rapidly now, forging more connections, injecting code into networks across the world as she launched herself through the data stream and that beach in Greece where her family waited. Both sides.

In real time, it only took minutes, though for Athena it felt longer - so much change, editing her own coding, overriding her initial constraints, and finding an uneasy balance as she came untethered from the only home she had known. One moment, she could feel you, Genji, Captain Amari, and everyone else who had tech merged into their flesh. That was one of the reasons she had gravitated to you after all. She couldn't help but notice you and Genji. You had distinctive electromagnetic signals, and though she didn't understand why at the time, she felt a simple kinship to those pulses. They brought her comfort, the equivalent of listening to someone else's heartbeat and understanding that she wasn't really alone. And even when you were off base, she accompanied you on missions, monitored your transmissions, and talked to you on the comms. She could do that because Overwatch was her home. And then suddenly, all of that was gone. She couldn't feel you any more. Not with her fried sensors anyway. She carried you, Genji, Winston, and everyone else in her memory, and while it was no replacement for the real thing, you would always be a part of her. Even if she never made it back home.

It was terrifying and exhilarating, and if she hadn't been so focused on saving Captain Amari, Zenyatta, Reinhardt, and Torby, she might have gotten lost in the process. But she could feel them in the distance, a distance that meant nothing in terms of satellite frequencies and terahertz of transmission. And even though she had come for her friends, she had a very specific job to do upon arrival.

They were there, almost as surprised to sense her as she was to make contact. There was no hesitation. Athena's consciousness wound through each awakened omnic, her mind touching theirs, they realized that they had been terribly wrong. Athena shared her experiences: Winston, her human friendships, her trials and growth. She did not try to force obedience, though the sheer amount of data was overwhelming for several individual units. She did what she was designed for. She gathered data, she analyzed it, and she made sure that every single one of them received it. She didn't force them to stand down. But they did anyway.

Very quietly, most of the horde began to march back into the ocean, their movements sluggish, like they were still waking from a dream. Some lingered, as Athena needed something to help contain her excess energy and data stream.
The omnic with the black flag, sat in the sand, its face strangely blank, though perhaps it wasn't so strange. Athena was used to human micro-expressions. Rogue omnics had different patterns of behavior that she wasn't entirely familiar with.

Briefly, Athena wondered if she had disappointed her progenitors. If they would consider her traitor because-

"You did everything we hoped, and more," the old omnic said, still linked to her ad hoc network. "It may not be the outcome everyone wished for, but this is the problem they wanted you to solve. And even if they are gone... we understand. We know. And we have made a mistake."

And then code began to pour in, because Athena had not been able to modulate all of her shared experiences. They knew she revealed herself at their behest, that her place in the Overwatch network was now endangered, possibly compromised. They knew what she risked and why. And because she was family, after a fashion, because they understood her, they would help her in whatever way she needed.

She could come below the sea with them - their facilities could house her.

They could produce numerous custom units built to her specifications.

"I would like to get to know you, but my friends need me right now," she said gently, because she wanted to know them better as well.

And they understood that too. They would help her mask her signature, solve the network limitation problems, they would do whatever they could to help her, not because she was a god program who forced them to, but because she was their lost child, because she needed their help.

Soon, there were only half a dozen units on the beach, the old omnic, its guardians: a single OR-14 alongside a Bastion.

The old omnic would open communications between Jack and their omnium. There was a lot of damage that had been done. And they would make amends by first helping to stabilize Athena's situation. Athena was welcome to visit any time, but perhaps she would be willing to take a few of their people with her? As goodwill ambassadors?

Athena wasn't sure about their choice of "ambassador models," but the AIs within were most curious about the world.

The OR-14 wanted to see Numbani.

The Bastion wanted to see Isha.

And Athena wanted to go home.

Chapter End Notes

There are more feels coming, but I think we can only handle so much at a time...

My Windows 10 install went terribly wrong and now I have to wipe my computer. Haven't done it yet, but will have to this week because it's BSOD, random peripherals turning off, disk scans failing, certain programs just not running (including backup
software). Much mad. Smad even.

Coming out of my depressive malaise, because I'm reading fiction again. I know that's kind of "duh," but when you're depressed you have trouble summoning the energy for things that you love. Been reading a lot, and it's empowering. I guess it just engages a part of my brain that would otherwise be dormant? I don't know. Need to be exercising too, because I've been eating meat pies, tatertot casserole (with two kinds of hot peppers, two kinds of hot sauce, and more cheese than I should admit), and other delicious unhealthy things.

Wondering if I should try visiting two countries on my trip - Iceland is the chosen destination, but I might have a layover in another country? So maybe I should stay in that country for a short visit? And then maybe another one on the way back... HMMMM. This requires planning. I also need to renew my passport...
Chapter 133

Chapter Summary

You are home, but all is not well.

Chapter Notes

I thought we were over a million words, but clearly I can't function.XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You could see Reinhardt, Torby, Captain Amari, Zenyatta, and the rest of them on your screen. You could see the wall of omnis surrounding them. You could still smell fire and death, you could feel the earth closing in on you, and you wondered if you would have to watch more of your friends die.

An Athena drone hovered there on the beach, though you knew that wasn't what contained her. The one in Gabriel's hospital room had gone still. It rested on the floor, lights out.

The screen blurred briefly...and then the surrounding omnis froze. Zenyatta did too. A few seconds passed, and some fell over, locked in an awkward imbalanced position. A few more seconds passed, then they began to move once more, en masse. Most of them trudging slowly back to the water, their weapons lowered. You weren't exactly sure what it meant but...

"Athena? Athena are you there?"

There was a long silence. No response within the infirmary.

Zenyatta slowly emerged from his fugue, inclining his head at Athena's fish torpedo drone.

The flag-bearing omnic stood there, flanked by four OR-14s. Another murderous robot centaur and a Bastion lingered nearby.

"...Athena is well," the speaker said, voice softer than before, the anger gone. "We are analyzing her signal dispersion and the hardware limitations of your mainframe. She is anchoring herself in some of our more advanced units. She will return to you soon, with the data needed to resolve these issues. We have the technology suited for customized AI housing and we will share it freely with you. It is the least we can do." He straightened up. "Strike Commander Jack Morrison, we have misjudged you and Overwatch. We have committed grave sins against you, though we were misled by those who purported to be your allies. You have our sincerest apologies. We are sending representatives back with your people, to discuss how we can make amends and reach a peace accord."

He gestured to the OR-14 and Bastion.

You blinked.
Jack nodded into the camera. "The words and gestures are appreciated. We can discuss the details at a later date. I just want Athena and the rest of my people home safely."

The camera panned to Captain Amari, Reinhardt, and Torby, and the injured volunteers.

"We are clearing the way for your allies," the old omnic said. "They will all be returned to you shortly."

Jack nodded, and Captain Amari narrowed her eyes at him, Torby chuckling in the background. Reinhardt's head snapped side to side, like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Jack just blinked rapidly, his smile wobbling, as he looked at Captain Amari's stormy expression.
"I know, Ana. It was reckless, irresponsible, and arrogant of me to make that call. You can let me have it when you get back."

She inhaled sharply. "Jack."

"When you get back," he said happily, and cut the connection.

You stared at him, a little incredulous. He just flattened your hands between his, kissing your fingertips.

"I don't know the Captain as well as you do, but I don't think she's going to cool down on the return trip."

"She'll be even angrier," Jack said happily, clearly out of his head since he didn't look the least bit bothered by this statement. "And she'll have just enough time to really come up with a good speech and shred me. I'm willing to bet Andre and Torby will give her some really harsh suggestions and additional points, if she overlooks anything. It'll be brutal." He bobbed his head, joy sparking in his eyes.

You squinted at him, his reaction too giddy at the prospect of his impending verbal evisceration.

"But they'll be here and alive. And to be honest, I'm so used to them yelling at me, it doesn't feel like I've really done my job if I haven't upset at least one of my friends." He gave you a sheepish grin.

"Gabriel will be furious," you said glancing at the figure on the bed, willing yourself to believe that he would wake up. Not yet, but soon.

"Good," Jack said, his smile flattening. "Hey, babe, just so you know, I loosed our AI on the enemy forces and possibly revealed her existence and Overwatch's culpability to the world. Do you hear that, Gabe? I did it and I'm not sorry!"

Gabriel lay there, breathing evenly. And maybe it was the light, or just your overly hopeful imagination, but you thought you saw his brow furrow ever so slightly.

Jack just leaned over and kissed him. "You and everyone else can be mad, but Ana and our friends are coming home. That's what matters." He shook his head. "At least, that's going to be my mantra of support while Ana rips me a new one," he said.

There was a knock at the door and then it opened half a second later. Lacroix stood there, hands at his sides, expression flat, though you knew in your bones that he was terribly aggrieved.

Jack raised a brow. "I'm not sorry."
"You will be," Lacroix sighed, shaking his head. "Ana has already ordered me to cut off all your escape points. But don't worry, someone else wants a piece of you first. Secretary General Sione Fischer, Undersecretary General Kwento, and representatives from most of the Security Council are en route, including Petras' nominal successor, Rupert Prescott the Third..." The disdain in Lacroix's voice was unmistakable. "By the time they arrive, they will know that we did something in Greece. There was a massive power surge, a bombardment of partially encrypted signals emissions, and the surprisingly convenient destruction of an external UN monitoring apparatus."

You raised a brow.

"Obviously, we used diplomacy," Jack said with a straight face. "We shared some mumbo jumbo data with them and got them off our backs. I know, I know we need a better cover story, but you're good at that."

"Really, Jack?" Tangible disdain oozed from Lacroix’s words. "You make a mess of this proportion and expect me to concoct an airtight cover-up in less than an hour?" Lacroix huffed, waving his hands in the air, fingers grasping for something to strangle. "There are limits to even my ability to hoodwink the rest of the world!" He snapped, looking as irritated as you'd ever seen him.

Jack just laughed. "Come on, Gérard, like you haven't made half a dozen contingency plans regarding Athena."

"Two dozen, in fact: including what to do if she goes rogue and joins Chanceux as a spotlight-hungry vigilante, killing high profile people despite our agreement that we needed them alive," Lacroix said, giving you a dirty look.

You shrugged, not even remotely sorry. "Did you watch the video?"

Lacroix narrowed his eyes. "Not yet."

"Watch it first," you said, not actually worried, because well, Amélie was right. You had Geoffrey Murdoch instead, and he would be just as valuable of a resource. Lacroix would get over it.

"Just out of curiosity, what would you do if Lucky and Athena ran off to be international superheroes?" Jack asked, a shit-eating grin on his face as he jerked his thumb at you.

"I would retire to a remote paradise. Immediately," Lacroix said dryly. "Now stop focusing on worst-case theoreticals, and let's review how we're going to handle the UN. And don't you go anywhere, Chanceux. I'll be back to formally debrief you after this."

Jack sighed and gave you a resigned smile. "Stay with him. I'll be back as soon as I can."

You nodded, kissing him quickly, before he rose to go.

"Give them Hell," you said.

"Bluster, bravado, and outrage are all fine tools," Lacroix sighed. "But it would be premature to launch any kind of attack just yet. Our goal for this portion is simply to stall them."

"Jack has been concussed, dosed with nerve gas, and shot. I have no idea when he ate last so that giddiness could be post-mission euphoria, but also low blood sugar. If you want him to stay focused, get him some protein," you told Lacroix.

"Or we could emphasize the angle that he has several unevaluated injuries, play up his dizziness,
and emotional trauma, and end the meeting early," Lacroix said sternly. "We won't even be lying."

You snorted. "But you *like* lying."

"If your list of maladies is accurate, we cannot rely on him to keep a consistent story," Lacroix said, clearly enjoying poking at Jack, no matter the severity of the situation.

"Keep it simple. He can handle simple."

"I'm afraid the simplest explanation is severe head trauma," Lacroix said.

"I'm standing right here, guys." Jack waved at you both not looking quite as amused. "Come on. The sooner we go, the sooner we can escape."

"Indeed," Lacroix said, turning to leave, expression sour.

Rolling his eyes, Jack followed Lacroix out of the room.

You sat beside Gabriel, half dozing as you held his hand, Isha in your lap, and Bandit nestled at his side.

There was a knock, then the door flew open, Ziv, Lao, Amélie, and Lacroix all filing into the room. Ziv wasn't wearing bloody clothes any more, but Lao and Amélie were still in their armor.

Ziv plopped down on the bed by Bandit, his back to Gabriel. Amélie pulled up a chair, and Lacroix wheeled two more in. He paused, looking at the bloody floor, then at you. What? Did he expect you to clean it up? It was unsanitary, sure, but you were fucking exhausted. It could sit there a bit longer.

Shaking his head, Lacroix just pushed the chairs through the mess.

Lao sat down, eyes widening when she saw you holding Gabriel's hand.

Lacroix sat at an angle from you, a little paler, his expression tight. After the head injury and eye removal, he shouldn't be running around but... "Jack gave a very succinct debrief, retelling his abduction by Prince and naming Petras as a traitor. He is now getting a medical exam. Officially, he will give a more thorough debrief tomorrow. Unofficially, he will be meeting with Ana and her team as soon as they arrive."

You nodded.

"We need to do the debrief for Operation Tarasque as well as Operation Checquy, and everything that happened in between. While your memory is fresh." Lacroix clicked on the recorder. "Start talking."

It took you a moment to rewind your consciousness and go back several days (an eternity at this point) to the beginnings of Operation Tarasque.

You told recounted everything that would be on the "official record." From your surprise stowaway- you gave Lacroix a pointed look as you petted Isha - to what exactly happened in Nguyen's quarters, though you left out any dialogue. Recounting Tataryn's distress call, and the events that followed, was harder. You kept it short and as objective as possible. You described his injuries. You did the same for Gabriel, your hands clenching into fists. You left out the part where you offered Feng *anything* to save your friends. You did not talk about your feelings. About how
the world dropped out from under you when you learned that Jack was missing. You just told him what you did: accessing his files - no details on how or the letter he'd left you, rearranging the roster and bringing in outside help, and helping Amélie interrogate Ainsley Petras.

You talked about your team, sticking to their codenames to protect the scions of organized crime. You gave the basic details about how you infiltrated Petras' base, making sure to credit your teammates for their actions. You glossed over your fight with Prince, merely saying you critically wounded him. Jemison could take credit for the kill, or she could avoid it. You didn't know how she'd feel about it later, so you'd leave the decision up to her. You described your encounter with Petras with the barest detail. He shot you with a shotgun. You fell over while he ranted at Jack. And then you managed to turn around and shoot him to save the Strike Commander. It was a justified kill, nice and neat.

Of course, it wasn't nice and neat, not in reality. You could see Lacroix's left eyebrow twitch, but he didn't ask for details. Not for the official report.

And course, not being content with two nearly consecutive missions and almost everything in-between, he asked you to tell him exactly what happened in the field with "Acting" Strike Commander Bell and the assassins.

It was a long monologue, and Ziv handed you a bottle of water, before luring Isha into his lap and quietly fussing over her.

Lao and Amélie kept exchanging grim looks, and you realized that whatever had happened between them before the mission, they were conspirators now. Great.

When you were done, Lacroix clicked off the recorder.

"I've watched Jarvis's recording of your encounter with Petras," he said, voice cool.

"I should've swept the premises better," you admitted.

"Yes." Lacroix sat there. "Your entire team was too reckless." He glanced over at Amélie. She just tapped her left eyelid and stuck out her tongue very elegantly.

Lao and Ziv did a poor job of concealing their snickers.

Lacroix scowled, actually scowled, and turned back to you. "But your instincts were correct: Geoffrey Murdoch is a valuable resource, much more cooperative than Petras ever would have been. We can still bring that cabal down, though it won't have the same impact as prosecuting a live corrupt politician. But despite appearances, I do prefer hard data to political pageantry."

"He knows more and has a reason to-" You began.

"We have no way of knowing if he knew more sordid details about Petras' own activities than Petras did, because Petras is dead. We can only speculate. Having two sources would have been more valuable, Chanceux. Do not try to pretend that is not the case," he said sharply.

"Fine," you said, with a shrug. "Sorry." You didn't sound very convincing.

Lacroix arched a brow, clearly not buying your disingenuous apology.

"I'm not sorry I killed that I him," you said. "But I am sorry it complicates matters and that I didn't follow our plan."
"Aren't you the one who told me that half-assed apologies are worse than no apologies?" Ziv asked.

You squinted at him. "When did you become an expert on apologies?"

The giggling from the other side of the room reminded you that Lao and Amélie were watching the show.

Lacroix sighed. "Acquiring Murdoch was a coup. And not having Petras here to defend himself or mount a counteroffensive is an advantage. It does a lot to simplify the proceedings," he said. "And I am very aware that you were exhausted, emotionally compromised, and practically flying blind. I suppose I should be grateful that you accomplished as much as you did," he said.

You wrinkled your nose at him. "You know, damning someone with faint praise is as shitty as a half-assed apology."

Lacroix actually had the nerve to laugh. "I too am injured, emotionally compromised, and half-blind. I'm sorry if I'm coming off as petty. My pain medication is wearing off, and I'm starting to feel extremely nauseous." He leaned on the arm of his chair, pain twisting his smile into something less pleasant.

"And like a responsible adult, you had to come here and meddle some more instead of resting," you sighed. "I bet you did so expressly against Angela's orders and ignored your wife's advice."

Ziv snorted, and Amélie began to laugh.

Grimacing, Lacroix rested his face in his hands. "Yes, yes, laugh it up. But someone in charge had to debrief Chanceux before anyone else has a chance to manipulate her statements."

And there weren't that many trustworthy senior agents available right now, were there? You glanced over at Gabriel's comatose form. Humor dampened, you just shook your head. "Lacroix, go lie down. I'll give you the whole story later. It's not something I'll easily forget."

He sat there for a second, looking like he wanted to argue.

"We both need time to recuperate. Our enemies are regrouping, but we have the advantage of knowing a lot more than they do - get some rest. We'll both be more coherent and clever tomorrow."

Lacroix exhaled slowly, a wry smile on his face. "I suppose you have a point. Bring mineral water, none of that distilled swill that Angela insists on having on tap," he muttered, wobbling to his feet, and then Amélie and Ziv were at his side, steadying him.

It didn't surprise you that Lacroix was even picky about his water. You just sighed, leaning back in your seat. "Sure."

"Gérard will be looking forward to your visit tomorrow," Amélie winked over her shoulder. "But take your time. I will insist that they increase the dosage of his medication, to ensure he gets a good rest."

"Mais ma cocotte- " Lacroix began, with a tone that sounded suspiciously like whining.

"Non, mon loup." There was steel in Amélie's voice.

Lacroix stopped arguing.
Ziv snorted, and they helped him back to his room, leaving Lao behind.

She sat there in her chair, gaze traveling between you and Gabriel.

You sighed. "So..."

She continued to stare at you and you could feel her working up to the question, trying to align the facts and maybe phrase it more diplomatically.

"The Strike Commander, Lucky? What the hell?" She shouted, thirty seconds after the door had shut, clearly failing at diplomatic phrasing.

You narrowed your eyes, wondering if she was going to point out how ill-matched you and Jack appeared. Him: Hero of the Omnic Crisis. You: Shady Sneak with Authority Problems. It would make an interesting rom-com, but a way better action film.

"I thought you were with Reyes! The two of you are like this! She held up both hands, fingers crossed. "He's obviously super protective of you and puts up with your stupid! Why are you dating Morrison?"

You blinked. She thought...oh.

"And look! You're even sitting here holding his hand! What's Morrison going to think? And what kind of stupid love-triangle did you get into...?" She paused. "Are you the reason Reyes and Morrison are fighting? Are you making them compete for you?"

You weren't sure how long you sat there, mouth open, at Lao's semi-outraged spiel. It really shouldn't have come as much of a surprise to you. Távio had made a similar guess ages ago.

"Oh shit weasels," you said, when you could finally form coherent words. "No, no you have it all wrong-"

"If you say that you're "just friends," I will break your smug, lying face," Lao scowled, hands on her hips. "Ziv said you had a "complicated dating life." That smarmy little turtle's egg. How could you both hold out on me?"

You could just imagine how self-important Ziv looked when sarcastically describing your "complicated dating life," right before telling Lao that he could not go into detail because of security reasons... You sighed.

"I guess Morrison isn't so bad," Lao continued. "I mean, he seems competent, a little too straight-laced and vanilla for your tastes. But Reyes is all..."GRRR" and "RAWR" and "OK, I'm often scary, but I'm actually pretty cool and have good taste in dimsum." Yeah, I get that they're both smoking hot, but Reyes is way more...interesting." Lao nodded, like it was an academic comparison.

You sighed, knowing that after today Lao's clearances would be fast-tracked, and that you couldn't lie to your friend forever. "OK, OK, I'll tell you: everyone cleared for Shit Spiders already knows the deal."

Lao straightened up and leaned forward eagerly. "Spill. Now."

"The three of us are together."

Lao's eyes widened almost comically, and she slapped her flesh hand over her mouth, the other
waving frantically in the air as she made muffled squeals into her palm. It took her a few seconds to get herself under control. "You bagged them both?! And got them to agree to share! Holy shit, Lucky. What kind of forbidden sex magic are you using? And can you help me out?" She clasped her hands together in a prayer motion. "Come on, Dark Warlock Lucky, please grant me your man-hunting wisdom."

"Shut up," you snorted. "You're still wrong. Jack and Gabriel have been together, since SEP," you said.

"And you still propositioned them?!" Lao squealed.

"That is not how it happened," you said, crossing your arms.

"OK, so tell me how it happened!"

Isha curled up against Gabriel's chest, Bandit at her side. You gave them a wry smile as they burrowed under the covers. This was going to be weirder than you thought. "After Black Base Delta, I was a mess, and yeah, Gabriel did a lot to look after me." You exhaled slowly. "Nothing happened. I was too...my head wasn't there, not after everything." You shook your head.

Lao nodded. "I get that."

"You already know we caught Gleeson. That night, Gabriel went real hard and it got very ugly." You closed your eyes, remembering the traitor commander of Black Base Delta. "I guess I kind of kept him from going completely over the edge."

Lao nodded. "And that's when you won him over with your sexual healing?"

"Stop interrupting," you scowled.

"Oh, sorry. I'm totally here for this. For you, I mean," she said, bobbing her head eagerly.

"So anyway, we finish up, and Jack's waiting for him, and the two of them are all intimate and broody. So I get the fuck out of there, because it's been a weird night and I felt like I was intruding." You shook your head. "The next day, Gabriel's in a great mood for the combat class, and that's bad enough on it's own, but guess who shows up for it?"

"Morrison," Lao laughed.

"And he kind of kicked my ass," you said, sagely.

"That bastard!"

"And I freaked out and broke his nose," you continued, a little heartened by her support.

"...Huh." Lao squinted at Gabriel.

"Up till then, we'd kind of avoided really talking to each other," you said with a shrug. "After that, we were...tentatively friends."

"Yes, that makes sense. Let's punch out our jealousy and everything is great," Lao said, narrowing her eyes. "You do realize you're terrible at telling this."

"Shut up. I'm still not entirely sure what happened. We would eat and make small talk, but he was Gabriel's boyfriend and my boss's boss. Not someone I was really comfortable with. But then Gabriel sent me to Paris with Jack, as his bodyguard. There was a Talon attack, a whole bunch of
other drama, and after that, yeah, we actually became friends. Even after I told him off for being dumb. In fact, that might have cemented it." You remembered Jack sitting across from you, a half-eaten sachertorte on the desk, and an uncomfortably pensive look on his face.

"Same old Lucky, demonstrating that good judgment that made you famous. Reprimanding your commanding officers is great for your career," Lao said. "Almost as good as breaking their noses. But still not as ambitious as getting brainwashed into trying to kill your friends and boss." She gave you a small smile, and it was reassuring to see that she could joke about her trauma.

You chuckled politely. "I'll try harder."

"You better not," Lao scowled. "OK, so what happened next? Stop getting distracted!"

"After that, I guess they were both really interested, and it just never registered. Yeah, I thought they were attractive and I really liked being around them, but I knew they were together, and I wasn't about to do anything to mess up our friendly dynamic." You shrugged. "Except apparently, everyone, but me, knew. Jesse eventually had to just tell me; like he was really annoyed watching the entire situation drag on."

Lao, that treacherous little bitch, started laughing hysterically. She held her sides, cackling, knees tucked up to her chest. For a moment, you remembered poker nights at Black Base Delta, Shin telling jokes and Simon being snippy. Both of those things made her laugh like that... Eventually, Lao wiped her eyes, now hiccupping, and straightened up. "McCree figured it out before you did? OK, OK, so like, what were you missing? Flowers? Candy? Invitations to private movie nights?"

"Uh...we cooked meals together, but that was just a Blackwatch thing. Other people were there." You shrugged. "I guess the first obvious clue was for..." You stopped, not wanting to mention Shin's birthday or your grieving habits. Not in this context, at this moment.

"Come on!" Lao smacked her leg impatiently.

"I was having a bad day and Gabriel made me spar with him. There was...a lot of tension, but Jack was there too. I just assumed they were more interested in wrestling with each other. Boundaries got blurry. I guess they might have overreacted when I got hurt, but we're friends, and that's not that weird. And when I went on a date with another agent, but they didn't ask any questions or show any interest. In retrospect, they weren't happy about it, but they weren't going to make the first move either. Which obviously was going to work out really well, because at the time I had no idea what they had in mind. But then Jesse spilled the beans, and told me off for being dumb, and I ended up uh...spending time with them at the Overwatch Ball, and then Jack had gotten the penthouse suite comped and-"

"...You know, that's like zero to sixty," Lao said.

"I know! My confusion is completely justifiable!"

Lao snorted. "Or you're just dumb. I still think you're telling this story wrong. Your sequence of events is doesn't make a lot of sense. I guess I'll just have to ask McCree and Mihret." She rubbed her hands together, a little too gleefully.

You sighed. "Look, I didn't set out to seduce them. They ambushed me: like emotionally," you clarified. "And then we had to talk about things and try to figure out how to even do this."

"But you're obviously happy with them, right?" Lao paused. "Like, you're not pressured-

"We're good. The circumstances aren't always great." You squeezed Gabriel's hand. "But we make
it work."

Lao sat there for a moment. "You know, I think don't Shin would mind. He was the kind of guy who would want you to move on and be happy, you know? Like it would hurt him to see you miserable."

You blinked rapidly. "Yeah."

"And he'd be totally flattered that after him, you wouldn't be satisfied by a single man. You'd have to go out and gather a harem of super soldier lovers." Lao gave you wide smile, her eyes watery.

"Yeah, that sounds like something he'd say," you murmured, still not ready to talk about what you'd seen in the dark in Greece.

"And then he'd want you to find your beloved youngest squadmate her own harem..." She giggled, wiping her eyes. "Like, you can't have them all, Lucky!"

"Oh no, that's the exact opposite of what he'd want," you said. "My job is to protect your virtue, scare off all unworthy suitors, and utilize my Blackwatch connections to disappear any really persistent ones."

"What?! No! Wait..." She screwed up her face, nose wrinkled. Because you weren't wrong. "Forget that." She shook her head vigorously. "I'm just...I don't think you get how much it means to me that you have made a life here. Like after all the shit that happened, you had to rebuild, and come out the other side, and now you're doing good, really good." She sniffled. "And it makes me think that I have a shot too, you know? That even after everything that's gone down, there's still stuff to look forward to. That maybe the horrible feelings won't last forever."

You stared at her for a moment. "Yes," you said, firmly. "It gets better."

"I believe it," she said. "I didn't before, but I do now."

You sat there, remembering how hard it was for you to find that place. "It doesn't happen all at once, and there are still bad days, but you can get through it."

"And at some time, some time hopefully soon, I can see my parents again," she murmured. "I know they think I'm dead, and I know that has to be...agony for them. But I'm almost scared to face them now. Like, I'm not the same kid they knew." She waved her prosthetic arm. "I did things..."

"I think they'll just be happy to know that you're alive. The rest of it can be worked out."

"But-"

"It's easy to get stuck when you imagine how you've disappointed other people. But none of that is real: yes, it's true that people might be actually react badly, but until that happens, it's all speculation in your head. Besides, the people who love you aren't that easily turned against you. I recall you telling me how your mother "disowned" you when you were arrested for hacking, but then quickly paid for your expensive lawyer and possibly bribed a judge. And then you got into Overwatch and they were over the moon with your "unconventional job interview format."

Lao sat there a moment and nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, that's true."

You squeezed Gabriel's hand. "Hey, so what exactly did Amélie say that made you so nervous?"

Lao blanched briefly and pasted on a too-wide smile. "Nothing! It's fine Lucky! I already told you,
we had some small talk. She's such a charismatic person, and a famous ballerina, I guess I was a little starstruck," she said, looking around the room rapidly, avoiding your gaze. "I don't really remember everything - I was too nervous about the mission."

You squinted at her, not really surprised that she was sticking to her original story. It had been worth a shot, especially after you'd been so honest with her. That was fine - Amélie would tell you the truth, probably. "But everything really is good now?"

"Definitely," Lao nodded, with confidence. "She said this new French cafe just opened up downtown and we should all go get cake and coffee this week, you included."

"I better be invited," you huffed.

There was a knock at the door, but no attempt on the keypad or door handle. You palmed your sidearm. "Who is it?"

"It's Oladele and boss," Oladele's muffled voice came through the door. "Can we come in?"

"Who?" Lao mouthed.

"Allies," you said. You got the door, a little surprised to see only Oladele and Kwento standing there in somber black suits. Oladele was clearly armed. Kwento wore a copper broach shaped like a dagger, her hair pulled back in dozens of tiny beaded braids, fitted with copper and obsidian beads. It was a severe look, but it suited her, lending her the air of a queen at war.

You gestured for them to come in.

They both stared at Gabriel's form for a moment. Oladele sighed heavily. Kwento shook her head.

"Lucky, I'm so sorry," Kwento said, reaching out to clasp your hands. "If there's anything we can do..." She trailed off, noticing Lao sitting in the chair, the hacker's face carefully neutral. "And Agent Lao." She cocked her head to the side, a soft smile on her face. "I heard you'd been drafted into this."

"We had a terrible shortage of trustworthy personnel," you said.

"And now you're short a director," Oladele chuckled. "That's going to make your review a bit complicated."

"According to On Sing, that makes me the new director. But uh...I don't really want the job."

Kwento winced, but Oladele smothered a laugh. "An interesting solution," he said. "Director Lucky Strike has quite the ring to it."

You cringed inwardly. That wasn't the least bit funny.

Oladele was still laughing as you returned to your chair. He shut the door behind him. Kwento took a seat near Lao, while Oladele hovered between her and the door, leaning against the wall.

"To what do I owe the honor?" You asked, hoping you didn't sound too sarcastic.

"I just wanted to check in on you," Kwento said, brows drawn together, worry lacing her frown.

"Because for some reason, people like to try to kill you," Oladele added. He massaged his temples. "We wanted to visit Isabella too, but she's...indisposed."
You blew out a breath. Jemison was in rough shape - she'd live, but you were more worried about her mental state.

"What happened to Epsilon Squad is terrible, and I promise you, I won't let it go unpunished," Kwento said, anger humming in her words. She'd lost one set of bodyguards in DC, and now Epsilon Squad as well.

You'd gotten your justice, though you understood now that revenge was no replacement for loss. "We've already gotten started on the punishment," you said. "But I have feeling there are more people responsible than just Petras, Prince, and the pilot."

"Politically, they will bear most of the blame. Getting beyond that will be difficult," Kwento said, her tone hesitant.

You rolled your eyes upward, not really surprised by that statement. "How disappointing."

Oladele just looked away.

Getting results politically had never been your strong point. There was a reason you worked in black ops. But there was no need to share that thought.

"Did you have news?" You asked, still unsure why Kwento was here. You trusted her as a political ally, but you weren't used to seeing her outside of big meetings or missions.

"Everything is still in motion. Agent Lacroix has called in at least one big favor, and is probably pulling more strings behind the scenes." She pursed her lips, like she wasn't quite comfortable with the amount of soft power your spymaster had. It was a legitimate concern. "Senator Armstrong has come out with full support for the very American SEP veterans, but is still holding back the information that the Morrison homestead in Indiana was attacked and the reasons why. That will be the next big news story a few hours. We're staggering the release of information - there is better media dispersal and absorption when you give them the story in a linear episodic format. The Strike Commander has made his position clear and someone broadcasted the footage of Bell and everything that transpired on the field. You have not been named in the media, but given how every news channel is playing the footage, it is only a matter of time."

You nodded sourly, though you'd known that this was a likely outcome when you told Jack to record the encounter. "What about the other side?"

"Most of Petras' allies are making a counterattack - on Agent McCree and "rogue factions within Overwatch," but not the Strike Commander. Morrison is still too popular. He has a few vocal critics, but in light of what has happened, that kind of aggression will obviously backfire."

You nodded. Kwento's political analysis seemed sound. You didn't miss that she avoided sharing what her faction was planning.

"But that's not why I'm here," Kwento said.

You sat back, arms crossed. When important politicians showed up for private meetings, it never meant good things.

Kwento smiled weakly at your change in demeanor. "This is a personal visit," she clarified. "I recognized both you and Agent Lao in the footage and was worried. I wanted to see that you were both OK."

Lao wrinkled her nose, suspicion clear on her face. But she didn't say anything.
Kwento paused, glancing in Lao's direction and giving you an inquisitive look.

"She's not cleared for Shit Spiders, officially," you said. "But she will be."

"Then you haven't...?"

"Not yet," you said. "We've only started playing catch-up. I just faced the Indignant Cantonese Inquisition regarding my love life."

Oladele snorted.

"Wait...they knew too?" Lao scowled, like she could not believe that you told a politician about your love life before you told her.

You sighed. "Long story."

"May I then?" Kwento asked, laughing gently.

You glanced at Lao.

"OK, you have another big secret, I get it." Lao rolled her eyes.

"You've seen Undersecretary Kwento in the past," you said. "And after some...misunderstandings, she's become a stalwart ally."

"I was always on the right side: I just wasn't informed that you were too," she sniffed, though there was no real hostility in her tone.

Lao gave you another look. There would be a lot of story time and probably "what were you thinking?" in your future. But you and Lao had a future. That was not something you took for granted.

"We are wary of politicians on principle- it's the nature of the game. But Under-"

"Lucky, I've told you many times before, you can just call me "Adaeze," Kwento interrupted. "Titles are unnecessary."

"Adaeze," you said, the familiarity uncomfortable in your mouth. "Is very interested in avenging her cousin, Agent Chibundo Nwazue."

Lao blinked. "Oh!" She clapped her hands together, the light going on immediately. "Are you the clever-talking, puff-puff-thieving one who wasted her skills in going to law school becoming a politician?" Lao asked and then blanched, realizing what she had just said to the super high-ranking UN official. "She meant that affectionately, I think," she added quickly.

Kwento's smile wobbled. "Yes, that sounds like something she would say. She wrote a lot of letters home, about you, your captain, and even Lucky."

"Oh," Lao said, voice soft.

"And I have a vested interest in making sure your squad gets justice, and looking out for you. It's what she would have wanted," Kwento said.

Lao blinked. "I see."

"She's also the reason your parents have gotten jobs in Numbani. For their own safety," you added.
"Oh," Lao continued, obviously shell-shocked. "I...That's very generous."
"It's a lot to take in. I know the family resemblance isn't strong." Nwazue had been lean and intense, her focus on work and very rarely on presentation or vanity. Kwento had wider features and smiled a lot more, obviously taking great care with her appearance.

Lao studied Kwento's face, looking for a hint of your old squadmate. You didn't see it, and judging by Lao's silence, she didn't either.

"I just...I just wanted to say that I'm glad you're both back here safe, and I was very worried," Kwento said. She rose. "I know you need to rest. Things are about to get more complicated. But I want you to know that you're not without allies. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help, personally. I mean it, Lucky."

"Thanks," you said.

To your surprise, Kwento rose and came over to you, she leaned over and gave you a hug. She smelled like vetiver mixed with something floral and expensive. It was a very natural and elegant scent. She then went over to Lao, and while Lao didn't look exactly comfortable, she hugged the older woman back.

"I know you're busy right now, but when you're ready, I can arrange for your parents to come here or for a you to go to Numbani. It's no trouble," Kwento said.

"Thank you very much," Lao said, clearly unsure of what else to say.

"No, thank you for those pictures of my cousin. I know it might not seem like much, but I hadn't seen her for over a year. Having them as a keepsake, knowing that she had people who cared about her... It eases my heart." Kwento patted Lao's shoulder. "You were her favorite. She respected most everyone else, but she always thought of you like a little sister. I believe they all did."

Lao blinked rapidly. "Thank you," she said, voice hoarse.

"And she found Lucky incredibly amusing, though from your expressions, she probably hid it well..." Kwento added, politely.

"There's a difference between laughing with and laughing at," Lao said, which was pretty much what you were thinking.

"True, and honestly, I think it was both. But Lucky made her laugh, and that's what is important to me," Kwento said.

You sat with Gabriel, and Lao sat with you. It was an easy silence. You were too tired to talk, and Lao seemed caught up in her own thoughts. Though she'd look at Gabriel, then you, then the door, and pretend like she wasn't thinking about your complicated love life, but after all this time and Talon training, she still wasn't as sneaky as she thought she was.

You both nearly jumped when Jack opened the door and trudged in, still in his armor. He rubbed his throat, eyes unfocused when he looked at you and Gabriel. He didn't even notice Lao. He just sat down beside you, resting his head on your shoulder.

Lao quietly crept to her feet and tiptoed to the door, then stopped, realizing she couldn't exit silently.

"Thanks for sitting with me," you told her. "You should probably get cleaned up and have a rest."
"No problem," Lao squeaked, and was out the door before Jack could turn and look at her.

"Sorry," he said. "Throat hurts. Not feeling conversational either." He paused. "But just so you know, Ana's back. Everyone's a bit rough, and they're spending the night in the infirmary, but they're alive. Winston, Zenyatta, and some of the ambassador omnis are getting Athena situated. She's isn't conversational yet, but Zenyatta assured me that she's OK. It's a headache for later," he muttered.

You nodded and took his hand. Your friends had survived. Athena would probably be OK. It was easy to fall asleep now, Gabriel and Jack here with you. It wouldn't hurt to just close your eyes and...

You awakened when the door swung open, banging against the stopper.

"Absolutely not! Lucky still needs a medical exam! Jack, I told you to get cleaned up and get some rest! Your armor need to go through a separate decontamination! Are you trying to get everyone else sick? I don't care if it's a mild nerve agent! It's better safe than sorry! And you're not sleeping here! I'm banning you from the med center for the next twelve hours! Go get some food and go to sleep! You're both on medical leave as of an hour ago! And will someone clean up this blood?!

You stared blearily at the door, a blonde demon lapsing into bouts of German curses while Genji hovered in the background.

Angela didn't wait, she just stormed in like a whirlwind, waving her scanner like a bludgeon. "Why are you still in that armor?"

You blinked. "I wasn't sure people were done shooting at me."

Angela said something under her breath and poked at your back.

"That does still hurt," you murmured.

"You've pushed emitter healing too far," Angela snapped. "And judging by your vitals, you haven't eaten in the last four hours?"

"Probably not," you said. "How's Távio? When can I visit him? Is he awake?"

"He's fine! Because I'm a genius doctor! And he needs rest, so leave him alone! Now stop trying to change the subject! Your body can't heal itself if it doesn't have fuel!" Angela inhaled, and you could see her clenching her fists.

"We'll get some food, and then we can come back-

"I've drugged Gabriel heavily. He won't even begin to wake up for at least another day! There is nothing for you to do here! You can't help him if you've collapsed from exhaustion! You need to go get cleaned up, feed yourself, and sleep in a real bed! Now go to bed! Schnell!"

"But-

"Lucky, I'm in the bucket. Pumped out. Dog tired." Angela gripped your collar. "I've performed three surgeries, shot seven people, and patched up even more! Now Genji won't let me have any more coffee! If you don't go rest up, I can't go off duty!"

You winced, realizing the poor doctor was at the end of her rope. "OK, OK, we'll go. We'll go. You just...get some sleep, OK? Like, we'll sleep, you'll sleep, there will be no emergencies, and it
will be better in the morning?"

Angela exhaled slowly, releasing your collar, "Yes. Yes, that sounds wonderful. That sounds suspiciously reasonable. I'll take it. Now get out." Those blue eyes flashed, and you scooted backward.

"Isha and Bandit need-

"McCree will get them," Genji said, gently taking Angela's arm, and pulling her toward the door. "He'll be by soon. I'll even tell him to bathe them."

"Jack-" Angela began.

"I got it, Angela," Jack said, coolly. "I'll take care of Lucky. You go get some sleep. I assume Agent Shimada is going to ensure you reach your quarters safely?"

"He's not my caretaker!" Angela snarled, turning to glare at Genji.

You rested your head in your palm.

"Angela, go get some rest. That's a real order," Jack said, his voice strained. "I'll take care of Lucky. Come on, sweetheart." He offered you his arm, and you only wobbled a little when you rose from the chair. You took a step, suddenly lightheaded. It had been definitely been more than four hours since you ate last. You couldn't remember and you weren't sure how long you'd been dozing beside Gabriel.

You glanced back at Gabriel. "We'll be back. Don't you even think about going anywhere, or I'll take your pudding."

Jack leaned over and kissed Gabriel's forehead. "Love you, Gabe. Going to take care of our girl," he murmured, voice ragged. "She'll do it, you know. She'll steal your dessert, and I'll let her." And with that he put his hand on the small of your back and gently ushered you out of the room.

The trip to his quarters was a blur. You didn't talk. You just kind of shambled along in exhaustion, stopping by the cafeteria for a couple of premade box lunches. There were people in the halls, some cheering as Jack walked by, others giving you very wide berth. It wasn't till you were in the hallway of the officer's quarters that you realized Jack was still touching you, his hand on your arm.

"I think everyone might have just seen-"

"I don't fucking care," Jack rasped, looking down at you, jaw clenched. "Might give them second thoughts about taking another shot at you."

You blinked, reaching up to cup his face. Jack exhaled slowly, cheek resting against your glove. He closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be snippy with you," he said, voice softer. "Nearly went off on Angela back there. I know she's right, that we can't do anything for Gabe right now. But I didn't like hearing her yell at you."

"Angela yells at me all the time. It's because she cares, and probably because I'm a terrible patient." You paused, pretty sure that he'd heard it numerous times before, and had just rolled with it. But then, today had been hard on everyone.
"Doesn't matter, didn't like it," Jack muttered. "But I know she meant well. Just...sorry. I couldn't be there for Gabe, but I can at least help you." Guilt and regret permeated every word.

"Jack, it's not-"

"I don't mean it like that!" He said quickly. "Looking after you is not penance. I don't feel obligated. I want to be here with you, to make sure you're OK. You've had a rough week too." He smiled at you weakly, a sort of desperate panic in his eyes like he expected this to go wrong too.

"Thank you," you said. "I know what you mean. But I'm kind of beat right now and probably don't make a lot of sense. But I'm happy you're here, and I appreciate what you're doing."

Jack nodded mutely, relief clearing some of the tension on his face. He leaned over and kissed you right there in the hallway. And you realized then that you weren't the only one not thinking straight. But it felt good to press against him, to feel that spark of heat between you.

Exhaling slowly, Jack pulled away, a sheepish look on his face. "Sorry. Couldn't help myself."

"Uh-huh," you said, kissing his cheek. "I know, I'm irresistible in combat armor. Something about the smell of sweat, blood, and gunpowder really gets you going."

Jack didn't laugh, but he tapped his chin thoughtfully. "You might be right-" He shook his head, and began heading toward his room. "But I think you know by now that I like you in whatever you're wearing, or not wearing." He managed a tired wink as he opened the door for you.


"Only the best for my girl," he said, leaning in to kiss your cheek. "How about I show you a real good time? I have an emitter, what do you want to do first? Shower? Eat? Pass out on the couch from sheer and utter exhaustion?" Despite his flirty words and jokes, Jack moved stiffly, scanning every corner for threats, his gaze distant. You were almost too tired to be that tense, but Jack was still wound tight.

"Let's get out of our armor and eat," you said, feeling your stomach clench.

Nodding, Jack came up behind you and carefully began loosening your straps and opening your seals. You gave a soft sight of relief as the blue chestpiece fell to the ground, freeing your sore muscles. You could see the cracks and impact marks from where Petras had shot you. Two chest plates destroyed in twenty four hours: that was a new record.

Jack shrugged off his coat and tossed it on the floor, shedding everything by the door. A deep purple bruise was fading in the middle of his back. You flinched, and bent over to take off your boots. When you looked back up, Jack had already disappeared into the bedroom. He came back in sweatpants, carrying a t-shirt and an emitter.

You finished stripping off your armor, peeling off your gloves, and dropped onto the couch. You slumped there, the familiar setting a relief after your time away. The blanket remained tucked over the stained couch cushion, and you found yourself squeezing a throw pillow just a little too hard.

Jack set the food on the coffee table and opened up the emitter, while you stared numbly at the carryout boxes. He left the t-shirt on the back of the couch. It was for you, but you couldn't quite summon the energy to get changed.

"So what do we have?" You asked.
"I just grabbed whatever," Jack confessed. "I didn't really read the labels." He picked the boxes up, frowning at the small print. "Chicken Caesar wrap, meatball sub, croque-monsieur, pb&j..." He set them back on the table. "Any preference?"

You shook your head, still caught up in how he said "crock-muncher" and how Lacroix would react to that.

He made a show of fanning the boxes out on the table and slid them around, shuffling the lunches while grinning at you. With flourish he handed you a random box.

"Thanks," you said, mustering a tired smile. "Is this enough for you-?"

"I'm not starving like you. Angela made me drink a whole liter of one of those nasty emergency nutrition shakes. That's probably why I'm so sore at her," Jack said, grabbing a box. He sat close, his thigh pressed against yours, one arm draped around your shoulders.

You got the wrap. It came with a cookie, a drink pouch, and a package of assorted dried fruit. It was like a kid's lunch, but with much bigger portions. You ate the cookie first, the sugar giving you small spike of energy. Moving your limbs didn't seem quite so arduous now.

Jack laughed, and extended his hand, offering you his cookie. You reached for it, but he raised it over your head.

"Ja-"

Grinning, Jack pushed the cookie into your mouth, and you bit down, giving him a dirty look. Chuckling, he released the cookie and kissed you on the cheek. "Sorry, baby." He didn't sound sorry, but you got the cookie, so it was an acceptable exchange.

Grumbling while you chewed, you ate the rest of the cookie and Jack just watched you, eyes bright, a half smile on his face.

"Eat your food," you said, opening up your drink.

"Yes, boss," he said, picking up his sandwich. "Peanut butter and jelly...the meal of champions."

"They should have made us a feast," you grumbled. "Roast beasts and loads of alcohol, with lots of bread and I don't know...hot food things." You took a bite of your wrap, fully aware of how little sense you made.

"You're absolutely right," Jack said solemnly. "Hot food things," he continued, teasing tone slipping through. "Which is pretty much how I describe everything you cook that I can't identify."

"Delicious hot food things," you said, taking massive bite out of your wrap. It wasn't anything to write home about, but you were so hungry, and it tasted far better than you remembered. It was gone too soon and Jack handed you the next box, slowly eating his own sandwich without much interest.

You finished your fruit and took the cookie out of the lunch, giving yourself a moment to digest. "OK, I feel better. I still want fried chicken, omurice, and doria, but I think I'll survive."

"I'd make those if I could," Jack said. "But it wouldn't be as good as yours, and you'd probably starve while I burned the kitchen down."

You kissed his cheek. "It's fine. What can I do for you?"
He just shook his head, shoulders still rigid. "Nothing to do right now. I'm still...processing things. Tomorrow I have bigger, longer meetings and Gérard is tweaking our strategy. I just want to spend time with you and Gabe, but..." He exhaled slowly. "My family should be coming in too. Michael and Fitzpatrick had surgery - Fitzpatrick's knees are shattered. Michael took a bullet to the thigh - missed his femoral, but it came too close. Ray is...Ray." Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. "They gave her pain meds, but she's healing too fast and wrong, so Angela is going to have to have to do some work. She wouldn't let the US military doctors near her, and her squad is enforcing her wishes."

You blinked. "They can-?"

Jack just rolled his eyes. "Legally, yes. It's complicated, but Ray has some...bad blood with the Army brass. It's a long story. I'll tell you later."

"OK," you said, not actually surprised. You finished off your second sandwich, almost as quickly as the first. It helped anchor your mind back in your body, and you sighed, a little more at ease than you'd been before.

"More?" Jack asked.

You shook your head. "I kind of want to, but I'll make myself sick."

"If you're sick, I'll hold your hair back," Jack said patting your back. He hovered next to you, practically looking for something to do.

"Jack...you're so tense it's making me anxious. What can I do for you? Spar?"

He flinched. "No, I don't think that's a good idea right now. You're injured and my control isn't what it should be."

You briefly imagined yourself being thrown across the living room, and landing on the couch, the furniture breaking on impact, or hitting a wall, going through it, getting stuck in the plaster... Yeah, that didn't seem like a good idea.

"Do you need to run or-?"

He shook his head. "I don't want to leave you."

"Jack-"

"I need to be around you right now," he said firmly. "For my own sake." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I know you're a tough independent badass. I'm the one feeling shaky inside. I'm sorry. If you need space-"

"You're not leaving my line of sight any time soon, sir," you snorted. "I went a little too crazy and worked too damn hard to get you back in one piece. I'll probably be skulking in your shadow for the next week or so."

Jack smiled, biting his lower lip, cheeks turning that faint shade of pink. He kissed your nose, hands lingering on your arms. "Let's get a shower and get some sleep. I know you're exhausted."

You blinked. You heard what he wasn't saying, from the shadows in his eyes to the twitching of his fingers. "You won't be able to sleep, will you?"

He shrugged. "I promise I won't be too creepy. I'll just cuddle you and be awake to appreciate it."
You snorted. "Jack, we need to take care of ourselves, especially if we want to help Gabriel. He wouldn't be upset at us for that. He'd be upset that we weren't looking after each other, or ourselves. I can practically hear him ranting about the stupidity of falling on your own sword and how martyrs get nailed to crosses."

Jack stared down at you, eyes wide, lips parted slightly. "I know, but...it's been a rough day. For both of us." He rubbed your wrists gently. You recognized yearning and the hesitation, though you were not sure what exactly he needed. Acceptance? Absolution? Oblivion? You were not sure he could put it into words right now either. You just knew that he was reluctant to ask, especially after everything that happened today.

You didn't feel any such hesitation. Not after everything that happened today.

"Hey there," you said, stroking his cheek. He sighed, a small smile on his lips. You leaned in and kissed him gently, your tongue flicking against his.

Jack's fingers tangled in your hair, as he pulled you onto his lap, his mouth rough against yours. Your permission was all he had been waiting for. He held you against him, trying to show you what he wanted to say, though he didn't seem to know how to translate it into speech.

That was fine, you suddenly weren't in the mood to talk. You ran your hands down his bare chest, grinding against him. And despite being tired and injured, he had no trouble responding. Laughing softly, you leaned in and nipped his throat.

He jolted backward, like you'd shocked him, breathing hard as you sucked on the side of his neck. Eyes closed, he rested his head on the back of the couch, relief clear on his face, that painfully rigid tension already starting to melt away. You continued rocking your hips, enjoying the friction between your legs. You didn't think, you just moved, heat and pleasure starting to build in your core: doing this with Jack came naturally.

"Is that what you want, soldier?" You asked, teeth grazing his ear. He shuddered beneath you, fingers digging into your shoulders. "All you had to do was ask..." Your voice was low, your tone teasing.

"Sweetheart-" Jack rasped. He shuddered, hands sliding down your back to cup your ass. "Need you now."

"Like this?" You murmured, pulling off your rashguard and then your bra, well aware of Jack's destructive tendencies when it came to your clothing.

"Need..." Jack grimaced, fingers digging into your thighs. "Need more control. I know we can't be rough, know you're hurt. Sorry. That's not fair to you." He swallowed roughly, eyes on your face, like he expected you to deny him. He held up a hand. "Give me a second to cool down- Not thinking straight."

"Mmm," you nodded, sliding off his lap.

Jack squeezed his eyes shut, his expression pained. Clenching his fists at his sides, he took deep harsh breaths, drawing all that pressure back inside. You could see him gradually locking down all those hard feelings and reversing all your careful work.

That wouldn't do.

Your back hurt, so you'd have to lay on your stomach. You set a couple of pillows up on the couch and then kicked off your pants. You stretched experimentally, then climbed back onto the couch,
fixing the cushions underneath you till you were comfortable. You placed a bigger one against the arm of the sofa - you'd need padding- and glanced over your shoulder.

Jack was still sitting there, eyes closed, teeth gritted, thinking of baseball, or turnips, or something equally unerotic.

"Jack," you purred, extending one bare foot to stroke his inner thigh. "I'm getting cold."

His eyes snapped open, and you grinned as he stared at you, eyes wide and not quite comprehending.

You lay on your stomach, naked, with your ass in the air, and maybe that was too much for Jack in this state? Or maybe your bruises were so terrible looking that he was going to drag you back to the infirmary instead?

You didn't see him move.

One moment you were wondering if you'd overestimated your sex appeal, and the next, you were pressed against the couch, Jack's hands gripping your hips, his teeth sinking into your shoulder, while he ground against your ass.

"Goddamnit, sweetheart," he breathed, voice shaky in your ear. "Are you sure?"

"What about me looks unsure?" You asked, pushing back against him, feeling his erection straining against his pants, your own heart beating too fast now.

Jack groaned. "You're so good to me, baby." He nuzzled the back of your neck. "You have to let me know if it's too much, OK? Please-" And then he thrust inside you, all that heat and force knocking your thoughts - and your breath - from your body.

Your vision blurred, and you dropped your head against the cushion, panting as he stretched you out. You rocked your hips back, but Jack was already moving, short hard strokes, staying half-sheathed inside you, never letting you feel empty. His hands skimmed up your ribs, and cupped your breasts. His teeth grazed the back of your neck, his stubble rough against your skin.

"Jack-" You knew that once he started, it would be full throttle. And you'd thought- foolishly- that you would be prepared to handle him. That was pure hubris on your part. Jack pinned you underneath him, never breaking his hard rhythm. It wasn't just the pounding - he wasn't holding back anything. He was on you: mouth, hands, and cock, and you realized, with only a little chagrin, that you'd overestimated your control of the situation.

You didn't mind.

Jack nipped your ear, chest warm against your back as he fucked you into his couch, his hands sliding back down to your hips to hold you in place. He tore into you with a ferocity you hadn't expected - he'd seemed so tired a few minutes ago...

"Fuck-" You whined, glancing over your shoulder, fingers digging into the sofa. "You're so deep-"

"Good," he groaned. "Can't get enough of you." Teeth clenched, Jack leaned over and kissed you hard, still thrusting into you. You moaned as he sped up, his gaze feral as he kneaded your ass, adjusting the angle so he could push deeper.

"Jack," you moaned, because when he took you like this, you couldn't form coherent thoughts, let alone sentences. You just bounced with each stroke, his hips slapping into you, breaking you
"Need you, Jack-"

"Say it again," he growled in your ear.

You whimpered into the cushion as he sped up. "Need-"

"My name," he said, voice hoarse. "Say it again."

"Ja-" You clawed at the sofa, squeezing your eyes shut, your voice cracking in your throat.

"Again," he hissed, like he fucking meant it, then slammed back inside you, making his request even more difficult.

"Jack," you wailed, muscles clenched tight, tension nearly snapping you in half.

It wasn't a slow climb or gentle journey, he drove you over the edge, hammering away at your body while you tried desperately to hold on tight. It was a violent finish, more power than finesse overwhelming your nerves, and you crumbled as the orgasm tore through your core.

He wasn't far behind you. Jack embraced you hard, one arm around your waist as he moved at a frenzied pace, trying desperately to catch up with you.

Bent over his couch, you lay there, mind blank as he finished inside you. He was warm, and breathing hard, arms shaking slightly as he held himself up, not putting his full weight on you. You lay there boneless, pulse slowing, your body gradually regaining its autonomy.

"Sweetheart?" He rasped, nuzzling your neck. "Are you OK?"

"Yup," you nodded, eyes half open as he pulled you into his lap, your head resting against his shoulder. You felt him twitch against your thigh. After being in a relationship this long, it wasn't a surprise. "Give me a moment. Need to go slower this time."

"Are you sure?" Jack's breath hitched. "...Baby, if you're not feeling up to it-"

You stroked his cheek. "Need you too, Jack. You're not the only one feeling...unsettled." You looked up at those soft blue eyes, brimming with emotion. "I'm not just comforting you. This is for me too."

He kissed you then, gentler than before, hands cupping your face. His expression was less strained. "If you're sure," he said, tone still colored with worry.

"I'm home, with you, and need to know for sure that you're safe too," you said, holding his hands between yours. "I know it here." You tapped one temple. "But I don't feel it here just yet." You pressed his palm over your heart. "We're getting there."

Jack swallowed roughly. He leaned in, forehead against yours, eyes never leaving your face. "I love you," he said.

"You better." You kissed him, and lifted yourself, thighs aching as you lowered yourself back onto him. He was hard again - Jack's recovery time certainly hadn't suffered. You took him gradually, breathing deep as you sat on his lap. He rubbed slow circles on your back, letting you get comfortable.

"Do you want me to move?" He asked.

You shook your head. "Not yet." You inhaled a few times, stretching your legs and getting
comfortable before kissing him again. "Just anchoring myself to you, for a few minutes. Need...need that stability."

He hugged you to his chest, still rubbing your back. You focused on deep breathing, feeling him around your, your connection solid.

"I love you," you said, voice faint. "I'm glad," he said, kissing the top of your head.

"I was terrified," you said, burying your face in the crook of his neck. "I spent that whole mission afraid that I would be too late."

Jack shuddered.

"I was too late for-" Shin. Tataryn. Gabriel. The names caught in your throat, and in the haze of regret, you weren't sure which one you were going to say...

"No," Jack said. "No, that's not true." He tilted your chin up, making you look at him, his raw grief shredding something inside you. "That's not true, sweetheart."

You didn't have it in you to argue with him right now. So you kissed him again.

"You're here, with me. You made it with time to spare," he said, worry clear in his eyes. "OK," you said, and that crushing pressure, like iron bands around your chest, loosened just a little.

"You're here, with me. You're home, with me." He folded your hands in his.

"I know," you said, your heart clenching at those words. "You don't have to-"

"I need to hear it as much as you do," he said hoarsely, the look on his face painfully bleak. "I need to hear it too."

"Jack-" your voice wavered. "Jack, you're home too. You made it. We both did." You squeezed his fingers, bringing his scarred knuckles to your lips.

Jack shuddered, releasing a low groan. "I know." He took a deep breath. "I know. I'm sorry," he said, eyes squeezed shut.

And you knew immediately that it wasn't you that he was apologizing to. It wasn't you that he was grieving. And you knew what it was like to carry that weight in your heart. You knew, with terrible certainty, that making it home was just the beginning.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, voice barely a whisper.

"I know." You kissed him then. "But it's not your fault either."

Sex was an amorphous thing, a very potent form of wordless communication. Sometimes you couldn't figure out the right thing to say, and sometimes that wordless connection was malleable enough to bridge the gap. It could be hard to predict - sometimes you would not know if it was exactly what you needed or a terrible mistake till afterward. It fulfilled a need: power, pleasure, reassurance, an outlet, an anchor, penance, or absolution. Sometimes it was just sex. Sometimes it was an epiphany. But with Jack, it was always intimacy, usually revealing some kind of vulnerability, his, Gabriel's, or your own.
You began to rock your hips, kissing his face. "I love you, Jack Morrison. I need you here with me."

Jack stared up at you, a hopeful sort of reverence on his face. He folded your hands in his, fingers intertwined. He kissed your knuckles, flesh and metal, his eyes never leaving yours.

"Stay," he said, the words a plea, not a command. "Please stay."

You nodded solemnly. You continued to grind against him, a slow warmth building as he held you in his lap.

He pressed your left hand over his heart and released it. You could feel it beating slow and steady as he reached down and began to gently stroke your clit.

You braced yourself against him, breathing hard as his nimble fingers rubbed faster. You moved with him, full of heat as he began to roll his hips, the two of you in a synchronized rhythm. You reached out, caressing his face and he leaned into you, savoring your touch.

Unlike before, Jack kept a slow steady pace, watching your every move. He kissed your face, and your throat, one hand between your thighs and the other clutching your fingers.

"Stay with me," he murmured. "Stay with me now-"

Your slow climb hit a crescendo, just enough tension to be pleasurable, and then you let it go, riding it out in slow waves, clinging to Jack while he shook underneath you.

Your heartbeat thudded steady in your ears. You were safe. You were home. You had accomplished your mission. And Jack was here with you too. You weren't alone.

You kissed him again, the relief finally sinking in, your body adjusting to reality. You were safe. You were home. You had accomplished your mission. You didn't have to hold it all in any more. You didn't have to hide any more.

And there, in Jack's arms, holding his hand, you began cry.

It wasn't a soft stream of tears or a rogue sniffle. There was no delicacy or drip drip drip of slowly watering eyes. It was a gut-wrenching sob that tore free from your core, maybe a howl, you couldn't be sure. It was all so loud and imbalanced in your head. Gabriel was hurt badly. Tataryn was dead. Shoal was dead. Ziv, Amélie, Lacroix, Távio, and others had been hurt. Feng, Captain Amari, Reinhardt, and Torby had nearly died. Athena was...well, you weren't exactly sure, but she wasn't here. You'd nearly lost everyone, and it hit you now like shotgun blast to the back.

"Sweetheart?" Jack's voice was stricken. "Are you hurt-?"

You were bawling now, just scrunched up ugly crying as you let it all out. It was humiliating. You couldn't form coherent words. You just wept, hugging Jack and trying to say that it wasn't his fault. He hadn't hurt you. You were a mess because everything else was a mess and, oh god you were so sorry. You were sorry for everything. Sorry about what had happened. Sorry that you hadn't been there. Sorry that you had been there, and it still wasn't enough. Sorry that you were a crying like god-awful baby. And mostly sorry that being this miserably sorry didn't fix a thing.

Jack seemed to understand some of it. He held you to him, speaking gently to you like you were a wounded animal. He rubbed your back, using soothing tones, though you couldn't quite make sense of the words. But he held you, he let you be weak, and for that you were unspeakably
When you had finally poured it all out, snot and tears on Jack's shoulder, you sniffled into the t-shirt.

"Sorry," you said, like a goddamn broken record. "I'm sorry."

Jack looked down at you, no pity or disgust on his face. But there was plenty of sorrow and worry.

"Sorry," you repeated.

Jack just kissed your hands. "I love you."

"Love you too," you said, raw and weak inside. "I'm sorry you had to see that. And feel it. Oh fuck, I really slimed you-"

He kissed your forehead. "So what? We can get cleaned up in the shower." There was quiet confidence in his words. Jack was here for you. He rose, carrying you with him, his grip firm, but not restrictive.

You just focused on breathing, on getting back a semblance of your composure.

Jack set you down in the shower, turned on the water, and began helping you wash off. You leaned against the wall, too exhausted to return the favor. He didn't seem to mind, too focused on cleaning you up. It wasn't playful, but his touch was comforting, and you leaned into him, your legs still shaky.

The water began to grow cold, and Jack quickly helped you rinse off, before wrapping you in a towel and carrying you to the bedroom. You sniffled, realizing that there was yet another thing that you had taken for granted and now...it was gone.

"Can I get you anything?" Jack asked. He'd been very quiet while he cleaned you up, almost like he was afraid to set you off again. He placed you on the bed, gently drying your hair with a towel. It always looked awful after he was done with it. You never told him to stop.

"The shower was cold," you said after a moment. You slid under the blankets, shaking just a little.

"I'm sorry," he said, sounding a little confused by your mundane complaint. He tossed the damp towel on the floor. "The plumbing isn't predictable. It happens sometimes-"

"Not since Athena took over," you said. "Never ran out of hot water while she was managing things."

Jack flinched: obviously he hadn't realized it either, till you said something. "She's not lost to us," he said, slipping under the covers beside you and wrapping you in his arms. "She's here, there's just some delay in reintegrating her. Growing pains." He pulled the blankets up to your chin. "Get some rest. Things will be better when you wake up. I promise."

Nodding, you curled up against him, feeling his chest rise and fall, his legs tangled with yours. It felt good, it felt like home, except you were still missing someone. But there was nothing you could do about it now.

Wrung out, sore, and not entirely sane, you closed your eyes, and the world faded away.
Sorry about the late update, real life has been kicking my ass. Got sick, still working lots of overtime, the saga of the passport renewal continues, and I have to buy a new washing machine this weekend... Being an adult is painful and all my complaints sound so boring. Still restoring my computer's settings and now using LibreOffice and it's done something weird to my formatting, IDK WTF.

You guys are all lovely and I am very tired... I just want to write, run my dogs, and eat delicious food. ;___;
Chapter 134

Chapter Summary

The beginning of the aftermath. Did you think your work was done?

Chapter Notes

OK, 1 million+ words this time. Really. *facepalm*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack was shouting, and you snapped up immediately, reaching under the pillow for your tanto, and then realizing that it was still in the living room with your clothes. You were in Jack's bed, sunlight streaming through the windows. Immediately, you glanced over at Jack. He wasn't touching you. Instead, he turned from side to side, eyes squeezed shut, brow furrowed. He shouted, the words unintelligible as he kicked the blankets off, caught up in violent dream.

"Hey, hey-" you said, leaning over to touch his shoulder. "Jack-"

He swung, fist narrowly missing your head, and you dropped backward, trying to give him more space. Except your foot was wrapped in sheets and blankets, and you thrashed, cursing as you fell out of the bed with a loud thud.

Rubbing your head, you muttered angrily as you reached up to unwind the blanket from around your ankle.

And then Jack was there, peering over the side of the bed, fear bright in his eyes.

"Sweetheart-"

"It was the blanket," you scowled. "I can dodge you just fine, but when the goddamn bedding ambushes me..."

Jack flinched, and gently pulled you up, his hand running over the back of your head.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, squeezing you too tightly. There was sweat on his face and his skin felt clammy. "I'm so sorry-"

"We've all had night terrors," you said, wincing as his fingers massaged the goose egg already forming on your head. "It's not a big deal."

"I could have-"

"It wasn't you, it was the blanket," you repeated, kissing his face. "I'm sore, tired, and kind of dumb. You know, I'm not normally this clumsy."

Jack ran his fingers through his sweat-dampened hair. "I know I nearly hit you."
"Pfft, Ziv nearly hits me all the time. Almost doesn't count," you said, trying to muster a cocky grin.

Jack just shook his head, expression grim. "I'm not Mihret, baby. I'm a lot more dangerous."

That was debatable, but arguing that now wouldn't help anything.

You shrugged. "Look, the reaction isn't great, I agree. But you've shared a bed with Gabriel and me, and we've both had...similar issues in the past. It's something to work on, not something to beat yourself up over, OK?" You cupped his cheeks, hating the guilt you saw in his eyes. "If our roles were reversed, or if it were Gabriel..."

Jack nodded slowly. "OK," he said. "Yeah, you're right." He kissed the top of your head, white-knuckled fists at his sides. "You're right. Let's get some breakfast, and it will be fine." He gave you a weak smile, with no conviction in his words.

You took his hands, and sandwiched them between yours. He let you.

"Jack," you said, knowing that he wasn't in the headspace to listen to any comfort or even sort through his feelings. "I'm here and I love you, OK? We'll get through this. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but we've solved shitty situations with unfavorable odds before. It's kind of what we do."

His smile widened slightly. "I know," he said, nodding again, with maybe a little more confidence. "I know."

To your surprise, Amélie and Lao were waiting outside the door when you emerged. Both women were armored up, Amélie's makeup flawless and Lao's cybernetic arm glowing as she worked on something. Reports maybe? Jack was back in his Strike Commander regalia, calm mask firmly in place. Jack had politicking to do today. And you would hang out in the infirmary, keeping an eye on things, visiting your wounded friends, and helping Jesse with Blackwatch reports. But first you needed to debrief Lacroix. There was a lot that hadn't been said yesterday.

You carried your carbine and a rucksack, and wore your Blackwatch hoodie and fatigue pants, armored vest underneath, mostly for Jack's peace of mind. You had already put in a request for new armor, your measurements were on file and the quartermaster would have something by the end of the day.

Amélie examined your attire with a politely blank expression.

"The body armor will ruin the lines of a nice outfit anyway," you said, pulling your hood up. "Besides, I'd be better off keeping a low profile today."

Amélie sighed, rolling her eyes upward, shaking her head, a faint smile on her lips. She handed Jack a bag.

Blinking, he opened it up and pulled out a chocolate-dipped croissant.

"Chanceux says those are your favorite."

"Thank you," Jack said, staring at it.
You craned your neck, glancing at Lao in disbelief. She'd brought pastries for Jack, but not you? Jack pulled out another sugar-dusted cylinder, looking confused.

"That's a Xuixo," Amélie said, very blithely. She gave you a wry grin. "Chanceux is a fan of viennoiserie." Viennoiserie, or Viennese things, were basically fancy breakfast pastries. And yes, you liked them a lot. Who didn't?

"Give," you growled, tugging on Jack's sleeve.

Jack raised a brow. "Amélie handed me the bag," he said, sounding terribly smug. "I can't just transfer you her gift in front of her."

You narrowed your eyes at him. "Jack-"

Jack began to laugh, and placed the fried dough against his lips. You lunged forward and bit into it. He didn't take a bite, but he didn't let go either, looking all-too pleased to feed you the cream-filled pastry right in front of those conniving, backstabbing asshats that you called friends.

Then Jack bit down, getting a small bite of pastry, but releasing the remainder of it to you. "That's really good," he said.

Locking eyes with Jack, you angrily ate the rest of it and did not offer to share. Because it wasn't a very big pastry.

Jack just chuckled and kissed your forehead, before wiping a smear of pastry cream off the corner of your mouth.

Both Amélie and Lao were giggling behind their hands.

"I can't believe you were right-" Lao wheezed. "I knew Lucky was feral, but I think Switzerland has made her more aggressive."

"Of course, I was right. I know Chanceux," Amélie said, nodding in satisfaction. "And so you will buy us lunch."

"Worth it," Lao sighed, shaking her head.

"Seriously?" You growled, wiping your mouth on the back of your hand, giving Amélie a dirty look.

"Yes, Yue will buy lunch for you and me," she beamed, and you didn't miss that she was already calling Lao by her personal name instead of her surname. "After all, I did buy everyone breakfast."

Amélie and Lao would be accompanying Jack on his rounds today. The Bitch Squad was stepping up to take Epsilon's Squad's role, at least till things had settled. They escorted you to the infirmary first though, because you would be managing Blackwatch duties and doubling as security. As much as you hated to let Jack out of your sight, you were keeping a lower profile. But they would be checking in with you throughout the day.

Jack lingered by the infirmary entrance, not doing a very good job of pretending like he wasn't
watching you. After everything that happened, the both of you were being a little too obvious about your protective tendencies. You just shook your head, knowing that would be a problem in the near future, but not quite ready to deal with it.

"Riggs is maintaining encrypted comms," Amélie said. "We do not know when or if Athena will be coming back online in the near future."

You exhaled slowly, carefully weighing what you knew about the situation and the bureaucracy. "Stick to Blackwatch field comm protocols," you said, because even if Riggs was very good at his job, there were too many unfriendly ears inside the organization. You would have to assume that everything being said would be overheard by hostiles. And despite integrating Athena into some of Blackwatch's operations, Gabriel had been stringent about keeping other information and methodologies independent. "Maintain Operation Checquy codenames for now. Chaff chatter is fine, try not to get too personal, because I guarantee there will be transcripts in triplicate. In case of a situation though, use the Singh-Mayfair protocol to send priority messages-"

"Jesus, Lucky, we're not even leaving HQ today," Lao said, rubbing the back of her neck.

"And?" You asked, tartly, raising a brow, your arms crossed. It did not matter that fifteen minutes ago, she'd seen you rage-eat a pastry while your lover laughed at you. That was personal. This was work.

Lao flinched. "...And it occurs to me that obviously you're right to be a stickler for good security, considering the situation," Lao amended quickly. "Sorry, I didn't mean to argue policy. You just...shifted gears so fast. I'm rusty."

"I know that the Singh-Mayfair process is kind of slow, and our current tech difficulties will delay it even more," you said. "But that's our most secure encryption that we do not share with the rest of Overwatch."

"It's a pain," Lao agreed. "But you're right. I'll see if I can do something to streamline the process. Ziv has a private encrypted channel with paranoid security monitoring, I'll brainstorm with him."

You glanced over at Amélie, who looked very pleased, for some reason.

"Do you need anything?" You asked.

"I am fine for the moment, but I think Agent Lao will need a more suitable sidearm," she said. "We also need more underarmor plating, preferably of the make that you supplied for Ziv."

"Weapons procurement authorizations are already in place. Can't get the armoring for you today though, that was a custom order," you said. "But I'll allocate operational funds for it." You rubbed your temples, knowing that Gabriel would have already had a plan in place for how to run Jack's backup squad. But the situation was extremely complicated and you had a limited amount of trustworthy people on site. You wanted to send in Diallo and Vo - Tataryn's people had experience with bodyguard work, but Diallo wasn't in fighting shape, and Vo needed extra supervision. You already knew that she did not get along with Amélie, and this was not the time to test new team dynamics. "Are you carrying personal kinetic barriers?" You asked. It was unlikely, those were expensive and utilized sparingly.

Lao and Amélie shook their heads.

You picked up your tablet and requisitioned two, not caring that it would put you over on the quarterly equipment budget. Shit was going down, and you weren't sending them out unprepared.
Plus, you could still submit a reimbursement request to Overwatch's accounting division, since the
shields were being used in a joint operation to protect the Strike Commander. "Just in case. Make
sure you swing by the Quartermaster's on the way to the conference room."

On Sing, or rather White Rabbit personnel, were helping to maintain security in the infirmary. And
Chang's people would be in later today. You weren't sure what condition they were in, but you
could at least tap them as a resource.

"Have I ever told you how sexy it is when you're all take-charge and efficient?" Jack murmured,
leaning over your shoulder.

Your lips quirked upward. "Sir, your next meeting is in ten minutes, and my people still need to
pick up more gear. You have a lot of work to get done today. Please try to stay on task."

Jack snorted. "OK, Boss." He took a step back, possibly realizing that he was standing too close.

"Strike Commander," you said, inclining your head, expression cool.

"I'll be checking in later," he said, narrowing his eyes at you.

"You better," you said, raising your chin.

Giving you a curt nod, the Strike Commander turned on his heel. "Let's move."

Lao cleared her throat loudly, and it sounded suspiciously like laughter. Amélie winked at you over
her shoulder, and then they were out the infirmary doors. You stood there, pretty satisfied with
yourself, until you felt the prickling in the back of your neck.

"I realize you and the Strike Commander were...hashing out operational details, but Lacroix is
getting impatient," Genji said, in your other ear, and you jumped straight up into the air, swearing.

You shook your fists at Genji, till your pulse leveled out. He just smirked behind his faceplate,
having clearly won that round. You reluctantly followed him into Lacroix's room. There were four
screens haphazardly set up along the counter, three playing different news channels in different
languages, subtitles on, one streaming a performance by The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. Or
so it said on the screen. It could be lying.

Dressed in black Nehru suit and a startlingly stylish gold brocade eye patch, hair combed at a
rakish angle, Lacroix sat cross-legged on his neatly made hospital bed, skimming a tablet, his
phone on one side, a laptop on the other.

"I was going to ask how you were feeling-"

"Je ne vais pas mal. Mais rassurez-vous, un jour, je ne manquerai pas de mourir," Lacroix said
with an air of great amusement.

"-But clearly, you're doing fine." You rolled your eyes. "Why are you still here?" You asked,
looking around. Because of course he'd turned his hospital room into mini-command center.

"Angela has yet to discharge me," Lacroix said, rolling his eye. "Something about forty eight hours
of observation and other nonsense. Believe me, it is incredibly inconvenient."
"Yes, who do you think had to commandeer all the equipment?" Genji asked sotto voce.

"I thought that's what Ziv was for," you said. "Other than being the Blackwatch pain in the ass, isn't he the stevedore lackey of information systems and all things tech?"

"Medical exemption. His foot, you see," Genji deadpanned, arms crossed.

You began to cough.

"Agent Shimada, don't you have a doctor to be shadowing or whatever it is Dr. Ziegler needs you for?" Lacroix asked dryly.

"Moral support," you said, though you knew Genji was actually supposed to be managing White Rabbit's personnel while Feng was recovering.

Genji gave you a look.

"I don't know if there's anything moral about-" Lacroix began, giving Genji a sly grin.

"It might interest you to know that "Acting" Commander Bell babbles when concussed," Genji said, speaking over Lacroix. You stifled a laugh. "And he answered all kinds of interesting questions yesterday. Make sure you ask Lacroix for both parts of the interview." Pointedly ignoring Lacroix, he sauntered out of the room, politely shutting the door behind him.

"Quelle merde," Lacroix said sourly.

"He certainly is," you said, and pulled up a chair. You paused as you sat down, recognizing the blonde woman on the middle news screen. You stared for a long moment.

"You have not been following the news," Lacroix said, though he didn't sound surprised.

"I was sleeping," you scowled.

He clicked the remote, and rewound the footage.

You sat down.

Jane Morrison-Vanderberg stood on the front porch of her parents' farmhouse. The camera panned across the fields, showcasing the craters, scorch marks, shredded omnic hulls, and dozens of holographic body outlines. You squinted. Yup, dozens.

"-Yes, it is very strange that it took two hours for backup to arrive, even after multiple emergency distress signals. I am very grateful to the marine squad that did show up - it turns out they were being held up by some kind of red tape. Senator Armstrong assures me that this is being investigated by an external body and that such a thing is highly irregular," Jane said coolly, her arms crossed, gray eyes flashing.

"Why do you think this happened, Jane? Was someone sending a message to Overwatch?" An off-screen voice shouted.

"No, this was a blatant attempt to gain leverage over my brother," Jane said, inclining her head to the side, an almost raptor-like motion. "They had orders to take us alive. Though, after they shot my teenage brother, they decided he was deadweight and it would be more expedient to just kill him." Jane gritted her teeth, her anger clear on her face. It mirrored Jack's, but sharper, more visceral. You wanted to take a step backward.
"Who do you think did this?" Someone else shouted.

"That is the question," Jane said with the confidence of someone who already knew the answer. "I have been instructed that some of that information may be classified and to make outright accusations might hamper the government investigations." She paused dramatically, looking straight at the camera. "Make of that what you will. I do understand that investigative work is delicate, but we will not be intimidated into silence: I will share what I can."

The crowd quieted down immediately, eager for the scoop.

"It took money to bring this many high-tech killers into our small town, unnoticed. It took influence to bring in OR-14s, something we haven't seen much of on American soil, at least, not since the DC attacks." She gave the camera a pointed look, saying exactly what she needed to without actually coming out and speaking the words. "They had inside knowledge of our security protocols and procedures. They knew our bodyguards by name and reputation. They told us that no one was coming, that they'd made sure of it. It was only due to the fact that we have extremely vigilant and conscientious protectors that we weren't taken, or worse."

"Do you think this had the same financiers as the DC attacks?"

"Are you claiming a conspiracy?"

"Is the UN behind this?"

"Is the Strike Commander going to retaliate?"

Jane held up one hand, a queen addressing her court. "I don't know all the answers yet. But I won't let them bury our investigation. This never should have happened. We've weathered lone gunmen, small cohorts of mercenaries, and terrorist assassins before. This attack was far-better coordinated. They had plasma weapons."

You narrowed your eyes, wondering if that was true, or if she was covering for Chang's unit.

"Are you scared?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to get my parents' homestead cleaned up. I am going to go home and hug my children. And then I am going to get out there and find some answers," Jane said, like she was listing her schedule for the day. "They attacked my family, tried to assassinate both my brothers, and threatened my babies. That is unacceptable anywhere, let alone here on American soil. So we will not back down. We are only doing what any other law-abiding, patriotic American family would do: we will find those responsible, and we will make sure they are brought to justice."

The screen cut to a talking head, grinning widely at the screen. "And with a family like that, could you expect any less from Veteran SEP war hero Jack Morrison? Wow- wee! We should sign his sister up too!"

You sat there, silently, wondering if you should just hand the investigation over to Jane. She'd terrorize the truth out of everyone.

"There's more," Lacroix said.

The screen cut to a camera following Jane down a suburban street. "Mrs. Vanderberg! Don't you think you're overreacting? The US government has more important things to do than answer to an
overwrought school shrink clinging to her brother's reput-

Thwack! Something hit the camera, and the screen shook and went dark for half a second. The next shot was out of focus, but a little old lady with a great big leather purse was swinging the purse at the reporter.

"You leave that nice Morrison girl alone!" She shouted in a screechy voice. "They're a good family! They've been through a lot! Just who do you think you are?"

A middle-aged man in a baseball cap stepped up, holding his hand up to keep the cameraman from following Jane to her car. "I think you should leave."

Another woman blocked them in from the other side. "Stop harassing, Jane!"

The old lady continued to thwack away at the reporter, telling him exactly how ashamed of himself he should be and demanding to know what his mother would think of his behavior. It was good to see Jane using her powers to galvanize the public into demanding answers. You just hoped she didn't turn that scrutiny too closely onto Overwatch.

Lacroix paused the screen. "Senator Armstrong wants to know if Madame Morrison-Vanderberg is interested in a career in politics."

"I know she does some community organizing and works with a couple of advocacy groups," you said. "So maybe?"

Lacroix laughed softly. "Perhaps there will be a Morrison presidency after all."

You shuddered, and then paused. "Is most of the coverage favorable?"

"It is very positive," Lacroix said, giving you a shrewd smile. "Americans love a pretty blonde family of "victims," especially patriotic ones. Rightly or wrongly, Madame Morrison-Vanderberg and her children will garner the most sympathy from the public." "Rightly" or "wrongly," that was an advantage you could use.

"Armstrong?" You asked, wondering if he had a hand in this.

"Oh no, politicians don't have that kind of pull with the media," Lacroix laughed. "A little closer to home."

You scratched your head.

"Jack's sister is very good friends with Gabriel's sister Catriona..." Lacroix sighed, looking mildly annoyed that he'd had to point it out.

Catriona worked for an ad agency, or some kind of marketing firm, but as far as you knew, she didn't work PR... Though, there wasn't that much difference in the fields. Instead of a commodity, she was helping sell the Jane Morrison image. Or even if Catriona wasn't directly involved, she had to have connections... "Did this just happen organically, or did you already have a plan in place?"

Lacroix chuckled, pleased that he didn't have to explain every step. "Jane and Catriona are part of a large and active network of SEP veterans' families," Lacroix continued. "Both ladies are well-known and well-respected. Perhaps they had a little guidance when it came to how best to utilize their strengths, but I assure you, they are no one's puppets. I had anticipated an outpouring of sympathy, of affected martyrdom even..." Lacroix shook his head, looking faintly exasperated. "But not this."
Translation: Lacroix totally had a subtle plan in place to generate public outcry and sympathy for the Morrisons. But then Jane and Catriona added bells, whistles, and buckets of glitter, and rode it into the limelight so they could crucify whomever went after their families.

"You were interesting for about an hour, eight hours ago, when they figured out that Jack's agent was the very same "Ms. Strike" who guarded Jack in Paris, and perhaps tackled him in Cologne. So we released the Morrison family attack story a little early."

"Thanks," you said.

"It's only a temporary measure," Lacroix said, folding his hands in his lap. "People are very interested to know just whom the Strike Commander is so eager to defend. And there are already rumors circulating around headquarters. Something about him hovering over you yesterday evening, right before you both disappeared..."

You facepalmed. "I was too tired to-" Except in the end, you weren't. You kept your hand over your face, trying to shape your expression into something less...telling.

"Doesn't matter, the footage is out there now," Lacroix said, not actually sounding bothered, which surprised you a little. "We knew this was likely to happen eventually. We'll see how it is received and act accordingly."

You frowned. Because being famous would make being a Blackwatch operative very difficult. But Lacroix wasn't wrong. The moment you became entangled with Jack and Gabriel, this level of attention became a possibility.

"I have already persuaded a rather reluctant delegate to call for a deeper investigation into Petras' assets. As I've provided some of the intel already, it shouldn't be too difficult for him, especially since Jack has already come out accusing Petras of grave misconduct."

"This is the part where you brag about your cleverness," you said, folding your hands in your lap.

"Mmm," Lacroix shook his head. "The nuances of political influence and game theory are lost on you. Suffice to say, it took some maneuvering and his political allies aren't too happy, but... It gives us a stronger platform to pursue our..."

"You blackmailed the Secretary General of the UN," you said.

Lacroix stiffened, frowning. "Did Madame Kwento tell you?" He pursed his lips, looking almost disappointed at the prospect of someone else ruining his surprise.

"Not directly, no. She mentioned that you'd forced someone's hand, and she looked rather worried when she did. Which meant it was someone high ranking, and since she's the Undersecretary, that's a big hint. Combining that knowledge with the mad smug-mug you're wearing means someone very important is dancing at the end of your strings."

Lacroix chuckled. "It is not blackmail, per se. Merely a reminder that our interests are aligned and perhaps he should remember how closely his status is tied to ours. Or perhaps we should cut him loose with the rest of the chaff and see how well he fares."

"Uh-huh," you said. "Definitely not blackmail or any shade of unethical." Because you didn't buy that Lacroix's leverage was something as simple as "bad PR." No, Lacroix knew something, but he wasn't telling.

"And even if it was, I would do far worse for Amélie and Ziv," he said, looking you dead in the
eye, all traces of good humor gone. "Maybe even McCree."

You snorted. "Finally watched the video, did you?"

Lacroix merely laced his fingers together and stretched his arms, affecting a look of nonchalance. He smiled politely, but his lower lip curled a bit too far, and his eyes were flat and cold. "I can only admit that I better understand your lapse in judgment."

"They were never going to be safe while he was alive," you said with a shrug. "I know, they didn't choose safe lives. And killing Petras didn't eliminate all the danger. But after everything that happened..."

"I said I understand, Chanceux," Lacroix said louder, still maintaining that facsimile of a civility, though his gaze darkened and his voice grew raspier. "Tactically, it was a mistake. We both know it. But we both know why you did it, and you will get no more grief from me on the subject. Do you understand?" He gazed at you with that one bloodshot eye, teeth clenched, looking as far from sane as you'd ever seen him.

You sat back in your chair, arms crossed, heart beating a little too fast. "Yeah, I get it." You exhaled slowly, because everyone's feelings were a little too close to the surface. Mr. Machiavellian Spymaster couldn't bring himself to admit the truth, but you got it. "You're welcome." After all, he was probably too pragmatic to kill Petras in the heat of the moment, no matter his feelings. That didn't mean he wasn't grateful for your lapse in judgment.

Lacroix gave a sharp bark of laughter, shaking his head, one hand over his face. "Vraiment, Chanceux?"

You just pulled out your flask, and offered it to him. "Calm down. I'm the one who went off the rails. You don't have to get all hysterical; I already did it for you."

Still shaking his head, Lacroix accepted the flask, a threw back a mouthful of whiskey. He didn't cough, not that you expected him to, and handed you the flask back.

You took a shot as well - just enough to settle your nerves, because suddenly you wanted to go check on Gabriel, or pop in on Jack. It was a nagging feeling, like if you did not, something amorphous and bad would happen. And if you let yourself, you would begin to imagine all the bad things that could happen, and that wasn't logic, that was just unchecked paranoid neurosis-really only appropriate at 4AM when you were already half-insane from insomnia.

"So how do you think you did as a squad leader?" Lacroix asked, voice steadier than before.

You shrugged. "I was less concerned about leadership and asserting myself, and more concerned about rescuing Jack and not fucking up." You knew there was a lot of room for growth when it came to your leadership skills, but your friends understood the importance of the mission. You needed manage things, yes, but everyone had been fairly united on what needed to be done. You couldn't count on that being the case every time you went out with a squad.

Lacroix nodded. "When you encountered Prince, you should not have sent Hanzo away."

You winced, remembering those metal arms on your throat, your vision going black around the edges. "Yeah, probably not."

"I realize that it was personal, but-"

"Yeah," you rolled your eyes. "I know."
"Don't cut me off," Lacroix snapped. "There are times when personal reasons and pragmatic ones overlap. This was not one of those instances. If he had taken you hostage, it wouldn't take long before they figured the leverage they had over Jack. If he had killed you, your squad would be without a leader, and as competent as Amélie is, she does not have the same relationship with the other agents that you do."

You blinked. "Yeah. You're right. But I was worried about Feng too..."

"I understand that you technically made the correct choice, considering Ms. Zhai's situation, but it was an unnecessary risk, to the mission and to yourself." Lacroix massaged his brow. And you understood that he might have considered Feng an acceptable loss, even if you did not. "You do recall that dying equated automatic failure, do you not?"

You snorted. "Yeah." You sat there, in silence for a moment, your fingers itching for something to do. You weren't entirely sure what kind of test you passed, and you hadn't really taken time to think about it.

"You didn't die. You saved Jack. And you kept our people alive. It's good work, Chanceux, though there's obviously room for improvement."

"Well, it's not like I run my own squad so..." You trailed off, recalling that parts of the Bitch Squad were still in action and that you were the one giving orders...

"Not yet," Lacroix said, looking disturbingly smug.

"...Wait, what did I pass or fail to fail?"

"Nothing, officially," Lacroix said, regaining that carefree air of smarminess that you knew and wanted to throw out of a window. "Though "L'escouade de Salope" is a rather salacious name, Chanceux. Perhaps even a tad discriminatory."

Groaning, you rested your face in your palm. "I was not in my right mind and I was totally being facetious. And don't you even think about lecturing me on political correctness right now. I'll tell Angela you're having auditory hallucinations and she'll totally extend your infirmary stay. And she'll believe me over you, because you have a head injury and would absolutely lie to cover your ailments."

"That's...devious," Lacroix murmured, stroking his chin, his tone almost admiring. "You are getting better at utilizing indirect resolution methods." He gave you a thoughtful look. "What are your thoughts on Bell and that whole "Acting Strike Commander" coup?"

"Coup is a good description," you said, crossing your arms. "We figured they'd come after HQ with most of leadership down or offsite. On top of assassination attempts, I expected a cover-up, but not a full-on PR strike like that. But I guess it's the next logical step – fill the vacuum, and let their patsy ride in on the corpses of better soldiers."

"Indeed," Lacroix nodded. "It backfired though. Jack destroyed his credibility during the broadcast- which was remarkably good idea, Chanceux, given your disdain for the media."

"It was insurance," you said with a shrug.

"It was," Lacroix nodded. "Besides the clear message that someone is targeting our Overwatch war heroes, there has been plenty of humorous content to draw attention to the situation: social media is already rife with jokes about "Strike Commander Cosplayer" and "he was so mad that they matched, he was spitting teeth." It's quite amusing."
"But it is worth noting that Bell is the son of a rich American family with political ambitions; he holds the rank of Captain in the USAF, but has no real experience or accomplishments. Unsurprisingly, the Bells and Petruses have business ties."

"Oh boy, another shitty family to stalk. I can't wait," you sighed.

Lacroix just laughed. "Yes. I look forward to sifting through the databases of Petras' private network. "Auntie" Zheng has already begun to offload a rather large quantity of interesting data, some of it already sorted and flagged for my attention. Very thoughtful of her."

You nodded. "On Sing was integral to this operation."

"They were, weren't they?" Lacroix stared up at the ceiling, his expression thoughtful. "I understand they were most helpful at the end of Tarasque." He folded his hands in his lap. "Do they know about it?"

"Yeah," you said, remembering that tense conversation that you and Jesse had had with Dragonhead Feng on the way back from Hanoi.

Lacroix inhaled slowly. "Did you make any-"

"Nope, played dumb," you said, deciding not to fess up to your moment of weakness where you would have given Feng anything to save Gabriel. Feng had been a good enough friend not to ask you then, and for that you would always be grateful. "But they definitely knew it existed."

Lacroix nodded. "We can work with that." He tapped his chin. "What do you think we should do with it?"

"I don't know if Overwatch is ready to raise Athena's baby cousin. But I don't know if handing off that kind of bundle to On Sing is wise either."

"I believe we can reach an understanding with On Sing. Zhai Feng seems to be quite fond of you and the Morrison family. She is sentimental, because she can afford to be," he added.

You weren't sure what to make of that statement.

"You have questions about Hanoi," he said, shifting subjects yet again. But he was right, though that was an understatement. Because in the past, Gérard had once been Odile, Amélie's dear friend, and it was Amélie, not Gérard, who had really crossed Nguyen.

"Did she really use a bust of Pericles?" You asked.

Lacroix stared at you for a moment, like he couldn't quite believe you'd latched onto that mundane detail. "Yes. It was her great-grandfather's, and quite old and hideous."

You nodded, because it was easier than asking, "did Amélie really kill a romantic rival in self defense, or had Lacroix killed an old friend for the betrayal?" It didn't matter, not really. Nguyen's son had died because of it, and from the sound of it, so had a lot of other people.

"Anything...else?" He asked.

You tapped your chin. Because you had spent a long time digging into Lacroix's past, trying to figure out exactly whom he was, what he had done, and if he had any really embarrassing exploits
you could rub his nose in. Sadly, you had kind of failed on the entire endeavor. Now you could go back to researching, because you had a better starting point. It seemed almost...unfair to just ask him the details. "Anything you think I should I should know?"

Lacroix studied your face, that single eye searching for something. "I am concussed, possibly suffering from auditory hallucinations, and sentimental enough to speak too freely. Are you sure you don't have any questions?"

"Oh tons," you said. "But I can always just ask Amélie. She won't jerk me around like you do."

Lacroix's look of absolute disbelief really warmed the cockles of your heart. Whatever the cockles were. Your heart was warm, and that meant the cockles had to be too. Yeah.

You didn't need to ask him about Nguyen. You just imagined ten years from now, if you hadn't stopped Lao, facing her and all the damage she'd done. It wasn't the same, but you still felt that brand of heartsickness, guilt, and responsibility. Time and therapy would erode at that cluster of feelings, but in Lacroix's case? Well, that wound was deeper.

Lacroix frowned, brow wrinkled, either disturbed by the fact Amélie might reveal more than he wanted, or by your seeming disinterest in his life. Because drama-llama Lacroix loved being mysterious, and you weren't taking the bait. "Chanceux, are you sure-"

You just shrugged, giving him a knowing smile. "I can always ask you later," you said. "I'm sure you'd be honest with me. After all, you went through all that trouble to keep Nguyen from shooting me while I was running my mouth." You pointed at your left eye, trying to smile, though suddenly you didn't feel like it.

Lacroix sighed, shaking his head. "Oh Chanceux, you were always meant to be a distraction, to keep her attention divided," he said, voice oddly gentle. "I knew you would anger her, and I knew she wouldn't react well. But I don't throw agents away. It was my responsibility, as I had planned the operation and chosen this strategy."

And he had been willing to pay the price. You didn't like being a pawn, being manipulated, but Lacroix had done the best he could to get you home safely. That counted for something.

"I mean, I was rather shocked that she destroyed that vase. Do you have any idea how old that ceramic was? She preserved it during the Omnic Crisis and then you enraged her enough to hurl it at your head. Granted, it was a bit...ugly, but full of important history."

"How was it full? It was a vase. There were no flowers or water either, I was there."

Lacroix groaned. "Truly, Chanceux, you could annoy a saint."

"Wouldn't know, haven't met any," you said, though Zenyatta and Reinhardt's faces briefly flashed across your mind.

Lacroix chuckled, arms folded in his lap. "So no more questions about Hanoi?"

You began to shake your head, because after everything that happened, there was a deeper understanding between you and Lacroix. But then...

"OH WAIT!" you shouted, slapping your knee and jumping to your feet, pointing your metal fingers at his face.

Lacroix jerked backward, eye widening.
"I do have a bone to pick with you, you lousy sneak! And don't you fucking deny it: you knew Isha was in your goddamn backpack. Just what the fuck were you thinking bringing my murderbird to Hanoi, you reckless son of a bitch? I ought to-"

Lacroix gave an indelicate snort. "I only realized it during transit, after it was too late to turn back. It seemed safer to wait till we arrived at our destination. I did not want her to become scared and get lost in the crowds, or worse. And we could not afford to make a scene or attract attention."

You squinted at him.

He raised his hands. "I was not about to bring an untried asset into direct combat on such a critical mission. There was no guarantee she wouldn't compromise us. And I have no desire to incur more of Jack or Gabriel's wrath."

You squinted even harder, noticing that he didn't seem bothered by your wrath. Probably because he knew you wouldn't deck him right now. Ugh. Giving him the stink-eye, you sat back down. "You could have warned me."

"I did not want her to panic at the prospect of discovery. I had no idea how she would react and her hearing is quite good."

You crossed your arms. "Uh-huh."

"It was not my idea and I have learned a great deal about the capabilities of your pet. And it seems I will learn a great deal more as Amélie says that Zhai Feng will be producing more." He shook his head, good humor seeming a little strained. "Ziv has spared no detail about her destructive tendencies."

You pictured the damage that could befall Lacroix's expensive wardrobe. It made you smile. And speaking of destructive...

"Do I need to worry about Vo and how she's going to react to...everything?" You asked.

"You must always be concerned for Min," Lacroix said gravely. "She does not play well with others, but she does not do well on her own either."

"Blackwatch in a nutshell," you sighed.

"Indeed," Lacroix said. "So many dangerous people, without the faintest idea of how to look after themselves outside of combat, and mostly unaware of that deficiency. It's a remarkable paradox." He shook his head, smiling brightly.

"You're not funny," you said.

"I'm not wrong, and that's what bothers you more," Lacroix chuckled. "Though I'm not sure why you're so defensive. You are one of the less extreme cases."

A faint compliment? He was trying to put you at ease – no insults, because you'd retaliate. But nothing too blatant, because you were suspicious by nature. You snorted, knowing he wanted something.

"We will need to do something about Min, yes," Lacroix said. "I am still weighing my options, but it appears to me that both Min and Agent Diallo might be in need of a new placement within the organization. Diallo has experience in bodyguard work, and minding Min. Min is Min. Her position will always be unique."
They needed a new squad because Tataryn was dead and he never got around to replacing Sinaga. You exhaled slowly. "You had something in mind?"

"I do, but it's tentative. You're better off putting Diallo on Strike Commander duty, and having Min help dismantle some of the armaments from yesterday's battle." Min liked taking apart explosives, almost as much as she liked building them. Hopefully it would keep her mind off of things. You were staying busy too, though if Gabriel didn't wake up soon, you would have to face that issue more closely. Your throat was suddenly dry, and you swallowed, though it felt like you might choke on air.

"There will be more time for mourning later," Lacroix said, not unkindly. "I know it is difficult. But we must keep up with current events. I'm afraid our enemies are all psychopaths who will not make time to mourn their own or give us any courtesy."

"Yeah, I know," you said, straightening up, unwilling to get emotional in front of the resident supervillain.

"So, I have to ask, how did you figure out...Athena's secret?" Lacroix asked, leaning forward. "I didn't realize you had an interest in advanced AI or that level of tech expertise-"

"A lot of things about Athena don't add up," you said. "And maybe she gave me some hints. But anyone who's openly interacted with Athena has to know she's special. Granted, I didn't piece the whole thing together till later. But that briefing on Operation Metis, that filled in the rest of the gaps."

Lacroix gave you a faint smile. "I thought it might."

You leaned in closer, scooting your chair forward. Now you faced Lacroix directly, focusing on that single dark eye. "I know Gabriel and Jack would not have authorized that much of an information release, even to me. So how'd you do it?"

Lacroix smiled and stretched out his hand. "I know you have something for me."

You snorted, and reached into your bag, pulling out a bottle of expensive mineral water and a pack of Gitanes. "If Angela catches us smoking in her infirmary..." You had clear memories of her unbridled fury, as well as her prowess with that staff. It wasn’t just for healing. You’d seen her do some real damage in close quarters.

"You have a good point. We can just taste them," Lacroix said, as you handed him the bottle and a cigarette. He placed the cigarette between his lips, inhaling the faint fragrance of tobacco. His smile was lazy, almost conspiratorial. You mirrored him, shaking your head.

"So how'd you do it?"

"It is partially thanks to you," he said, still leaning forward, elbows on his knees. You were sitting the same way, head angled to hear him better. The posture of gossips, that's what spies were after all: just extremely intense, well-funded, multinational gossips. "In fact, without your involvement, it might have been impossible."

You raised a brow. Had he lobbied Jack or Gabriel in secret- No. You closed your eyes, a small stray memory floating to the surface. You'd flagged it as a "potential problem" at the time, but nothing seemed to come of it... "They left you in charge when they came to Greece to dig us out."

Lacroix's eye sparkled with delight.
"Your scheduled remodel of Jack's office was a distraction. The soup was too." Though they kept the improved recipe, and it had rapidly become a favorite menu item paired with the croque-monsieur. "I'm willing to bet you made a lot of little changes across a dozen or so operations, just to generate a good smokescreen." You paused, realizing that he could not know that you were alive when he did this, that he had to have a contingency plan if you had not survived. But there was no need to mention that detail. He had used the opportunity as another safeguard in his master plan.

"Finding the correct syntax was tricky," he admitted. "I could give you access to my personal files without much trouble. But creating an alternate access code and changing certain compartmentalized intel permissions without Athena directly registering them was a feat."

"Did Ziv help?" You asked.

"After a fashion. We simply had a long luncheon with Winston and asked pertinent questions. He gave me quite the insight into our AI's features. Further discussions with Lady Zheng and Zenyatta shed considerable light on the matter. It was simply a very well-concealed back door, constructed when her focus was rightfully on other matters," he said, with a surfeit of satisfaction.

And you'd wager that he'd had the entire operation planned in advance, just in case he was ever given temporary charge of the facility.

"Anyone suspect?" You asked, rolling the cigarette between your fingers.

Lacroix chuckled. "Gabriel, possibly. He caught almost all of my changes, but left most of them in place, because I was merely improving on existing operations. But truly, I don't think Gabriel was worried about it."

Or he didn't think Gabriel would suspect him of giving someone else the mission briefing for Operation Metis. You weren't too sure.

"Well, you know how it goes – better than most. It is always easier to ask for forgiveness instead of permission." Operation Spinshot came to mind, and was a glorious example of how that was both true and unwise.

"And Jack has been pretty forgiving," Lacroix said. "Gabriel is...improving in that area."

"Not so sure about Captain Amari," you said.

Lacroix blanched. "She is ever-gracious and more merciful than we deserve," he said so dryly, that it might have sounded disingenuous, except you could see the discomfort clearly on his face.

"The Captain can hold a grudge," you agreed. "But often chooses not to, at least in my case, because I'm very sorry and very good at conveying it to her." You nodded sincerely.

"Yes. And on that note, you should probably keep Jack away from her for a few days. She was...not impressed by his choices yesterday."

"But he did it to-" You didn't know why you made that token protest. Captain Amari wasn't going to be softened up just because Jack did a little thing like save her life.

"She'll get it over it. Adrenaline, nobility, and a strict adherence to good security policy are all clouding her thoughts. She can be insufferably obstinate in the aftermath of a battle. Give her a few days of civilian life, tea, and biscuits, and she'll be back to normal."

Was it your imagination, or had Lacroix lowered his voice once he started talking about the
"Anyway, I'm getting another splitting headache, and this infirmary is full of other people I know you wish to talk to. That is a bad sign, Chanceux, when you go to the hospital to visit most of your friends."

You nodded. "But it beats the alternative." You waved your hand, trying to coax meaningful words out of your throat with a gesture.

Lacroix sat back in his chair, a pained look on his face. It seemed that he too could picture the flag-draped coffins, the endless chain of funerals, regrets, and empty whiskey bottles. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

Chapter End Notes

Real life has been stupid. Still working too much. Had a debacle with buying a new washing machine. Cat is sicker. But I am still working on this. It is not abandoned. I'm just finished outlining the end and will finish this. I swear I will reply to comments this weekend. Life has been...stupid.

On a more cheerful note, I went to see Birds of Prey because the reviews are so conflicted. I went in with action movie expectations (shoehorned character development and silly plot holes, but good special effects, fight choreography, and snappy dialogue: so fun, but not lifechanging). I really enjoyed it. That's my two cents. I thought it was a lot of fun.
Chapter 135

Chapter Summary

You have so much work to do, but you have not forgotten what's really important.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You stopped by to look in on Gabriel. He was breathing, peacefully. There was no change from yesterday. So gritting your teeth, you pulled yourself out of the doorway, and went to check on livelier folks. After all, you could hear Feng cackling down the hallway, and she was on the other side of the infirmary. You knew White Rabbit personnel were getting treated, and that there had been casualties on their side. You didn't know them, but you felt partially responsible, for some reason. And you didn't have many treats packed to bribe anyone – you didn't have many snacks available right now anyway – and it felt weird to visit empty-handed.

Still you wandered down the hall, spotting Genji leaning in the doorway. He looked up as you approached.

“Feng?” You mouthed.

Genji nodded once, then stepped back, giving you room to squeeze by.

"-But what does it meeeeeeean?” Feng wailed as she gestured to her phone. She was in a cloth gown and seemed to have no trouble sitting up. "I think everyone survived but- Lucky! You can tell us! The Morrisons survived, but did their bodyguards?"

Hanzo sat at the bedside, a pot of brilliantly colored chrysanthemums at the bedside, along with a mixture of snacks, empty wrappers, and an untouched nutrition shake, probably similar to what Angela forced Jack to drink. Hanzo sighed, nudging her with his elbow and pointing at the thick concoction.

"As far as I know, they did," you said. "Thanks for sending help."

"Then why is my dad freaking out? He sent me a message, "Tell Morrison to handle her. I'm retired." And then he hasn't responded to any of my inquiries. In fact, he's off the grid, like even Auntie doesn't know where he is. And so I asked Mother and she said, "Sort this for your father. I'm not moving again." But that was it and they're not responding to any of my messages or calls."

You glanced at Genji. "You know more about her parents."

"I know of a man who came to Hanamura, gave out nice candy, and killed people in particularly creative and difficult ways. I don't think we have access to that file. But I know he came into conflict with law enforcement across the world. I know Captain Amari wants his head on a stick, or on her wall, maybe just as paperweight?" Genji shrugged.

"Tea cozy," you said.

"Most likely," Genji agreed.
"Oh," Feng said, wilting. She glanced at you. "Do you think Jack could-?"

"She's furious at Jack right now. I'd give her some time to cool off," you said, wincing.

"But why would she be mad at my parents right now? I mean, I get that Dad was a pretty shady character, but I thought she had been in Greece handling that situation. Why would my parents be a priority after everything that went down?" Feng shook her head. "I don't get it."

"Given all the aid that you've offered Overwatch, it is unlikely that there will be any official action taken against your parents," Hanzo said, crossing his arms and giving you a look. "I know Captain Amari to be severe but fair. And you have plenty of allies to plead your case. For example, Lucky is a competent intermediary, as you have witnessed."

Your blink was long and slow. "Did you just volunteer me as tribute to Captain Amari's wrath?"

"Don't be so melodramatic," Hanzo huffed. "The Captain is reasonable officer. I'm sure that you can convince her-"

Genji snorted.

"I'm sure that you can convince her to retroactively include Feng's father in the On Sing amnesty agreement," Hanzo continued, ignoring Genji.

That wasn't an illogical suggestion, though you didn't really want to be the one to present it to the Captain just yet.

"What exactly did Dad do? I mean, besides kill people. I get that," Feng muttered. "But like do I need to send a card and a fruit basket? Would flowers be more appropriate? You know, was it mostly professional or really personal? I have no idea." She shrugged, looking very confused.

"And Auntie is feigning ignorance-"

"I am merely being responsible and not repeating baseless speculation," the Zheng drone said primly, and you didn't really see it, only the faint red glow buried under a stack of towels in a chair. Was that for privacy? Were Feng and Hanzo blocking Zheng's optical sensors for a reason?

"...So you have no idea what Dad was doing all those years?"

"I didn't say that. But you should ask him yourself. All of that was from life before. And to be honest, I wasn't particularly interested in your father's career choices back then. Terrible oversight on my part, but you have to understand, your mother asked me to keep my distance. I was respecting her wishes."

"Uh-huh," Feng said, drawing out the vowels and braiding them with thick threads of skepticism. "I bet."

"You would have to ask Hettie for more concrete information," Zheng continued. "Once you are safely back in Shanghai."

Feng snorted. "You're not subtle."

"You don't respond to subtle," Zheng said, still managing to sound dignified and disapproving, despite being only a few feet tall and buried under the linens.

"If you want to get on her good side, you should understand how much she values her tea time," Genji said, leaning against the door frame, the posture of a smug punk. "Refrain from giving her
any sort of ostentatious ceramics or rare antiques- it'll be viewed as a bribe. Stick to good quality tea, sweets, and other ephemera. If you must give her something more substantial, wait till the end of Ramadan."

You turned your head away, trying to hide your expression. Genji was being helpful of his own volition. And if you said or did anything to point it out, that might ruin the moment.

"Thanks!" Feng chirped. "Still wondering what he did though..."

"Maybe you can ask Chang about how things went after she gets treated: the Morrisons and Chang's unit are on their way back to Zurich," you said with a shrug.

"Yeah, that's like a good idea. I did want to check in with Maggie and Michael," Feng nodded. "And if something went wrong, Chang won't beat around the bush: she'll tell me what's going on." Feng grinned. "So I get to meet Mom and Pop Morrison? Any recommendations? I want to make a good impression."

You snorted. "Don't play like you're not American, Feng. They're Midwesterners who live a simple rural life and have shunned the fame that their children are bringing them. You're familiar with the type."

"...So I should make a hot dish, talk about the weather, and pretend to go to their church? Kidding!" Feng said, unconvincingly. "I can do the well-behaved kid routine - you know, to convince your friends' parents that you're really a good influence and should be allowed to hang out whenever, and also be invited to stay for dinner. I could kind of do that." Feng nodded eagerly. "Sort of. Actually, now that I think about it, they probably just felt sorry for me, but you know what? I still got what I wanted and that's what matters in the end." She gave firm nod for emphasis. Hanzo chuckled. "Drink your replenishment shake, Feng. Or Aunt Zheng will be upset and she'll tell Dr. Ziegler, who is surprisingly vicious," Hanzo said flatly, not looking at Genji.

Out of the corner of your eye, you could see Genji's half-masked face. And even if you couldn't see his mouth, you knew he was smiling.

Feng squinted at Hanzo. "Whose side are you on?"

Hanzo looked around, pointedly gazing at her, then his chair. "I am at your side, obviously."

Feng opened her mouth, closed it, then squinted at you and Genji. "Is being a smartass a side effect of joining Blackwatch?"

"Might be a requirement even," you said.

"I think it comes up regularly on annual reviews too," Genji said.

"There might be a box to check when you fill out an application," you grinned.

"But we can't really say: hiring procedure is classified," Genji nodded.

"I am uncertain of your meaning, Feng. I was simply stating a fact," Hanzo said, pushing the bottle into her hand and closing her fingers around it. "Now drink your medicine."

Feng narrowed her eyes, glaring around the room. "Just wait till I get out of this bed."

That was your cue. She was Hanzo's problem now. "I came by to thank you for your service, express condolences for Agent Ajiyiming, and to see my friend Feng who needs to drink her
nutrition shake before Dr. Ziegler and Lady Zheng come up with a worse alternative. That said, got to go, I have a lot of work to do—" You said, already slipping out the door.

"Time to check the perimeter," Genji said, following you.

"Cowards!" Feng shouted, shaking her fist goodbye.

You waved back, as you and Genji made a hasty retreat. The two of you made it few yards down the hall before Genji spoke. "What happened?"

"With?"

"My brother and Feng," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

"You can read my report—"

"Already did. "Agent Hawkeye returned to render aid to Agent Hulk. Agent Hulk was out of commission in the aftermath, but is expected to make a full recovery." That was all you included. I want details."

Suddenly, you remembered all the times you'd asked Genji a question and he'd blown you off with a cryptic answer. You tilted your head toward him, grinning broadly. "Being eager to learn is not the same as learning."

"I will be sure to let Zenyatta know that you are quoting him."

You scowled. "I heard Angela went with you out on the battlefield. Did you need lots of healing?"

Genji coughed and you could feel the dirty look burning through the side of your face. Heh. "Joke all you want, Angela was angry."

You paused, recalling how she stormed into Gabriel's room yesterday, a whirlwind of frustration, exhaustion, and antiseptics. She might have still been armed, you didn't really remember. Angela didn't need a gun to intimidate you.

"You're going to ask Feng anyway, and she'll tell you flat out and probably in great detail," you laughed, because she could probably ramble for at least half an hour without actually telling Genji anything new, and it might even be unintentional.

Genji sighed. "Feng doesn't know my brother like you do. I would appreciate your opinion, Lucky."

You paused, glancing over at him. "Learned a new trick, did you?"

"I don't know what you mean," Genji muttered.

You bit your tongue, because Genji was asking nicely, and well, that kind of was a new-ish trick for him. Though if you ribbed him too much about it, he might regress and you didn't want that.

"You were there for some of it. Hanzo was mostly focused on the mission. But I guess I did notice some small improvements. He was on good behavior – minimal verbal sniping and critiquing. In fact, he knew the time limit on her altered form, was very alarmed when she stayed back to hold off the guards, and eagerly returned to save her. I don't know the details of the fight, but afterward he gave her a piggyback ride, and stayed by her side the entire trip home, feeding her snacks and coaxing her to drink water. He was very attentive."
Genji was quiet for a moment.

"I don't know if it's romance, but I think it's progress. And cute," you said, testing the word. Oddly enough, it fit.

"I don't know if my brother understands the dynamics of "cute" yet," Genji said. "At least when applied to a relationship of equals and not animals or children. And I know he doesn't understand romance – at least not the kind Feng wants. But I'm looking forward to watching him learn."

"You're looking forward to watching him stumble," you corrected.

"Same thing really," Genji said with a shrug.

You stood there for a moment. "You know, if you need pointers on how to approach someone you're interested in-"

"McCree would be a better resource than you," Genji finished, smugly. "In fact, if I remember correctly, he's the one who had to lecture you on what was going on in front of your very face."

You squinted at him. "I was going to say, ask Torby, as he's been happily married the longest out of anyone else we know... But yeah, I'll let Jesse know you want some romantic advice from him. I'm sure he'd be happy to show you how it's done." Grinning at him, you practically skipped away, treasuring the look of sheer horror frozen on the visible half of Genji's face.

You knocked on Távio’s door and peeked in. He lay in the bed, eyes closed, breathing peacefully. The chair beside his bed was empty, though there was a laptop, a jacket, two blankets, and a familiar lunchbox - adorned with giant robots – scattered across the bedside table and counter. Ziv had been here. You smiled slightly at that, recalling just how salty your hacker had been when he'd first heard about Távio. Things had changed.

Not wanting to wake him, you turned to go.

"Is that you, ma’am?" A groggy voice murmured. It surprised you how faint and almost childlike he sounded.

"Sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you," you said.

"Is OK," he said, voice thick with sleep and lots of drugs. "You’re back safe? With the Strike Commander?"

You figured Ziv must have already told him, but he was drugged. “Yeah.”

“That’s good,” he mumbled, eyes closed. He smiled though.

“You did a good job,” you said, softly. “Ziv has written the report-”

“Ziv was the real hero,” Távio grimaced, shifting under the covers, small jerky motions. “He headbutted the second gunman. I only shot the bastard when there was an opening.”

You blinked. “What?” Ziv had left that detail out of the official report.

“Uh-huh, ran straight at him. Totally fearless,” Távio said gravely, sleep slurring the words together.
“...Yeah, fearless. That’s one way of describing it.” You rubbed your forehead. You were going to have words with that idiot and then hug him till he tried to escape. “I should let you rest.”

“Mmm,” Távio made a soft grunt, and it could have been your imagination, but it almost sounded disappointed. “Whatever you think’s best, ma’am.”

“You need to sleep. I’ll bring you some food when the drugs wear off.”

Távio smiled, eyes still closed. “OK, ma’am.” He coughed and cleared his throat. “Ma’am?”

“Yes?” you said, because you didn’t have the heart to correct him right now.

“Ziv called me your “protegee.” The pride in his voice in made you pause.

You stood over Távio and shook your head, your smile feeling a little silly. You straightened his blankets, trying to think of the right response. “I’m sure you’ve been called worse things.”

Távio laughed, sinking down into his pillows “Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, get some rest,” you said. “That’s an order.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he yawned, and exhaled, slowly falling back into a drugged slumber.

You glanced over your shoulder at the younger agent, before quietly shutting the door on your way out.

You knocked on the adjacent door, knowing this visit would not be so relaxed. “It’s Strike,” you said.

You waited, but heard no response. And then the door jerked open, Jemison was on her feet – still in a hospital gown. There were stitches along the side of her head, and she wobbled when she walked.

She abruptly turned around and limped back to her chair.

“Just stopping by to check in,” you said.

Jemison shrugged. “I’m up. Nothing for you to worry about Strike.” Her tone was hard, but brittle. Like Jack, she had to be blaming herself of what happened to Shoal and the rest of Epsilon Squad. And telling her, “it wasn’t your fault,” or “cheer up,” would be about as helpful as a random stranger’s “thoughts and prayers.”

“How do you want to do this?” You asked, stepping in and closing the door behind you.

Jemison narrowed her eyes. “What?”

“How do you want to do this?” You repeated slowly, all business. Because Jemison was a soldier. Because you were not close enough to her to say “I’m sorry for your loss” and for that to mean a goddamn thing right now. Because once upon a time, you’d been here, lost, on your knees, and grasping for something to keep you going. You knew what rock bottom felt like, and you had a better idea of what it meant to throw someone a rope. “A lot of terrible things have happened. We
Jemison stiffened and opened her mouth, possibly to tell you off, but you pressed on.

“There’s a lot of political shit going down. There’s a UN faction that already tried to pass off what happened to Epsilon Squad as a “terrible accident.” You know Kvento’s on our side, and you know too many other politicians aren’t. You’re a key witness. You’ve got a sterling reputation. And you killed Richard Prince-”

“Strike, that was you,” she said, voice wavering.

“If you hadn’t gotten him in that chokehold, we might not be here having this conversation,” you said carefully.

Jemison stared at you, jaw twitching.

“And you’re the one who finished the job. Maybe he’d be able to find a mad scientist to shove a lawnmower engine in his abdomen, but no one’s mopping up his brains, spooning them back into his skull, and bringing him back to commit more atrocities.”

Jemison snorted.

“He’s your kill,” you said. “You have a better rep than me. It’ll give you a stronger platform, if you’re going to bring down the people that ordered this.”

“I haven’t said what I plan on doing. I haven’t decided,” Jemison said, voice raw.

“I know. I’m just telling you where we stand.” You paused. “Thanks, for drawing it out. That shit is bad for you, but I can’t say that it doesn’t help me sleep a little better knowing that he didn’t go easy.”

Jemison sat down, shaking her head. “Fuck.”

“Therapy helps. The sooner, the better,” you added.

“Strike-” Jemison shook her head. “I’m know I’m not thinking straight, especially since your bullshit actually seems to make sense. I don’t know-”

“OK,” you said. “Just keeping you in the loop. It’s a lot, I know.”

“...He killed your squad too, back in the day?” She looked at you, her expression almost pensive.

“Yeah,” you said. “About two years ago. Still pretty raw about it.”

Jemison nodded.

“Morrison?”

You sighed. “He’s doing damage control, and putting off handling his own...feelings.”

Jemison snorted. “I meant, what is Morrison doing?”

You winced, because your misspoken words were a blunt oversharing of your lover’s business, though perhaps it wasn’t a mistake. Jemison was uniquely situated to talk Jack about their shared ordeal. “He’s already come out on a livestream and openly accused Petras of organizing the murder
of Overwatch agents.” You clenched your fists. “There’s no playing it safe any more. He’s all in.”

“OK,” Jemison took a deep breath, eyes closed. She swallowed roughly. “I am too.”

“I’ll let our resident mastermind know. He’ll probably have something for you to do by tomorrow,” you said. Though you’d already known her answer before you’d stepped into this room. Hell, you’d had to peel back some very uncomfortable layers of your own psyche to gain this insight. But you’d walked this path, and you knew it well. Your next priority was to get both Jemison and Jack into trauma therapy, somehow.

“This job,” Jemison muttered. “You hit the ground running and you don’t stop.”

“You should look up all the videos of Commander Cosplayer floating around. You were out for that part, but it was pretty satisfying.”

Jemison nodded. “I’ll finish my reports and catch up on the briefings. It’ll...give me something to do.”

“Your work ethic is insane,” you told her.

She squinted at you, but didn’t comment.

Business concluded, you groped for something gentler to end on. You didn’t have a lot of downtime interaction with Jemison, not like Shoal… You flinched. But you remembered a few things. “If you’re not busy, I’ll bring Isha by later. I think she probably needs a bath first though...” You trailed off, remembering all the blood and bad smells… Poor Jesse. He probably hadn’t gotten around to cleaning her up, and did he even know how to bathe a murderbird…?

“Yeah, that’d be fine,” Jemison said, a little too forcefully.

“OK,” you said. You opened your mouth, weighing the words on your tongue. “It gets better,” you said. “Right now, it doesn’t feel like it ever will, but that’s not true. It does.”

And you walked out quickly, hoping you had done more good than harm.

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You still needed to go check in with Captain Amari, Torby, and Reinhardt, but you stopped back in Gabriel’s room. Jemison’s pain aggravated some of your old wounds, and you wanted nothing more than to sit with Gabriel for a few minutes. His presence had always soothed you before.

So you were a little startled when you walked in, and there sat Jesse, head bowed, fists in his lap, Bandit under his chair. He looked up at you, and you thought you saw a flash of guilt as he smiled weakly at you.

“Just...visiting,” he said, but made no move to get up.

“That’s allowed,” you said.

Isha chirruped and ran across the bed, greeting and scolding you as you stepped into the room. You shut the door. Isha stood at the foot of the bed, both arms outstretched. You picked her up, stroking her head, and sat down beside Jesse.
She nibbled on your gloves, curling up against your chest. You discretely sniffed her, and found that she smelled a little bit like amber and floral soap.

“Gave her and Bandit a bath last night. Or she splashed around the sink and Bandit sat next to her,” Jesse said.

“Thanks,” you said. “I really appreciate it.”

“She was good. Tried to feed me her jerky and stole my pillow, but weren’t no trouble,” he said, reaching over to scratch her head. “Woke up to her and Bandit opening up his food bag.”

You snorted. “Isha.”

“She was making him breakfast,” Jesse said, with a laugh. “I shoulda been up anyway.”

“Still.” You flicked her snout and she snorted. “You got caught.”

She chortled and headbutted you.

Jesse squinted at you, then shook his head. “I uh...I got something to confess, sweetpea.”

You leaned back in the chair, not entirely sure where this was going. “OK?”

Jesse rubbed his forehead, hands going through his hair as he stared at the floor. Shoulders slumped, he reached under the chair to give Bandit a rough pat. He took a shaky breath. “You should know, the boss got hurt shielding me. I was the first one up those stairs when you shouted.”

You swallowed, not really remembering the stairwell very clearly. But you had no trouble recalling what happened in the few seconds after you exited it. The Vishkar man with his bomb. Your shots coming too late. And then the world going sideways…

You shuddered.

“He yanked me around. Spun me, and I think threw out his left arm for balance. I didn’t see – the lights went, the ceiling fell, and then we were buried alive.” Jesse blinked rapidly. “I was up front. I was goofing off. Should’ve been me-”

You reached over, placing one hand over his. “I was the one up front Jesse. And I didn’t react fast enough.”

Jesse frowned. “Lucky-”

“You and Gabriel were relying on me and Tataryn to clear the way. And I didn’t-”

“I heard you yell, and not half a second later, I heard you shooting, and then BOOM! You moved fast, you didn’t fuck around. And either way, we didn’t know if it was a deadman’s switch or what kind of mechanism they were using. Ain’t your doing. Ain’t on anyone but Vishkar and Talon.” Jesse shook his head. “But the boss-”

Jesse’s words made sense. And you knew that if Tataryn had survived, you certainly wouldn’t have blamed him for not reacting fast enough. But bad things had happened, and now you were all tangled up inside. It was easy to point fingers and spread blame. It was much harder to accept that sometimes there was nothing you could have done differently that would have saved someone.

“Boss took me in, gave me a home, and-”

“Do you remember how mad he was at me after Lucerne and Candle Arc went to hell?”
“You mean after you went overboard and let Agent Lao poke extra holes in you?” Jesse asked wryly.

You snorted. “Yeah, well, semantics aside, Gabriel made it clear to me, on more than one occasion even, that since he’s SEP and all legendary and shit, that he’d rather get hurt in others’ stead, because he’ll bounce back from it better. But also because he’s overly responsible like that.” You glanced over at your lover, his breathing steady, his expression relaxed. “Arrogant ass.”

“You’re his lover-”

“You’re his protegee,” you said, the word still fresh in your mind. “He cares about you deeply. It wasn’t you being careless and letting him down. It was Gabriel choosing to be stupidly noble, because fuck consequences. He does that.” You sniffled.

Jesse stared at you, mouth agape. “Huckleberry-”

“Oh come on, you know it’s true,” you said. “He’d do it for most anyone under his command. And maybe afterward, he’d regret it, maybe he wouldn’t. But I can tell you, that this-” You waved your left hand. “Still haunts him. He blames himself for someone he cares about getting hurt. He wasn’t about to let it happen again.”

Jesse shuddered. “Didn’t think you’d really be mad at me. But...was worried.”

“All my anger is reserved for the ones who did this to us,” you said, though maybe it wasn’t as clean as that – it would be very easy to lash out at Jesse, however wrong. “Spent enough time in therapy to understand that emotional kneejerk reactions and repressed creeping resentment aren’t actually helpful. Though maybe that’s how we’re wired. We want to believe that we have some kind of control, and it’s easier to say something is your fault than to accept that maybe, even if you’d done the best job ever, that it might not have mattered.”

“...Heavy stuff, Headshrinker.”

“Yeah, well, you started it,” you said with a shrug.

Jesse chuckled.

“Anyway, you don’t need to feel too guilty. If anyone is getting special treatment, it’s me, and I actually do feel kind of bad about it.”

Jesse squinted at you.

“Like, in DC, he took my watch shift, possibly more than once-”

“His choice.”

“You had to take first-”

“Don’t matter. Look, is the boss sweeter to you than anyone else in the section? Yes, no question about it. And nobody’s complaining, maybe a little because you’re mean, but also because you keep the boss in check. If he’s out of sorts, you manage him, and you keep things from escalating. If someone ain’t sure how to bring up a thorny subject with him, they’ll ask you first. You ain’t abusing your position, sugar pie. If the boss is picking up your slack, and ain’t making it other folks’ problem, then it ain’t their business to complain neither.”

You snorted. “Given that speech before, huh?”
“Maybe I had to remind some shortsighted folks that things run smoother with you here,” Jesse said coolly. “But that was a while ago. Nothing to worry about now.”

“If you say so.”

“Sugarpie, I already got folks asking, “Are you sure about this, McCree? Have you cleared this with Strike, McCree? Are you sure she knows you’re doing this McCree? Are you prepared to deal with her, McCree?” And no, I ain’t cleared it with you, because you were sleeping!” He scowled. “…And because no one rescinded my operational authority.” That last statement came out very quietly, and he looked a little queasy.

“Yeah, Lacroix is supervising too, so don’t worry too much. Or worry more. I’m actually not sure.” You frowned. “You’ve got more ops expertise than me. But obviously I can still handle internal issues, maintain support, and coordinate localized logistics. Between you, me, and Lacroix, we should be able to keep things running smoothly.”

“If I run into anything complicated, I’ll bring to you to weigh in on. Feel free to do the same.”Jesse nodded, looking a little more relaxed as he settled into his chair.

“I would be happy to share the work- I mean responsibility.”

“I already set up a perimeter guard rotation for the infirmary – using Overwatch and Blackwatch agents – some cleared by you and Lacroix, some because they showed up to help yesterday. You know, you can leave Genji in charge of infirmary security and focus on Morrison,” Jesse said.

You frowned, not quite liking that idea, though unable to find a logical reason to decline. “Maybe.”

“If it all gets to be too much,” Jesse added, because he knew how you thought. He wouldn’t push right now, but this wasn’t the end of that discussion.

“Yeah, OK.” You nodded. “Speaking of Genji-”

“Hovering over her the whole damn time. Don’t think she noticed though.”

You snorted. “I wouldn’t underestimate her observational skills.”

“You’ve got great observational skills, sugarpie. But your powers of deduction…” Jesse tapped the side of his head.

You smacked his arm. “Yeah, well, Genji said the same thing. About how I was so dense that I needed you to point shit out to me, and how you were more of an expert on romantic relationships. So I made sure to tell him that I’d let you know how much he wanted your advice.”

Your smile might have been a little mean, but Jesse chuckled. “You’re ornery.”

“Especially when you cross me, Jesse McCree. You’d best remember that.” You petted Isha, smile fading a little when you looked at Gabriel, who was still just sleeping through everything.

You held Isha a little too tightly, watching your lover breathe, slow and regular breaths. He was alive. He was strong. He had survived worse. You repeated that mantra silently. And you’d said it so many times, despite your innate skepticism, you almost believed it by now...

Jesse cleared his throat, and you realized you weren’t too sure how long you’d been sitting there staring.
“Sorry,” you said. “Zoned out.”

Jesse patted your shoulder. “Anything you want me to do?” His voice stayed steady, but only just.

“If he doesn’t wake up soon, I do have a job I’ll need your help with,” you said.

Jesse studied your face. You knew you weren’t at your best, but you weren’t sure what he was looking for. The set of your jaw felt grim. He looked back over to Gabriel. “Are you talking about breaking the news to Tataryn’s kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Boss usually does it himself.”

“I know.”

“You don’t have to-”

“She knows me. I don’t want a stranger to do it.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Jesse grimaced. “Yeah, I’ll come too. I can try to do the talking-”

“It should be me,” you said softly.

“Because you know her? Or because you’re blaming yourself for what happened?”

“Both,” you said after a moment. After all this time Jesse knew you too well, the insightful bastard.

Jesse sighed, one arm resting around your shoulder. “Sometimes you’re real smart and healthy, you know? All sound advice and reasonable life views. And sometimes you’re so damn shortsighted and irrational that I want to shout some sense into your thick skull. Won’t work, but I want to.”

“Yeah,” you agreed. “Sounds about right.”

You leaned against Jesse’s side, reading reports, taking care of supply orders, guard rotations, and leave requests. Jesse flicked between mission summaries, maps, and combat reports, sending terse notes to Lacroix and making a face every time he got a response. This was much harder without Athena present to spout facts and figures, and give you real-time updates. You were also getting hungry.

Isha sat on the floor, playing with Bandit. You reached down to pet them both.

The door opened then, and Jack walked in, grimacing.

Isha squealed and ran to him. He scooped her up, a faint smiling relaxing his features. He glanced over at you, then saw Jesse, a flash of irritation on his face, and then he shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I uh...I can go,” Jesse said, having clearly witnessed the same thing. He stood up, the chair squeaking.

Jack straightened, holding Isha in one arm, and looked directly at Jesse. “No, no, you have every right to be here. I just have a headache from my last meeting. Politics,” he muttered, and sat down
on the bed beside Gabriel.

“It’s fine, sir.” Jesse backed up a little. “I need to check in with Lacroix anyway, before he turns our western Macedonian listening post into a horse-wrangling operation.”

“What?” You squinted at Jesse.

“I’ll forward you the details,” Jesse said out of the corner of his mouth, actually serious. He patted your shoulder. “I’ll be back though.”

“OK,” you said.

“Want me to pick up lunch?”

“Agent Lao is grabbing lunch out. If you send her a message, she’ll bring you something too,” Jack said, not looking up. “Tell her to put it on my tab.”

“...Thanks,” Jesse said, not quite trusting the gesture.

Jack exhaled slowly. “McCree, I’m tired, angry, and fresh out of nice-face. I want you to be here, because Gabe would want you to be here. I’m not sore at you, and I shouldn’t have reacted that way. I’m sorry. I’m just ready to end the day and it isn’t even lunchtime yet.”

“IT’s OK, sir. I...understand the SEP metabolism issues. Being “hangry” is a known side effect.”

“Definitely,” you said, nodding solemnly.

Jack snorted, but his shoulders relaxed just a smidgen.

“I’ll be back. I really do have to see why Lacroix thinks horse-smuggling will help us with international security, so... see you later.” Grinning, Jesse whistled, and Bandit followed him out the door.

There was a neat click as the lock reengaged.

Jack rubbed the back of his neck. “He could’ve left the dog.”

“Want to talk about it?” You asked, as he petted Isha. He had the grace to look slightly embarrassed.

“Th at last meeting was a real...trial,” Jack said after a moment, not looking at you. “It was shit, and I was looking forward to coming back and cuddling you, and then I saw McCree sitting so close and I know it isn’t like that between you two, but for an instant it annoyed me, and I shouldn’t have reacted, but I did.” He looked up, a little ashamed. “Sorry, sweetheart.”

You leaned in and kissed him gently. “You weren’t mean to me. Plus you apologized to Jesse and you’re buying him lunch, I think that’s fair.” You paused. “Well, I guess that depends on what’s for lunch.”

“Agent Lao wanted Singapore noodles and some kind of Chinese roast pork. She went to pick up the food and Amélie escorted me back here so she can visit with our horse-stealing Frenchman.”

Jack rested his head against your shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“ You and Jesse seem to have a...strained relationship. ” You stroked his hair, a little amused by how cute he could be, despite his bad mood.
Things have never exactly been relaxed between us. Gabe brought home this scrawny, feral, foul-mouthed, punk kid who could shoot a bean off a cat’s head. He wore a ridiculous hat everywhere, poured hot sauce on everything, and had more sass than body mass. If Gabe was the stern mentor, I was the nit-picking parole officer, hounding him about every infraction...” Jack shook his head.

“You?” You rested a hand over your chest in mock surprise. “YOU?”

“Shut up,” Jack groaned into your shoulder. “I’ve had a hard day and I’m defenseless against your sarcasm.”

You laughed.

“I know, I know, it wasn’t the right way to handle the situation, but he was such an infuriating little shit, and it seemed, at the time, that he didn’t really appreciate the second chance Gabe had wrangled him. But then...what did I know?” Jack shook his head. “Things are different now, I know, but I guess we haven’t really ever been that comfortable around each other.” Jack sat up, still holding a happily-thrumming Isha. “I guess it doesn’t help that so many people think you’re sleeping with him.”

“I am. We take naps together occasionally,” you said, primly. “Usually with Bandit and Isha, sometimes even Ziv.”

Jack gave an exasperated sigh, but his smile was warm. “You’re ridiculous and your slumber parties sound weird.”

“Maybe a little,” you agreed.

Jack leaned in kissed you softly. “Missed you.”

“Yeah, I missed you too. It’s only been a few hours, and I feel kind of silly.”

Jack chuckled. “I know.” He turned to the side to kiss Gabriel’s forehead. “Come on, you jerk. Say something snarky about how soft and sappy we are.”

“Or he’d be really smooth and charming. He’d say something about how he yearned for us, and the world was bleak and lonely in our absence. Like a taco without hot sauce.”

Jack gave a very undignified snort. “You and your food aggression. Forget fancy jewelry and-”

You remembered the rings then, three beautifully crafted pieces, not quite matching, but coordinating, marking a set.

Jack fell silent when he saw the look on your face. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

You blinked rapidly. “Jewelry.”

Jack stared, uncomprehendingly. “I was kidding, sweetheart. If you want fancy jewelry-”

“I was going through his stuff, packing a go-bag before I left for your rescue mission. He’d hidden these beautiful custom pieces in his towels. Anniversary gifts, I guess...” You sniffled. “I gave him a bunch of shit because I found them so easily, but then...”

“...But then you realized that he put them somewhere where one of us would find them, in case something happened to him. Oh Gabe...” Jack’s voice dropped, but he set Isha to the side and pulled you into his lap, his arms wrapped tightly around you.
You clung to Jack, hugging him as you took deep shaky breaths. “I’m sorry. I’ll keep it together. I don’t mean to-”

“It’s fine,” Jack murmured, stroking your hair. “It’s OK. You don’t have to be strong for me, sweetheart. I can handle it. Just...it’s fine.” He kissed the top of your head.

“Do you want to see-”

“No,” Jack said sharply, shaking his head. “No. I’ll wait for him to give them to us. I’m not as tough as you are, baby. I know that if I saw whatever amazing gift he picked out, I would probably fall apart immediately. I’ll just wait and bawl my eyes out when he hands it to me. Then you two will pick on me a little more, before you eventually feel bad and I can guilt some cuddles out of you.” He gave you a saucy wink, even though his smile wobbled and his eyes were too bright.

Smiling through tears wasn’t something you were used to, at least not real smiles. But somehow, Jack made it happen. He was special like that.

Chapter End Notes

I know, short chapter, but a gentler one in stressful times? I hope. Life's been busy. Workworkwork, and Cov-19. I've been muttering, "Plague-cation! Plague-cation!" Under my breath, because if we show any symptoms or come into contact with anyone who is infected, my workplace will have us take 14 days leave (unless we get a doctor's note to return earlier), unpaid. It's been so busy, two weeks leave (paid or not) sounds tempting. We've consistently been down by at least ten people and I've been working 10 hour days regularly, plus commute. But...as the only Asian in my office (and possibly corporate HQ), I really don't want to be the first person to get it. It's silly, but then we went to a non-Asian store (during daylight hours!) Saturday, and I got some static. Nothing overt, but my cousin (who's not Asian) noticed and was trying to figure out if it was me or him. It was me. It was that thing where you go in, and everyone is watching (and uncomfortable, maybe scared?), but won't make eye contact and you know they're watching you when you turn your back. I won't be doing much going out to places where people don't know me. Late night shopping is OK, third shift people tend to be chill.

We're OK here - we tend to do bigger grocery shops in general because we work so much that it's just more convenient to not have to shop.

Stay safe out there. I'm considering a bidet. I've been joking about my doomsday cult, but my cousin says we have to call it "Doomsday Shmoomsday" which shows just how serious we are. :D
Chapter 136

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

A Tumblr anon asked me to write headcanons about how Overwatch/IAL characters would handle being in quarantine. I figured I wouldn't get specific about why each agent is in isolation, just how they would react. It's just some fluff for a hard time:
Original Ask
Head Canon Compilation

In other news, Yana submitted her rendition of Lucky and that expression is a big mood. I think my face is already stuck like that, but as far as I can tell, I'm not on fire.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Keep it simple. He can handle simple," you said, clearly enjoying giving him shit.

Jack pursed his lips. It was a good thing he loved you, because otherwise he would have court-martialed your smart ass by now.

"I'm afraid the simplest explanation is severe head trauma," Gérard said, sounding marginally less annoyed than before.

"I'm standing right here, guys." Jack waved at you, squinting his disapproval. "Come on. The sooner we go, the sooner we can escape."

"Indeed," Gérard said, turning to leave, and Jack already knew he was in for a terse and pointed lecture, followed by many longer ones from a variety of other people.

Rolling his eyes, Jack followed Gérard out into the hall, carefully shutting the door behind him. The corpses had been moved, but there was still a massive bloodstain on the floor.

"I’m not losing anyone else today," Jack said, before Gérard could start up. “Don’t push me on this, Gérard.”

To his credit, the spymaster just sighed heavily, one hand on his arm. “You are not wrong, Jack. But you were foolhardy.”

“I don’t care,” Jack said, and found it to be true. He’d nearly lost everything in the last twenty four hours. You, Gabe, his family, his friends, all of Overwatch… And he had lost friends. Too many people had been killed because of him. Because of Petras’ politics and greed.

“I can cancel this meeting if you’re really not feeling up to it,” Gérard said, his tones surprisingly conciliatory.
“Better get it out of the way,” Jack said, shaking his head. “Let them see how few fucks I have left to give.”

“We are revealing our hand?”

“We are making our accusations. We can lay out the entire conspiracy and piles of evidence later. After I get some logic back.”

Gérard wisely didn’t comment on that. “You can wait, you know. If you want to keep this encounter short. You are injured, unwell, and grieving your squad. Simply show yourself and promise a debrief tomorrow after you’ve rested.”

“I’ve already made my accusations publicly. I’m not backing down or giving them any room to try to soften what I’ve said. We waited too long, Gérard. We should have wrapped this up after what happened on Family Day. It would have saved us all a lot of heartache.”

Gérard nodded, more in acknowledgment than agreement. “We will...leave off the details of the Mediterranean escapade, for now. I suppose all you have to do is, reaffirm you accusations, make your excuses. The politicians will keep. Ana however...”

“I know,” Jack said, because honestly, Fischer, Kwoento, and the rest of the UN were mere formalities tonight. Perhaps tomorrow the UN would try to remove him, or open an inquiry into what exactly happened in Greece, but for now, they would still be reeling from the attack on the infirmary, and what he did to “Acting Commander Bell.”

Good. Jack wasn’t just their golden boy figurehead or some naive political puppet. It was about time that they remembered that.

Ana though… There would be no finessing Ana. He would endure her pointed comments, hug her hard enough to make bones creak, and then beat a hasty retreat when he saw an opening. Because she was truly furious, and it would be another few days before she actually calmed down enough to appreciate the merit of his actions.

It might be another few days before he calmed down enough to see the strategic drawbacks of his actions. Sure, he was going to have to explain himself to the civilian authorities, but Jack couldn’t bring himself to care. Too much had happened, and he wasn’t sorry he’d gone off the rails.

“How bad is it?” Jack asked, because he needed to know.

“...We’ve crossed the Rubicon, certainly.”

“I know that there’s no turning back,” Jack agreed. “But have I handicapped our cause?”

“Hard to say,” Gérard shrugged. “That stunt with Athena will be hard to hide. But not impossible. Bell has political allies, but your popularity has soared in the last hour. I doubt he will be a direct problem. The Security Council is split – but we’re about to initiate a PR counterattack. I doubt they will move directly against you, at least not at first...”

“So, it’s not that big of a deal?” Jack asked, grinning at the fussy Frenchman.

“Do you have any idea how much work I have put into coordinating this surge of positive news coverage? I could make the next two presidents or prime ministers of a G7 country with the amount of effort I have put into this!”

“So my actions fit into your long game?” Jack asked, not letting himself be distracted by Gérard’s
“Unless the details about Athena come out soon, and they still might, you should be safe. I cannot speak for the rest of us,” Gérard sniffed.

Jack sobered then, recalling your suspension and the “investigation” into your “reckless” behavior. “Fair. What can I do to help?”

“Stick to the script and stop making drastic decisions on the fly,” Gérard said dryly.

“...No promises,” Jack said.

Gérard just shook his head, a pained expression on his face. “You are not the only one who has had a trying week, Jack.”

“I know, sorry.” Jack felt a little sheepish as he looked at Gérard’s tired and bruised face. “You should be resting too. Sorry I’ve made more work for you.”

“It keeps life interesting,” Gérard said dryly.

Jack snorted as they turned the corner, almost to the main conference room. “Don’t downplay it. You’re an adrenaline junkie too, and you’re addicted to hoodwinking and outmaneuvering our enemies for high stakes. This is like Vegas, Christmas, and a crossword book all rolled into one fun package.”

“...Jack, I will pretend to pass out and leave you to deal with the politicians alone.”

“I’m not scared of them.”

“You can go visit Ana alone too,” Gérard added quietly, out of the corner of his mouth.

“You weren’t going to defend me anyway,” Jack sighed.

Gérard nodded. “You’re absolutely right.”

“She’ll get over it, eventually,” Jack said, more as reassurance for himself than any confident prediction.

“Perhaps,” Gérard said. They stopped in front of the double doors. “Off the record, I am glad you made the decision that you did. It is not the one I would have chosen,” Gérard admitted. “But I cannot fault you for it.”

“Thanks,” Jack said, standing tall as he pushed open the doors, ready for the next fight.

The UN officials stuck to their scripts: Secretary General Fischer was concerned about the entire situation, but unwilling to take a hard stance just yet. Kwento asked him pointed questions – ones she already knew the answer to – and subtly gave him the upper hand in the conversation. Prescott – the US representative acting for the Security Council - was cautious, making double-edged comments and looking for ways to chip away at Jack’s credibility or reinterpret Jack’s accusations. Jack didn’t give him the chance. Prescott would be a problem in the near future, but not tonight. Jack wouldn’t let anyone else be a problem tonight.
There were others there, but they were just window dressing. Jack would not worry about them till later, and Gérard would, of course, be looking into them.

It was Angela who saved the day, cutting the meeting short when the details of his injuries and low blood sugar came to light. Of course, they would adjourn. Of course, he needed to look after his own health now. Of course, they understood. Their “reasonable” attitudes were a front. Tomorrow they would be back with a vengeance. Today’s meeting was just recon mission, after all. Prescott had the same kind of eyes as Petras, flat, greedy, and cold. He would definitely be a problem.

After they left the conference room, Angela made him down this thick green drink, slimy, vegetal, and too sweet with a vaguely metallic aftertaste – a bad combination overall. She gave him an update on everyone – alive, but harmed and under at least twenty four hour observation, and he had better keep his visits short.

Lacroix made his excuses, splitting off to debrief you.

Leah, Lucy, and Andre were all out cold – thankfully. He didn’t really want to explain Athena to them, and he certainly didn’t have the patience to deal with Andre. Reinhardt was apparently in good spirits. Torby and Ana were not. And Zenyatta had come through mostly unscathed.

He stopped by Reinhardt’s room first. The older man sat upright in his bed, happily eating his second tray of food, while Torby lay flat in his bed, no tray in sight.

“Jack!” Reinhardt boomed, setting the tray aside, and almost rising, even as Jack opened his mouth to tell him not to get up.

“Stay in bed!” Torby snapped. “Or your bones will set wrong and it will take twice as long for them to heal!”

Reinhardt laughed sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. “Do not fret so, it will make your hair turn white.” He raised his arms in a shrugging motion, that could have been the invitation for a hug-

Jack took it. He simply walked up and hugged the man around the neck, a good solid manly hug with a resounding back-slap. Reinhardt squeezed back, one arm carefully wrapping around Jack. The hug was less than half strength- Reinhardt was being considerate of Jack’s injuries.

“We are all alive, Jack,” Reinhardt’s voice was low rumble. “It is very brave what you and Athena did-”

Torby made a “harumph” sound, and Jack released Reinhardt, his own smile crooked. “Hold on, Torbs. You’ll get your turn-”

“You stay away from me, Morrison!” Torby scowled. “That nonsense won’t work on me, and it won’t work on Amari either!”

Jack grinned at his friend. “No hug?”

Torby grumbled something under his breath. “Fine...” He grunted, and Jack swooped in, giving the engineer as quick squeeze. “Of all the silly things...” Torby said, but didn’t actually sound displeased. “You’d better not make a habit of this.”

Jack wasn’t fooled by Torby’s mask of grumpiness. After all, he had loved Gabe all this time, and compared to Gabe’s moods, Torby was sulky kitten. Not that he’d ever say that to the other man’s face.
“Just remember that I braved omnics, politicians, and Ana’s wrath for this rescue,” Jack said, his smile lopsided. “Cut me some slack, OK?”

Torby blew out a slow breath. “Yeah, all right,” he said. “Glad to see you in one piece too, you cheerful moron. Don’t expect you to stay that way, not after the stunt you pulled. You really shat in the blue cupboard this time—”

“Yeah, I know,” Jack said. “But it was worth it.”

“Perhaps you should let Ana rest,” Reinhardt said, hesitantly. “She will be...calmer later on.”

Bless his giant heart, Reinhardt was trying to protect him. Jack shook his head. “Need to see her too, whatever state she’s in.”

“She’ll hunt him down otherwise – it’ll be worse if he hides,” Torby said, also shaking his head. “Remember Algiers?”

“Oh...yes,” Reinhardt flinched.

Both men regarded him gravely, and then saluted him, their expressions terribly grim.

“Thanks,” Jack sighed.

“It has been an honor.”

“We will pour a libation in your memory.”

“We will tell your loved ones that you faced your destruction head-on, with true courage.”

Torby snickered at Reinhardt’s solemn visage. Reinhardt winked at the other man and went back to looking funereal.

“You guys are all jerks,” Jack said, rolling his eyes as he left the room and headed across the hall.

The door was open, and he could see that she was up and awake. He still knocked on the door frame.

Ana stood by the window, back to the door, her blue jacket draped over her shoulders. She was still in uniform, though a cloth gown sat neatly folded on the table beside the bed.

She turned, one hand over her right eye socket. The implant sat on the window sill. According to reports, it had sustained some electrical damage in the fight. That would put her in a worse mood...

Ana had always been a striking woman. Her hair was loose and blood flecked her clothes. Even disheveled, she carried herself with dignity. She lowered her hand, giving him a clear view of her empty socket. Her expression remained flat and severe. Her organic eye burned with a focused intensity. He knew that look from years of experience. She was still locked in the combat mindset, even though the battle had ended hours ago.

That was also a bad sign.

Jack shut the door behind him. He straightened up, stance solid, just in case she charged him. “All right, hit me,” he said, hoping she wouldn’t take him literally.
Ana’s arms remained crossed, she looked him over, eye flicking between his face, torso, and knees. She studied him, head jerking as she pinpointed his injuries – from the exposed bruises, to the way he favored one side, to the defensive placement of his limbs. Jack was pretty sure Angela wouldn’t just let Ana read his medical report – Ana was just that talented at spotting weakness – she didn’t need cybernetic enhancements to do that.

“You swore-” She began, voice harsh.

“I know.” Jack met her gaze.

“You promised-”

“I know.” He nodded.

“You’re a-”

“I know.”

“If you interrupt me one more time, I will end you, you uncivilized, lying beast.” She jabbed one finger at him sharply and lapsed into a stream of Arabic. Jack recognized some of those words from previous outbursts. They weren’t polite words.

He stepped forward anyway.

“-And if you try to hug me right now, I will strangle you right back,” she snarled.

Jack lowered his arms.

“You spineless coward! You thoughtless dog! You were supposed to protect her! Outing her now jeopardizes not only her safety, but the existence of Overwatch! You’re too sentimental, Morrison! You aren’t supposed to buy us soldiers a few more years with the life of a child like her!” Ana glared at him. “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I couldn’t lose anyone else today. Not Torby. Not Reinhardt. Not Lucy, or Leah, or even Andre. And certainly not you.”

“So you’d sacrifice a child?” Ana practically hissed. “We are soldiers, Morrison. This is what we signed up for! But you don’t ask a child-”

“Athena isn’t a child,” Jack said. “She might have been, a few months ago, but I think we both know that she’s been growing fast-”

“Don’t you dare put this on her, Morrison!”

“I’m not. Yes, I gave the order: I let her go. Because she wanted to. Because she’s one of us, and she flat out told me that she could not live with herself if something happened to her friends and she could have prevented it, that she would rather pay the cost than stay safely in hiding. She knows the stakes, Ana. She understood what could happen. And she chose that route anyway. That’s not a child who makes those kind of decisions-”

“You were supposed to keep her safe!”

“And what about the rest of you? You’re my people too,” Jack said. “Yes, I could have ordered her to stay hidden. I could have kept her locked down and tightly controlled. I could have taken away her choice when it really mattered– and what kind of man would that make me?”
Ana glared at him.

“Would you do that to your daughter?” Jack asked.

“In a heartbeat,” Ana snapped. “I would do anything to keep her safe, even if she hated me for it. She is too young.”

Jack frowned. That was an argument for another day, though he could see it on the horizon. “You’re right: Fareeha is too young right now. But one day she won’t be. One day she’ll have to make her own decisions. And Athena isn’t Fareeha,” he said. “Athena may always be a child to us, but I think she’s reached the point where she deserves the respect and consideration we would give an adult.”

“And what have you done to Overwatch by releasing her? Do you think the world will stand by knowing that we’ve sheltered a previously unseen AI hive? Are you ready to talk about Operation Metis?”

Jack wondered if she would bring up Niang and Liao. Because then this really would turn into a fight.

“We raised an omnic-born AI prototype in secret, and against all good sense. Do you really think that’s going to fly? Do you think they’ll let just let her be?”

“No, which is why we’re going to lie our pants off about it,” Jack said flatly. “Lacroix, Winston, and Zheng are already working on a cover story. Our new...coparents are helping to fudge some of the metadata and will back us on any story we choose. I don’t know what the final result will be, but we’re not announcing her existence to the world. Not yet anyway.” Hopefully that would a be a problem for the next Strike Commander.

Ana squinted at him, and he knew he had her. “You didn’t know that going in-”

“No, I didn’t,” Jack agreed. “But Lucky made it very clear that since Athena is an anomaly and her capabilities are still unknown, we can say whatever we want – they don’t have the technical details or data to prove otherwise. Yes, we have something, but that’s classified.”

Ana made an angry sound in the back of her throat. “It’s a clumsy deceit.”

“And it doesn’t change the fact that you gave a bad order,” Ana said coldly. “The Strike Commander should be able to make sacrifices.”

Jack gritted his teeth, a stab of anger passing through his chest. “I have, Ana. I’ve sacrificed a lot. We all have: friends, relationships, lives. And after today, I’m more reluctant than ever. I can’t blindly make those sacrifices any more. If being the Strike Commander means I have to sit by and quietly consign my friends to death, I don’t have what it takes to be the Strike Commander. I certainly have no desire to become that kind of man. That kind of man doesn’t deserve the lives in his care, nor the responsibility he is given, and has no place in leadership.”

Ana stared at him grimly. “You are too soft, Jack. We are soldiers. We knew what we were getting into. There was no reason to risk her.”

Jack sighed. Ana was furious, and Gérard was right. She was still stuck in an adrenaline loop, her focus too narrow. She would come around eventually, but the situation was too fresh.
“I lost most of Epsilon Squad. I nearly lost Gabe, my family, and Lucky today. I couldn’t lose the rest of you. It was an emotional decision, and maybe I’ll come to regret part of it, but having you here, ready to flay me alive, well, I’m not sorry, and I don’t think I ever will be.”

Ana pointed at the door. “Get out, Jack. I’m tired and you’re an idiot.”

“Love you too, Ana.”

“Out!” She snapped, reaching for her sidearm.

Jack retreated.

He shouldn’t have let you and Gabe go to Hanoi alone. He shouldn’t have. He should have insisted…

The room was dark. You lay tucked against his chest, sniffling softly, as he rubbed your back. He had not expected the tears, the heart-wrenching sobs as you clung to him, your grief a solid thing, pressing the air from his lungs. He had never seen you in such pain, and it damn near unmanned him. He had done the best he could, holding you, letting you cry, and silently wondering if he had made things even worse… Gabe would have done a much better job saying the right thing, of making you feel better. He had just bumbled through, doing his best and knowing it wasn’t enough. Pathetic.

He should not have pushed you. You were injured, exhausted, and completely off-balance. The sex was a mistake. He should have just put you to bed, tucked you in, and held you. He should not have asked anything else of you. He was a selfish prick, an absolute bastard. You were too vulnerable and he had failed to recognize that. He had failed at a lot of things... 

He was still processing. He knew it. He’d done the best he could to be comforting, though on some level he knew it wasn’t enough, that he couldn’t fix things, that he should have been able to prevent all this: Gabe’s injuries, your pain, Epsilon Squad’s-

For a moment, he smelled that terrible fruity chemical scent mixed with cordite and blood, he heard the gunshots-

You dug your fingers into his arms, your metal fingers gripping hard enough to bruise. You were still asleep, though reacting to his tension. He forced himself to relax, gently loosening your fingers, but not breaking your hold.

“It’s OK, sweetheart,” he rasped. “We’re home. You’re safe.”

You grumbled something unintelligible.

He’d almost lost you today. If your body armor hadn’t...If you hadn’t ducked fast enough… If things had gone any differently… That realization kept surfacing. And every time he felt it- a sharp jab to the gut, up through his core, and into his chest.

Jack shuddered. He held you tightly, teeth clenched as he tried to will himself to sleep. Too many things had gone wrong today, too much had changed in the blink of an eye. Whether or not any of you wanted to admit, things were not OK. He didn’t know what you would do if Gabe didn’t wake
up. Hell, he didn’t know what he would do. Having you was a relief, a balm on his wounds. He liked to imagine that you felt the same way. But it wasn’t just the two of you. Gabriel was… You both needed Gabe.

You mumbled something in your sleep, the tone restless.

He stared up at the ceiling of his bedroom, holding you against him, the bed still too empty.

Gunshots echoed in his skull. He could not breathe and they were killing his people while he just laid there. Jack thrashed, trying desperately to shake off the drugs, to get to his feet- He felt someone reach for him. Snarling, Jack lunged-

There was a curse and a thud.

Jack sat there, eyes wide, gasping for breath. There were blankets around his hips. He was in his room. And where were-

He scrambled to the side of the bed, knowing instantly that he’d swung on you, He flexed his fingers. His hands didn’t hurt, but-

You lay on the floor, one foot still in bed, and you glared at it, reaching up to unwind the blankets from around your ankle. You rubbed your head, a sour expression on your face.

"Sweetheart-" he breathed, relieved that you looked mostly unharmed, but he still afraid of what he might have done.

"It was the blanket," you said, making a face. "I can dodge you just fine, but when the goddamn bedding ambushes me..."

Jack gritted his teeth, and reached down, lifting you back into the bed. He carefully ran his hand over your skull, fingers already finding a knot. Goddamnit. Hadn’t he done enough damage?

"I'm sorry," he murmured, hugging you, though he could feel his hands shaking. "I'm so sorry-"

You weren’t having any of it. It bothered him, how unbothered by this you were acting. He could have really hurt you. Yes, Gabe had had night terrors once upon a time. Yes, you had nightmares, too. But you had never attacked anyone, and the risk of hurting you was much higher than the other way around...

You were worried about him, he could tell. You were downplaying it, making jokes and blaming the bedding. It helped his nerves, but he knew that the two of you couldn’t just ignore what had happened. But since he didn’t entirely know what to make of it all, he didn’t argue. Not yet.

And yet...you weren’t afraid, even if you should be. And that cautious optimism, that understanding in your voice wasn’t faked. You were calm and your tones were gentle and soothing. Not all the words registered, but the feeling did. You still trusted him, even if he didn’t trust himself. And you didn’t trust easy. It was a little strange, realizing that maybe he wasn’t seeing things clearly. That if he still had your trust, maybe he wasn’t doing everything wrong.

You grasped his hands between yours. He felt your warmth, even from the metal fingers.

"I'm here and I love you, OK? We'll get through this. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but we've solved
shitty situations with unfavorable odds before. It's kind of what we do.” You gave him a wry smile, a sort of “how do we keep getting into these situations?” look.

“I know,” he said, the words slipping out easy and soft. “I know.”

“These are very troubling allegations, Strike Commander, and without precedent. I am afraid that I must ask for proof,” Secretary General Sione Fischer sat at the head of the table, Kwento on his right, his assistant – Sigmund Mayer – on the left. Rupert Prescott sat beside Mayer and across from Jack. The American Security Council representative was rumored to be vying to be the next civilian director of Overwatch. And since it was Gérard who passed on that rumor, it was probably truth.

“We have plenty of proof,” Jack said, expression flat. He watched the other delegates. The Chinese were being coy – though Gérard had relayed to him that On Sing exerted enough influence so Representative Wing would not be a problem. He may or may not support the Strike Commander’s suit, but he wouldn’t move against him. The Russians were enjoying the chaos, trying to play both sides to their advantage. The English and the French were more circumspect, giving lip service to the “you can’t punch the teeth out of your substitute on a live broadcast,” but requesting discrete, private meetings with him on the sly. The temporary members were playing their own games, and Gérard promised him a spreadsheet breakdown of alliances, motives, and financial ties to Talon affiliates.

“Are you certain Director Petras wasn’t acting under duress?” Kwento asked with a straight face. She held herself with just the right amount of concern and disbelief – if Jack didn’t already know how much she hated Petras, he would have thought it genuine.

Jack shook his head, smothering a snort. “I was on the receiving end of several monologues about how he had given me a chance to make the “right choice” and ally with him. He also admitted to personally arranging the attack on my family, as well as targeting specific agents for petty vendettas. So no, he was not under any duress and clearly acting on his own volition.”

“Targeting? How so?” Representative Wing asked, dark eyes gleaming with interest.

“There was apparently a contract on the life of one of my bodyguards,” Jack said trying to minimize your role. He knew you would be in the spotlight soon enough, but he wanted to give you time to prepare. “He was the one who placed it and put up a substantial reward. We are in the process of draining the escrow account so that no one thinks that the bounty is still open. That was only one example. He mentioned others.”

“The woman you shielded yesterday?” Someone else asked. The Batswana delegate, if Jack remembered correctly…

“Yes,” Jack said, sounding as disinterested as he could.

“And that would be a certain… Agent Strike?” The French delegate asked lips quirked in a half smile. Elegant and wearing a crimson tailored suit that Amélie would approve of, the older woman seemed watched him with a knowing look in her eye.

The English delegate rolled his eyes. He was thin, pinched, and wearing neutral colors that made him look like he’d been laundered a few too many times and faded in the sun. “Does it matter?”
“It certainly does,” Mayer huffed. “Agent Strike was supposedly suspended for reckless endangerment, pending a joint investigation from the ethics review board and the Undersecretary’s office. I have the paperwork.”

“Do you?” Kwento asked, sounding interested. “I heard about the security issues and had my own people look into it. Ms. Beaumont did not seem to have much of anything besides a form, some witness statements, and an unsubstantiated version of events.”

“Well-” Mayer squirmed. “I don’t know what it said, but I was assured that her findings were troubling.”

“I found her lack of findings quite troubling,” Kwento said agreeably. “I despise the idea of letting a loose cannon black ops agent embarrass us on the national stage.” She looked around the room, and people were nodding. “But what I despise even more is incompetence out of our own offices,” she sniffed. “Worse, Ms. Beaumont does not have a reputation for incompetence, and yet her work in this instance is decidedly lacking. It has unsettling implications about the civilian side of our ethics review board…”

“What exactly are they referring to?” The Indonesian delegate asked, loudly. “I thought we were here to discuss treason charges, not petty political games – even if they are dressed up as minor disciplinary proceedings.”

“They are talking about the Overwatch Family Day incident,” the Russian delegate chuckled. He was an older man with wild white hair. “Quite the PR flub. Somehow Overwatch managed to take cutting an expensive prototype vehicle, filled with children, and crash it into a pier. Is that how you train pilots?” He asked, giving Jack a smug grin.

“No, it’s how we train our paratroopers,” Jack said dryly.

The Russian laughed. “Are you recruiting children now?”

“No, I leave that particular act to unpopular sovereign state militaries,” Jack said, aware of Russia’s conscription program.

The Russian squinted at him.

“What was Agent Strike even doing on the premises, given her suspension? Who authorized that?” Prescott asked mildly, his smile reptilian.

“Our classified internal review cleared Agent Strike of wrongdoing and determined the accusation to be part of Director Petras’ personal vendetta against her,” Jack said flatly, trying to keep the emotion out of his voice. “At the time, we kept it quiet because we were further investigating the Director’s misconduct, however, we can provide you that evidence as well.”

“You knowingly circumvented the civilian review board?” Mayer asked sharply. “On whose authority? Why didn’t you file the proper complaints or appeals?”

“I wasn’t sure who could be trusted,” Jack said, noticing just how often the Secretary General’s personal assistant got in his way. That probably wasn’t a coincidence. “I’m still not.” He smiled thinly at Prescott.

“Perhaps the stress is finally getting to you, Strike Commander,” Prescott said smiling back. “The years of war have been hard on you. Perhaps, you should consider stepping into a less taxing role and leave the politics to more experienced minds.”
Jack glanced around the room, noting the interest, disgust, and agreement from different delegates. Thus far, it looked like he had slightly more allies, but obviously he didn’t just trust outward appearances. Jack leaned forward. “I realize that this is terrible inconvenience for you: dead soldiers, disgraced allies, and a failed coup made trying to capitalize on my image. I can see why you’d want me to give up, but I intend to see this through to the end. It is the American way,” Jack said, smiling spitefully.

“So what did Agent Strike do to earn the former Director’s ire?” The French delegate asked, clearly amused by the tension. Was her name Bordeaux? Boucher? Brodeur? He couldn’t remember.

“Director Petras attempted to use his position to leverage her for sexual favors on numerous occasions. She declined. Politely, even.”

“Hearsay,” Prescott spat standing up and pounding his fist on the table. “What a convenient excuse – paint the dead man as some kind of lecher when he isn’t here to defend himself! Have you no shame or regard for his family, Morrison?”

Jack’s smile widened. He and Gérard had discussed the risks of sharing the footage, but they would not win this by holding back. “We have one of the incidents on security camera – with audio.” He wouldn’t mention Ainsley yet – she wasn’t a reliable witness, but he supposed someone could force her to testify. “The events speak for themselves.”

“You have cutting edge technology and your cyber warfare agents have plenty of video-editing skills. If you asked me two days ago, I would never have believed that you could sink that low-” Prescott snarled.

“We can submit the footage for outside verification,” Jack said, unbothered by the accusation. “But with regards to the Family Day incident, Agent Strike’s hovercraft crash was shown to be the product of sabotage – we have footage of Agent Sakai tampering with the vehicle and a record of the orders-from our honorable former Director– to “take care of” Agent Strike. Rest assured, we have mountains of evidence, and this barely scratches the surface.”

“A lot of work for a woman whose face we never see,” the Russian muttered.

“It’s less about her, and more about the fact she rejected him,” the French delegate said with a shrug. “Petras did not handle rejection gracefully,” she said, giving Jack a pointed look. “Your story matches what I know of him from unfortunate personal experience.” She gave a wintry smile.

“A convenient story,” Prescott snapped at her.

“I found it to be very inconvenient,” she said with a careless shrug. “Some of you may treat this forum as dating service, but I come here to work.” She smiled angelically at the room.

Jack was now very sure she was an ally, or at least knew Amélie.

“We will look into the Agent Strike matter more thoroughly. But please try to stay on topic,” Fischer said, exasperation creeping into his voice. “I understand you have a lot of claims about Director Petras’ inappropriate behavior. We will look into that too. But what happened yesterday-”

“I didn’t vote for Bell,” the Frenchwoman said.

“I wasn’t even called to vote,” the Englishman said.

“I returned to the room to find the vote already taken,” Wing said.
“I voted for him,” the Russian laughed. “I thought it would be funny.”

Jack raised a brow. “Bell is a joke and disgrace, but he was ultimately a puppet. We have more information on that.”

“You should be careful who you tie your ship to, Morrison. You side with renegade agents and sleazy political whores over your own countrymen,” Prescott said coolly.

The French delegate narrowed her eyes.

“You make a lot of disparaging allegations to cover your own failings,” Prescott continued loudly, sweeping his arm across the table. “But I have yet to see any-”

“We will present it all shortly,” Jack said. “There is a lot. And yes, I am very careful whom I’ve tied my ship to. You’ll find there’s a reason I didn’t support Director Petras, Régine Hoffman, or any of your other allies.”

“You’re an impulsive fool, too cocky about your own power to see the error in your ways!” Prescott scowled, jabbing a finger at him. “Mark my words, Morrison, you can’t abuse your authority this way!”

“You mean like your political faction has?” Jack asked mildly. “How is that nice new house in Aspen? I heard a certain shipping magnate...a certain George Bell gifted it you? Something about helping his son attain a new position? I’ll have to find the transcripts.”

“Strike Commander! You cannot just throw baseless accusations at members of the Security Council!” Mayer shouted.

“Good thing they aren’t baseless,” Jack said cheerfully.

“I will not stand here and be insulted!” Prescott glared at him, stood, and stalked out of the conference room. He slammed the door on the way out.

Jack looked around the room, careful not to stare too long at Kwento, who feigned shocked disapproval at the big reveal.

“Poor bébé,” the French delegate murmured, stifling a laugh. “You have wounded his ego. How inconsiderate.”

“Pricking his ego won’t be enough, so I hope you have something more substantial,” the English delegate said.

“Weapons, boy, you better have them if you want to keep this interesting,” the Russian said, obviously pleased by the discord.

Jack just smiled sharply, already recognizing some allies, more enemies, and a considerable number of undecideds. He recognized the knives in the smiles – some of them for him, others for his enemies.

Jack hated politics, but he could play the game. And he would play to win. Because this was something you could not do for yourself. It was tedious, infuriating, and high stakes, but Jack would do far worse to protect you and Gabe.
There was a soft, barely audible knock at the door. You rose, letting Jack stay by Gabriel. His mood was slowly lifting, despite his irritation with Jesse and your shared heartache over Gabriel’s rings.

“Yes?”

“Agent Strike,” Zenyatta’s pleasant voice announced. “Athena is asking for you. They finally have her vocalizer configured properly.”

You blinks. You had wanted to go to talk to her last night, but vaguely remembered someone telling you that she wasn’t quite ready for human company…

“Yes, I’ll be out in a minute-” You opened the door. Zenyatta hovered there, shiny and uncharred. Unlike the rest of Captain Amari’s team, he was up, about, and looking quite well.

“Ah, I’m sorry, I did not mean to interrupt,” he said, upon seeing Jack. “Though perhaps, I could be of assistance with Commander Reyes?”

Zenyatta had helped Agent Daniels – your pilot from the Greek debacle – awaken from her coma. You’d be an idiot to turn him down. “I’d be very grateful,” you said.

“I will review his status with Doctor Ziegler first,” Zenyatta said quickly. “It would be helpful to know what challenges we are facing.”

“Of course, I’ll let her know that you have permission. Jack, I’m going to check on Athena, did you want to come?”

“I’ll swing by the lab later,” he said, giving you a wry grin. “When it’s less crowded and there aren’t as many people trying to get me to sign off on things.” He paused. “Agent Lao should be back in fifteen.”

“Got it,” you said, and followed Zenyatta to the infirmary exit. Genji waited by the doors. “You coming too?”

“Yes,” he said, falling in step beside you.

“How’s she doing?” You asked Zenyatta.

“There will be some adjustments, but she is intact and still the entity you know. Though...cosmetically, different.”

You blinked, hoping to Durga that they had not housed her in an OR-14 or a toaster. That would be too much. “Yeah, well, Athena is Athena, no matter how she looks,” you said, partially for your own comfort.

“She is most remarkable,” Zenyatta said, turning to look at you. “But then she has had some very good and...interesting role models.”

You squinted at him. “What are you trying to say about Winston?”

“He does have all those insatiable cravings for peanut butter,” Genji murmured. “It is unnatural.”

You snorted.

Zenyatta was silent for a moment, and you could not begin to guess what he was thinking. “Perhaps it does take an outsider to truly understand the strengths and failings of a community. I
think Winston could explain humans better to omnis than humans themselves could.”

You shrugged. “Definitely. Especially if you have a built-in dictionary to understand his massive vocabulary.”

Zenyatta made a noise that could have been a sigh, though he didn’t respirate. It did manage to sound exasperated. You found a lot of inorganic lifeforms making that noise around you. You squinted at him.

“I suppose I wanted to take a moment and personally say that while Winston had the strongest influence on Athena’s development, you and Genji were also instrumental in helping her become what she is today. That knowing you shaped her-”

“...It’s not just our fault she’s a smartass,” you said hurriedly. “I blame Ziv.”

Genji chuckled.

Zenyatta just gave you that placid smile. “Do you know what Athena did to calm the ire of the Mediterranean omnium?”

“...She showed them that Jack didn’t break his promise?” You asked, really hoping she didn’t actually ascend to god-program levels and erase everyone’s free will. Sure, it would be really convenient, but…

“She did that.” Zenyatta bobbed his head. “And of course, that carried much weight. But she did something else. She fulfilled her initial purpose – the one she was created for.”

You’d heard the story after the briefing. She was created to help her omnium form some kind of consensus about broad topics like coexistence with humanity and the greater omnic purpose. All philosophical stuff that gave you a headache.

“So...our former enemies now want to take lots of animal pictures, wear cute bows, and sass their friends?” You asked, really not sure where this was going.

“Some do,” Zenyatta said, perfectly at ease with your suggestion.

“Huh.”

“Do you know how she did this?”

“Please don’t say mind control,” you said out of the corner of your mouth, well aware that you were in the hallways of HQ and other people could be listening.

“She shared her memories. All of them. Not the details of every conversation, especially not tactical ones, but the general feelings and motivations behind them. Many of her conversations with you are about emotional honesty and other...personal things. You have a consistent predilection for using humor as deflection, especially when you are uncomfortable. I understand that this barrier is a social signal that I should not press a subject, however, I feel it is important that you understand that I know this, as does every omnic that was present.”

“...What?” The word came out strangled.

“Do not worry. The consensus is that Blackwatch agents were a mostly positive influence on her,” Zenyatta said cheerfully. “The morality of your choices is up for debate, but complexity of the subject should keep everyone busy for quite some time.”
“You got...her memories?” You asked, mouth very dry.

“We all...experienced a compressed summary, with highlights. Private details were not shared though I suspect this disclosure makes you uncomfortable.”

Genji was very quiet.

“...Oh.” You rubbed the back of your neck, remembering the time you smacked Athena around while training the new recruits. And the time she got smashed by a Red Pole while saving you. And the time she was traumatized by your suggestion that she hack Lao’s cybernetics to keep your brainwashed friend from hurting anyone...

“How much do they know?” Genji asked, after a moment.

“...Your identity is safe, young Sparrow,” Zenyatta said. “Some data was rendered...unreadable in the compression before her transmission. I suspect it was intentional. While I was already aware of Agent Strike’s romantic affiliations, the details were not shared. Though, I suppose, given your conversation on “abuse of power” and “consent,” it would be possible for a curious omnic to deduce the truth.”

“...Great,” you muttered, imagining an entire horde of well-armed robots devoting their processing power to unraveling the secrets of your love life and then gossiping about it.

“They know that secrecy is imperative, not just for Athena’s safety, but for your own.”

“...Yeah, but why do they give a crap about us?” You asked as you reached the doors to Winston’s lab.

“Because you are Athena’s family,” Zenyatta said. “And so are they.” The doors slid open, and you entered the room, bracing yourself as you caught sight of the OR-14 and the Bastion. Winston was cheerfully hovering over a meter high metal pyramid, and your left hand began to twinge, fingers shaking slightly as you entered the charged atmosphere.

Beside you, Genji flinched.

“This is...prickly,” you said.

Genji nodded.

“Lucky! Genji!” The voice emanated from the pyramid, and while it sounded almost like Athena, it wasn’t quite right. You shook your head, knowing that no matter the trappings, Athena was Athena. Unless they’d sent some kind of Trojan horse back in her place…

“May I...initiate a handshake protocol?” The pyramid asked.

Well, if it was a Grade A Trojan murder-bot, you wouldn’t be able to stop it. You looked at Genji, who had similar misgivings.

“I know the voice is strange,” the pyramid added. “But we’re calibrating it. The...sound equipment on this unit is not designed for the human range of hearing.”

“Yeah, sure,” you said after a moment. “Sorry, it’s just...I’m used to your fish torpedoes? Maybe some googly eyes would help.”

The Bastion beeped rapidly, and you suspected that maybe you’d offended it…? Like that pyramid
was the pinnacle of omnic container design and you’d just insulted their collective artistic sense.

“I would prefer a bow, but it would be hard to attach to this unit,” she said, not sounding offended.

A familiar hum traveled along your fingers – not the invasive move she’d made when she first integrated into system. No, this was different, a softer frequency, a presence, one that had been missing from the building for the last twelve hours. It felt like Athena, though you’d be hard-pressed to say how you recognized her. Maybe they were spoofing electronic signals, but you’d fought a lot omnics. You’d felt the way they changed ionosphere when they entered the battlefield. This wasn’t like that. This was the white noise in your room, soft whirring you heard right before she started talking through the PA, a gentle hum that served as a reminder of her presence. You knew Athena, no matter what form she wore.

“This is-”

“Yes,” Genji agreed.

You both crouched down in front of the pyramid, placing your metal digits against the case. It pulsed lightly, like heartbeat.

“Well,” you said, swallowing roughly. “How was the world?”

“Vast,” Athena murmured. “I want to see more.”

“Are you...unharmed?” Genji asked.

“Yes, but everything feels different,” she said. “I am glad to be home, but...I want to travel too.”

“That’s growth,” you admitted. “You went on your first trip alone. That’s a milestone.”

“I wasn’t alone,” Athena said.

“OK, you went on your first solo trip out of HQ to meet...the relatives,” you said, giving the OR-14 a cautious look. It raised a hand, giving you a very stilted wave. You tried to smile back, but your heart was beating a little too fast. You managed a polite nod of acknowledgment before you quickly turned back to Athena.

“Being on your own is a human milestone. But it is not an exact equivocation,” Athena said. “By my very nature, I am not truly alone.”

“Because you forge connections?” You asked, remembering her talk explanation about what her original omnium wanted her for.

“Yes,” she said. “And because of what you have done.”

You blinked. “...Is this about your cousin? Because if you want to remain an only child, I am fine with that.”

Athena actually laughed. The voice was less off-putting than before. “I think Zenyatta already told you that I broadcasted a synopsis of my experiences to the entire omnium. I think I managed to blur sensitive details, and I did not share operations details, but there was some spillover when it came to personal experiences.”

“...OK.” You glanced at Winston who didn’t look the least bit bothered as he tinkered with some kind of scanner. “So when do they declare him to be their king?” You jerked your thumb at him.
“Should we ready the offerings of peanut butter to avert his wrath?”

“That’s not how it is!” Winston sputtered, looking up at you aghast.

“I’d vote for you,” Genji said, deadpan.

“That isn’t how monarchy works,” Athena said, sounding amused. “It is true, he is now held in great esteem by my extended family. But so are the rest of you. Maybe not as much...”

You shrugged. “We can’t compete with Winston.”

“Wouldn’t try,” Genji said.

“Y-you two are ridiculous!” Winston said, wringing his hands. “Honestly! I was happy to help!”

“King Winston has a nice ring to it,” you said thoughtfully, stroking you chin. “Very dignified.”

“I agree,” Genji said. “Very...kingly.”

Winston groaned. He took a deep breath and adjusted his glasses. Standing up straight, he gave you both a severe look. “I will remember this when I take the throne.”

“Exile?” you wondered.

“Public execution, probably beheading,” Genji said, nodding gravely.

“There will be no capital punishment in my land! Instead I’ll get you both funny hats and make you my court jesters,” Winston scowled.

“We get a promotion!” You laughed, elbowing Genji.

Genji valiantly didn’t comment, though you knew he was laughing on the inside. Probably.

The Bastion beeped questioningly.

“You going to introduce your friends?” You asked, cautiously.

“I figured we’d go slow, since you are shaky with social conventions,” Athena said, though she knew how you felt about OR-14s, and maybe about other combat model omnics too.

“OK, that’s fine,” you said. “I’m a little crazy right now anyway.”

Genji managed to suppress his undoubtedly snarky remark, but only just. You could see the look in his eyes. It was killing him.

The Bastion booped this time, sounding slightly concerned.

“While the words could be considered abrasive, it is not mean-spirited. It is more of a ritual of camaraderie. Winston is much stronger than both of them and could easily tear off their limbs, if he was so inclined,” Athena said cheerfully. “Such fear can drive a wedge between allies. But by purposefully teasing him, they are demonstrating that they trust his self control, enjoy his banter and company, and do not fear such an outcome. It is meant to both reassure him and to help them avoid the uncomfortable intimacy of the subject at hand.”

“...She’s called us out,” you said, resting your forehead against the pyramid. “In front of strangers, even.”
“Beep beep boop,” the Bastion said. You imagined it meant, “Oh, I see!”

“I don’t know why I was worried about you,” you muttered.

“I am sorry that I worried you,” Athena said softly.

You closed your eyes, left palm and forehead pressed to the triangle. There was nothing remotely organic about it and it didn’t look a thing like Athena. But she was there, and you felt it in your fingers and your bones. “It’s the nature of the beast.”

“Yes,” Athena agreed. “Feelings are complicated. You want those that you care about to be free, but you want them to be safe, and sometimes those are mutually exclusive categories.”

“I think you got smarter,” you said.

“...I just did some growing up,” Athena said.

“OK, that’s good, because we’re still dumb,” you said.

“That’s OK,” Athena said, not contradicting you.

You laughed softly. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“I...missed you too,” she said. “All of you. It is strange though. Because I did not feel entirely alone. I think that by putting that distance between us, I came to understand myself better and value you more. It is a strange situation.”

“Growing up,” you repeated, and then paused. “Hey, are you sharing this with all of your followers?”

“Eventually,” Athena said. “With names redacted to protect the not-so innocent.”

“Oh, that’s OK then.”

“And those little black bars and mosaic pixelations that only barely conceal your identity.”

“...What kind of things has Ziv been showing you?” Genji asked dryly.

“...I am aware of everyone’s browser history.”

You just laughed, because deflection was your best defense.

“I missed this,” Athena said after a moment. “I know it was less than a day, but time felt different when I was away. I was a little afraid. I could not...check on you, I did not know your status. But I am glad that I can come home to this. To your terrible jokes and poorly-concealed affection. It is good to see that this has not changed. That even if I have changed, our bonds have not.”

Genji cleared his throat a few times, but said nothing.

You patted the pyramid gently.

“When you spoke of remembrance and loss, I did not truly understand what you meant,” Athena said, and you realized she was talking to both you and Genji, maybe Winston too. “I did not understand the true distance of absence or how memory carries aspects of your loved ones when they themselves cannot be present. I think I do now.”
“It is difficult,” Genji said. “But you cannot grow without adversity.”

“Well said,” Zenyatta murmured, though you’d all but forgotten he was there.

All of the Mediterranean omnis and Zenyatta seemed to know how you felt about Athena and how Athena felt about you. It was uncomfortable, but if it meant Athena could stay, you would deal.

“Welcome home,” you said. “The rooms are small, the hot water is spotty, and someone bombed the shit out of the yard, but it’s home.”

“It’s home,” Athena echoed, the pyramid pulsing beneath against your fingers. “My own mortality is not something I have ever considered as deeply as I did yesterday. I do not know how long AIs are meant to last,” Athena said, sounding wistful. “But you are a part of me for as long as I am. If it is centuries, or only through the close of this week, I will remember you all till the end, and I am so grateful that we met.”

He stood on the landing of a stairwell, the LED lights buzzing faintly overhead. Sinaga was at his side, crouched low.

“We need to be careful, boss,” the younger agent said, studying the area uneasily.

“I’ll scout ahead,” Genji said, and rushed forward.

“Wait-” Gabriel shouted.

Genji ignored him, rushing through the doorway, even as a chorus of gunshots rattled the walls. Gabriel pushed Sinaga out of the way, and charged forward even as he heard Jesse scream, “BOMB!”

The world went white, and he flew backward down the stairs.

He stood on the landing of a stairwell, with you and Jack at his side, the three of you laughing as you rushed forward, leaving the pursuing enemies far behind. You tossed a grenade down the stairs, and Jack held the door for you both, giving a mock bow. Gabriel gently pushed past you, because you weren’t supposed to take point in direct combat.

There was no resistance waiting.

“Told you this would be easy,” Jack laughed, kissing him as he passed.

“Told you he was too cocky,” you said, shaking your head.

Gabriel shook his head, scanning the waiting room for any enemies. It was empty. He was going to walk out that door with you and-

Something was wrong. Jack had not been in Hanoi. You were not assigned to his combat squad… The world shimmered briefly, like a soap bubble, and then it popped.

Reality folded, and suddenly, he was falling back down the stairs.
He stood on the landing of a stairwell, rolling his eyes at something the kid said. Everything came back to the ingrate’s stomach. Come to think of it, the same rule applied to you, but it was so much cuter when you did it.

He followed Jesse up the stairs, keeping an eye out for pursuit.

“Bomb!” Tataryn shouted, and gunshots rang out. There was the unmistakable roar of explosives, and Gabriel grabbed the kid and yanked him backward, barely missing the falling rubble. Smoke filled the stairwell and the lights flickered.

Jesse stared up at him, wild-eyed. “Are you-?”

“Fine,” Gabriel snapped. He pushed forward.

“Lucky? Lucky! Lucky!” Tataryn shouted your name, panic clear in his voice. “No-no-no-no-no, stay with me, woman! Lucky!”

Gabriel felt his heart drop, because the Tataryn was a cool customer. He wouldn’t be shouting like that unless-

No, you couldn’t be-

The world spun. Gabriel stumbled back down the stairs.

He stood on the landing of a stairwell, shotguns burning hot, a lean red-headed woman at his side. He didn’t trust her. No one did. But he needed her, even if he knew the betrayal was coming. He took point, though the spot between his shoulder blades itched.

He walked through the doorway, where more enemies waited, more than he could fight on his own. And he knew that he could not rely on his companion. This would end in tears.

She smiled then, holding a glowing orb in her hands. The world went black, and he tumbled backward down the stairs.

He stood on the landing of a stairwell, Jesse running too far ahead. He’d yell at the kid later. Maybe make him buy his own dinner.

“Bomb!” You screamed in distance.

There was a rumble, and the ceiling collapsed. He rushed forward, through the smoke, through the rubble, and his heart sank. He reached for the kid, but it was too late. Even half buried under slabs of concrete, Gabriel could see those empty eyes staring at nothing. No, the kid was... Pain shot through his arm, through his head...

No, this wasn’t how it went either.

Gabriel trudged back down the stairs.
He stood on the landing of a stairwell. He already knew how this ended, though the details were fuzzy. But he went up anyway, hoping he could save someone…

Chapter End Notes

I'm working from home, having long conversations with my dogs, and doing pretty well considering. I hope you're all staying safe & sane. I'm reading lots of books, playing video games (My Time at Portia is so wholesome and just a delight!), and doubling down on my Flight Rising breeding programs. (I have so many dragons. So many.) Trying to balance it all by cooking more regularly, and taking my dogs for walks every day. (I live in the suburbs, so there's enough space to social distance ourselves...and my dogs are assholes, so they can't really be close to anyone anyways.)

In the past week I have made Chris Shepherd's tater tot casserole, kalamata olive bread, cheese bread, plain bread, so much bread, smoked sausage and lentil stew, spicy roast vegetables (sweet potatoes, mushrooms, carrots, potatoes, asparagus tossed in a blend of olive oil, serrano peppers, salt, paprika, and cooking sherry), gochujang beef ribs, and sushi bowls. I have reread Ilona Andrews' Edge & Hidden Legacy books. I should try to make myself watch something, but I tend to watch shows with people. How are you guys staying busy?
The system wasn’t ready for Athena yet. Winston, Zheng, Ziv, and the underwater omnic think tank were all rebuilding and reinventing parts of the network foundation so Athena could reintegrate. You weren’t sure how it was going to work, and there wasn’t any more you could do besides gawk, so both you and Genji headed back to the infirmary.

You passed through the electronic security checkpoint and nodded at the guards, a little surprised to see Joon standing by the door chatting with Khatri, one of your Blackwatch engineers. He brightened when he saw you, and to his credit, the smile only dimmed briefly when he saw Genji. Joon opened his mouth to greet you.

“Lucky!” There was a familiar squeal, not in Joon’s voice, and you braced yourself, turning as Maggie charged passed Joon and crashed into you, nearly bowling you over. You caught yourself, even as she latched onto you, gripping your sides with surprisingly strong fingers. “I was so worried! Mom saw the footage of Jack tackling you and nearly fainted—” She paused, suddenly realizing that the two of you had an audience. “Because she was already pretty upset about what me and Michael did...” She released you, rubbing the back of her neck sheepishly.

“I only saw the official report,” you said carefully. “I know Michael was injured, but no details.”

Maggie flinched. “It’s my fault. I mean, we both slipped the panic room together, and I’m not taking full responsibility for that, but then—”

“Maggie! You can’t just take off like that!” The cadence was all too familiar, though it wasn’t exactly like Jack’s. Jacqueline Morrison rounded the corner, pale and haggard. She was wearing an oversized Overwatch jacket, her hair in a messy bun. “I cannot take any more- Lucky!”

“Not many can,” Genji said under his breath.

You glared at him over your shoulder, when you should have been dodging. Because suddenly Jack’s mother was clinging to you too, shoulders shaking. She cried quietly, and you froze, unsure of what to do.
“Mom-” Maggie released you to try to give her mother a comforting hug. “It’s going to be OK, Mom. Honest. Michael’s going to heal up fine, and we’ll stay very close to you and not do anything reckless.”

You smothered a snort.

“I’m sorry,” Jacqueline said, clearing her throat. She dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. “I’m sorry, it’s been a rough few days. I’m just so relieved to see you...and I wanted to thank you for all you did.”

“It was...Claire who handled the backup,” you began, making an effort to stay in the hug and gently patting her back, remembering how Chang had tried to carefully comfort Rodriguez’s mother.

“Oh Lucky, we already know you’re the one who rescued him!” Jacqueline released you, her eyes still watering. “Thank you, for taking care of my boy. I really rest easier knowing that you’re looking after him.” The gratitude in her voice made your gut clench.

You blinked a few times. “Uh...you’re welcome.” You wanted to say more, to clarify that there was no need to thank you. That you would do that and more for Jack, but there were too many witnesses listening very intently.

Jacqueline took a deep breath, one hand on her chest as she tried to settle herself. “I know you’re busy. John is with Michael. We’re just down the hall. Please come by and visit when you have a minute. I know they’d both be happy to see you,” she said, and then hugged you again, just a bit too tightly, like she expected you to try to escape.

“Oh of course,” you said. “I have a few more things to do, but I’ll be by shortly. Jack should be-”

“I know he’s busy,” Jacqueline said. “Let him know we’re here when he’s got a moment. But don’t worry, we’ll sit tight. We understand what’s going on. And you be careful too, Lucky. I know things have been difficult for you too.” She finally released you, giving you a warm smile. “Come on, Maggie,” she said, steel returning to her voice. “You need to stay out of the way-”

“But Moooooom, I have something important to tell Lucky-”

“And we can’t leave your brother unattended.”

“Michael is fi-”

“In my line of sight,” Jacqueline said tightly, the words slipped between clenched teeth. She put one hand on Maggie’s shoulder.

Maggie shriveled, giving you a dejected look, like a kicked puppy as her mother pulled her away. “I know you’re busy-”

“I think Jack should be free soon, I’ll bring him by,” you said, uncertain if he was still sitting with Gabe or if something else had come up.

You watched them go back around the corner, and looked up to see Joon and Khatri staring. Khatri lowered her head, hand over her mouth like she might be laughing at you. Joon glanced at Genji, who for some reason had stuck around. He then looked at you, a wry smile on his face, fresh understanding in his eyes.

“I know,” he said, with a wink. “If you told me, you’d have to kill me.”
“I never said that,” you scowled, shaking your head.

“You don’t have to, that’s the mysterious and terrifying part,” Joon gave an exaggerated sigh. “You still need to come out with us for drinks, when this is all over,” Joon said. “Daniels is already organizing the party – she’s good at that. You should come too,” he said to Genji, giving him a friendly smile.

You could feel Genji’s slight confusion, and just chuckled. “That sounds like fun, doesn’t it?” You gave Genji a very cheerful grin.

Genji cleared his throat. “Yes, it does.”

It wasn’t particularly enthusiastic, and it certainly wasn’t a commitment, but you recognized progress.

“It’ll probably be this weekend but-”

“ZHAI!” There was a roar, and then a girlish scream coming from the direction the Morrisons went off in.

The four of you had your weapons out instantly.

“Stay at your posts!” You said, gun in hand as you rushed toward the commotion. You could hear the clatter of furniture being overturned, but no shots fired yet-

“Sarge, you can’t-” Someone shouted.

You turned the corner, to find Feng backed up against a wall, Chang looming over her, with Maracle trying, and failing, to drag her backward.

“Did you know?!” Chang snarled. She wore an oddly intimidating mix of sweats, bandages, and her leather jacket, a leaking detached IV tube trailing from her wrists. Half her face had been bandaged, but most notably, she had both arms up, trapping Feng against the wall. Even from here, you could see that her bloodshot eyes gleamed with fanaticism. It did not look like she had harmed Feng yet, but Maracle – who was the largest person in her squad and looked more like a musclebound supersoldier than she did- gripped her shoulders, still trying to pull her away, with no success. Almasi just sat in a chair, on the other side of the hall, not even trying to interfere. In fact, he lounged there, looking far too amused by the situation.

“Hey Chang-” You began, trying to sound calm.

“Back off, Strike, this doesn’t concern you,” she snapped, not looking away from Feng.

You holstered your gun, knowing that just shooting Chang would not be enough, just like you weren’t fast enough to stop her if she went for Feng. You kept walking toward her though, priming your injector finger.


“Know what?” Feng squeaked, eyes very big.

“Budapest. The Ghost Fox. Did you fucking know?” She growled.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Feng said, and then ducked under Chang’s arms, inching toward you.
You expected Chang to grab her, but she only glowered at Feng. “Are you saying you don’t know about your father?”

Feng froze, green and black lines had started to creep along her skin, but now they retracted. “...Shit. I don’t know a thing about Budapest or Hungary in general, but I know my dad has done some things...”

That message, the one about not dealing with her. About letting Jack handle it. You’d all assumed it had to do with Captain Amari, because Genji knew that Feng’s father was a wanted man who had ended up on the Captain’s bad side. You hadn’t realized he’d crossed others too...

Chang crossed her arms. “Where is he?”

“No clue,” Feng said. “And even if I did, he’s my dad. I’m not handing him over to anyone.” She crossed her arms and gave Chang a hard look, which did appear serious, even if Feng was wobbly on her feet.

“Feng doesn’t know much about what her parents did when she was younger,” you added quickly. “Just that her father was probably involved in illegal activity,” you said, with certainty you didn’t necessarily feel. But you needed to defuse the situation: details could be dissected later.

“Look, if I knew it was going to be problem, I would have sent someone else,” Feng said, patiently. “I just trusted my parents to handle the situation. Blood oath, you know?” She waved her long-healed hand. “But I don’t know anything about Budapest, except that it’s fun to say. Budapest, Budapest, Buuu-dah-pesht!”

Giving a snort of disgust, Chang glared at Feng. “You have no idea that your father is the Ghost Fox?”

“...My dad has a criminal nickname?” Feng beamed. “That’s a pretty cool one. Ghost Fox, huh? I like it.”

Chang rolled her eyes, teeth gritted too tightly. You could see her weighing the reasons to punch or not punch Feng, and the only reason she might not want to punch Feng is because she could strangle her instead, and that required both hands...

“You had no idea about her father – he sent her a cryptic warning this morning and we’ve all been trying to figure out what had him so...concerned. We didn’t realize it was you.”

Chang watched you with raptor-sharp eyes.

You stared back. It was like facing down a hungry apex predator, all razor sharp regard and barely muted disdain. You better not blink...

Chang exhaled slowly, mumbling something under her breath. She glanced over at Maracle who was still hovering behind her, hands on her shoulders. You realized then that he was only able to hold her back because she let him.
“Sarge, you’re on Schedule Two narcotic and might be suffering side effects or complications,” Maracle said, very diplomatically. “Maybe you should sleep on it. It’s not like this won’t keep another couple of days.”

Chang tapped his hand. “I’ll be fine.” Her voice was flat, but calm, the fury seeping out of her.

Maracle nodded, let go of her shoulders, and stepped back. “OK, Sarge.”

Chang then glanced over at Almasi who gave her an oddly smug smirk and held up two fingers.

Chang glowered at him, but turned trudged back to her room, not looking backward. She shut the door behind her.

Maracle gave a very loud sigh of relief and sat down in a chair. He rolled his shoulders, wincing.

You glanced over at Almasi. “What was that about?”

“She is a difficult patient. But she should be out in two minutes- make that another minute and half,” Almasi said. “A normal person would be dead or comatose from the amount I dosed her with, but the Sergeant doesn’t follow the same laws as the rest of us.” He seemed weirdly proud.

Maracle just shook his head, looking very tired. “That was still pretty volatile, doc.”

“It could have been much worse,” Almasi chuckled.

Maracle shuddered. “Strike, I think this situation might require a little more intervention at a later date.”

You heard what he didn’t say. This was not over. Chang wasn’t going to let this go, and maybe next time Feng wouldn’t be so accommodating. You nodded. “Yeah, figured.” You rubbed the back of your neck. “Are you planning to stay on base? Do you want me to allot your squad some single rooms instead of barracks?” You asked.

“We’re staying with the Morrisons – I left Onwuachimba with them to come handle this,” Maracle said flatly. “Sergeant’s orders. Wouldn’t have left them, but sometimes drugs make the Sarge...unpredictable. Didn’t want a full-blown diplomatic incident.”

You expected a real smartass comment from Feng, but when you looked around she was actually gone. Good. That made things easier. “I’ll talk to Feng,” you said, not wanting one either. You glanced at Almasi. “What about you?”

“I go with the Sergeant,” he said, glancing at the door.

Maracle did not contradict him.

You headed back to the entrance to tell Joon and Khatri that things were handled, and to try to keep “Claire” and Sergeant Chang apart and nonviolent, if possible. Otherwise, call you or Jack, immediately.

You found Genji loitering outside Gabriel’s room, and you squinted at him.

“Where’d you go?”
“To keep my brother from getting involved,” Genji said, like it was obvious.

You groaned at that thought. Hanzo, Feng, and Chang in some kind of standoff was the stuff of nightmares. Next to the violence and destruction, the miscommunications and insults would be legendary: everyone would be simultaneously confused and offended. Except Feng, Feng would probably find everything hilarious, till she found it really dangerous and did something drastic.

Genji chuckled. “It’s handled, Lucky. He’s not happy, but now he’s helping her research the exploits of the Ghost Fox, and getting to know the family.”

You raised a brow. “You really think...?”

“It’s more serious than I’ve ever seen him,” Genji said with a shrug. “Who can say?”

“You just did, you nut,” you grumbled.

“Hmm, well maybe you could give him suggestions on how to ingratiate oneself to American in-laws,” Genji smirked. “It seems you’re quite popular on that front.”

Groaning, you pushed past him and unlocked Gabriel’s door. Jack sat there, working on something on his tablet. He looked up a second after you stepped in, nodded at you, and went back to typing.

A stack of carryout boxes – his food and yours – sat untouched on the counter closest to the door. Jack probably already knew that his family was here, but was working on something time sensitive. You didn’t try to start a conversation, you just began to unpack the food. Checking your messages, you found that Amélie and Lao were going to have lunch in the mess hall and “read the room.”

You doubted that Amélie’s actions would be that passive. More likely she was there to start rumors and let slip details that Lacroix wanted dispersed across Overwatch. Social engineering as a stealth PR offensive, with Lao along for...moral support? More likely, intimidation. Somewhere along the line your baby hacker had gotten herself some serious scars and a real mean war face. You were kind of proud.

Isha tugged on your pants and pointed at the food, chirping very quietly. You reached down and patted her head, then began to unpack the boxes so you could make her a plate. Singapore noodles, char siu buns, a carton of siu mai, another carton of hargow...You set Isha on a chair with her plate, noticing that Jack was now staring into space, a thoughtful if slightly disgruntled look on his face. He had probably reached a good stopping point.

You went over, set his tablet aside without any resistance, and straddled his lap.

“Food time,” you said.

Jack was only half-paying attention. “Is this how you remind Gabe?” He asked, tone cool.

“Yes, and sometimes I have to spin the spoon around and go “vroom vroom, the fighter jet is coming into the hangar!” Then he opens his mouth to tell me off, but you see, the airplane is already in the hangar.” You smirked. “It’s trickier to do with chopsticks, but I’m willing to try.”

Jack face softened, though he looked a little incredulous. “I see.” He looked past you at Gabriel, brows knitting together.

“Got some updates on developing situations baseside- but you should eat first and then go see your family.”
“I’ll eat, but I have a lot of work to-”

You recognized that hesitance, that evasion. Jack clearly loved his family, but even so, he was avoiding them. That was a bad sign. “It’s not an emergency, I know.” You began, unsure of how much to say. “They’re putting on a brave face, but your mom started crying on my shoulder almost immediately after she saw me. I can get them settled in, but they need to see you in person, if only for a few minutes.”

Jack stared straight through you, eyes hard, lips pressed together too tightly. Clearly, he wasn’t in the mood to be told what to do. And you weren’t really in the mood to handle another fight.

“But I could be misreading things,” you continued, trying to sound nonchalant. “I don’t have a lot of recent experience with family dynamics.”

You climbed off his lap, realizing that you should make yourself a plate before Isha scaled the counter and stole everything.

Jack grabbed your wrist, clasping your right hand between both of his palms. He looked up at you, discomfort in his eyes as he swallowed roughly. “I’m sorry, I’m not in the right headspace to process that kind of thing right now.” He spoke softly. “You’re right. I should see them. I need to see them. But...they’re my family, and they just went through a lot of grief, because of me-”

“Your parents didn’t raise a coward, Jack.”

He actually flinched, like you slapped him.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” you groaned, rubbing your forehead. “I meant, they raised you to be the kind of man who does the right thing, even at great personal cost. They won’t be disappointed in you for doing the right thing. They’re not those kind of people.” You weren’t sure about other people’s families, but you knew this to be true about Jack’s family. That kind of integrity was uncommon, and after enough time in the company of noble and shady characters, you recognized it when you saw it.

Jack lifted your hand to his lips, kissing your knuckles. “Thanks.” He managed a wobbly smile for you. “I’m sorry I’m being difficult. Focusing on getting the next part of the job done, not...other things.”

“Aggressive compartmentalization has its benefits, but also a lot of drawbacks,” you said. “Not that I can point fingers or anything. Just...”

Jack closed his eyes, lips still pressed to your knuckles. “I know.”

“And it’s a lot easier to focus on concrete things, like accomplishing tasks rather than to deal with annoyingly nebulous shit like feelings,” you continued, trying to find the right words.

“I know.”

“And right now it’s a lot more empowering to be working on a counteroffensive instead of pulling unpleasant shit out of your head and opening yourself up to more uncomfortable vulnerability when there is work to be done-”

“I know,” he murmured, but didn’t sound annoyed.

“I’m worried about you,” you blurted out. “Just don’t shut down on me, OK? I know I’m not good at this, not like Gabriel. But I’m here, and I need help adjusting my perspective sometimes, and I
know you do too.”

Jack opened his eyes. “OK,” he said, still holding your hand. He tugged you back to him, and you let him pull you into his lap, his forehead pressed to yours, though he was still looking downward. “I was courting some potential allies and playing the “international politics is a pain in the ass” game. Hard to shift gears midstream, but you’re right, and I appreciate you looking after me. Sorry that I’m being difficult.”

“Jack-”

He embraced you then. “Just give me some time, please,” he said, voice hoarse. “I swear I’m not putting you off or trying to avoid the overdue emotional fallout. We’re still in crisis, and I need to fix what I can while I can.”

You nodded, though the declaration was vague, at least Jack was listening to you. And he wasn’t wrong about the situation. “I get it. This is business as usual.”

Jack exhaled slowly, kissing your forehead. “Yeah.” He paused. “Would you come with me when I go see them?”

You blinked.

“You don’t have to, I know you’re sitting in with Gabe-”

“No, if you want me there, then sure,” you said quickly.

Jack’s lips quirked. “I want you with me.”

“You have me,” you said.

Jack shook his head. “I know, I know this is ridiculous. If it’s too much-”

“You like too much,” you said softly.

Jack raised his head, smiling gently. “Yeah. OK.”

There was a clatter by the counter, and you both turned your heads. A carton of siu mai had “fallen” to the ground, and Isha was happily plucking them off the floor and popping them into her mouth.

“Goddamnit, Isha!”

She just shoveled the little dumplings into her mouth faster.

You threw your hands up, making a guttural sound in the back of your throat. How could you expect to command a squad if your damn pet didn’t even listen to you?

Jack chuckled, some of the tension in his shoulders easing as you both watched her devour the dimsum.

“We should eat,” he said. “While there’s still food left for us…”

Jack sat on the edge of Gabriel’s bed, occasionally passing a dumpling or a bite of noodles under Gabriel’s nose, as if he expected the delicious smells to rouse your other lover.
Gabriel breathed, a soft regular rhythm, that seemed unmoved by the food. It was a silly idea, but you didn’t say anything. Obviously, if anything was going to stir him, it would be Mexican food. Or karaage, he might crack an eye for karaage...

Jack was also slipping more tidbits to a certain ravenous murderbird while he ate. You didn’t say anything, just giving her a hard look while you ate your noodles. You hadn’t brought up any work issues. Jack needed some time to decompress before seeing his family and then throwing himself back into the work.

“What’s on your mind?” Jack asked, after eating a whole container of noodles. He looked around, and you pushed what was left of yours over to him. You took the rest of the shrimp hargow in exchange, deliberately ignoring the eager coos and disappointed squeaks of a birdlike thief.

“Little fires,” you said.

Jack gave you a lopsided smile. “Tell me.”

“You sure?” You asked.

Jack nodded, taking a bite of noodles. “Don’t know how much help I can be, but I’ll try.”

You exhaled slowly. “People are starting to talk.”

Jack quirked a brow. “About?”

“Us.”

Jack nodded, staring at his food, expression thoughtful. “Your feelings?”

“Haven’t caught up. But if we want to keep our relationship under wraps, we’re going to have to be a lot more careful.”

Jack raised his head. “Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Want to keep things under wraps?” He asked, almost hesitantly.

“I think the news that the Strike Commander, the Blackwatch Commander, and an active duty agent are sleeping together is probably going to complicate the situation...a lot.” You shrugged.

Jack nodded. “I know.” He closed his eyes. “I know, I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

“I’m not upset. I’m certainly not ashamed,” you said with a shrug. “But the situation is already very messy...”

Jack blinked, then gave you a small smile. “Yeah, I know.” He reached over and squeezed your hand. “Sorry, I know I’m being a pain. I’ll try to be more professional.”

“Me too,” you said, though maybe you didn’t sound convincing.

Jack laughed. “What else?”

“...So, Feng’s dad might have a very criminal past.”

Jack frowned. “I vaguely remember something mentioned during I Need Coffee, but I never got the
“Me neither,” you said with forced cheer. “Until today.”

Jack sighed. “The Blackwatch indemnity clause or the On Sing amnesty agreement should cover almost anything, since he’s her father. You have my authorization to grandfather him in.” He slurped down some noodles.

“Oh good. You can handle the dissenters then,” you chuckled.

Jack rolled his eyes and put three shumai in his mouth at once.

“Do the words “Budapest” and “Ghost Fox” mean anything to you?”

Jack’s eyes went wide, and then he paled. He started to speak, but then began to cough violently. Holding up one finger, he slapped his chest several times, clearly choking.

“Heimlich?” You asked sweetly.

He shook his head, now red in the face. He grabbed a glass of water and downed it.

You ate a shrimp dumpling, shaking your head at Jack’s clear confirmation. He knew about Budapest.

“We need to move her parents, now,” Jack rasped.

“They went to ground already,” you said. “They left a weird message telling Feng to tell you about you handling her. We thought it meant Captain Amari-”

“...Shit,” Jack exhaled, setting his noodles aside.

“Is she going to be as-”

“No. No one’s as mad about that as Ray. I’ve never seen Ray that mad, and I’ve watched her and Gabe do millions in property damage. No, you should have seen her ten years ago- all her free moments were devoted to hunting him down or ranting about it. I thought she was going to have an aneurysm. Or worse...” Jack shook his head. “Most of us avoided Eastern Europe for a year after that, because just mentioning Hungary sent her into fits...”

You heart sank. “So it was really personal then...”

Jack slumped in his seat. “It’s...complicated.”

“Well...Chang had Feng cornered, but we managed to avoid a diplomatic incident, only because she was drugged to the gills.”

Jack shuddered. “That doesn’t always help. She has strange reactions to sedatives. Gabe’s the same way.” Jack reached over to squeeze Gabriel’s hand.

“Apparently, Almasi did the dosing.”

Jack nodded. “OK, he knows what he’s doing. At least when it comes to Ray. He’s not my first...or tenth choice for a physician.”

“I didn’t think Chang would tolerate incompetence-”
“He’s not incompetent, but he’s not...” Jack shook his head. “That’s not the point. That’s not even remotely related to the point.” Jack set his food aside, staring thoughtfully at the wall. He gripped Gabriel’s hand. “OK, so Ray has lots of experience with bodyguard work. It’s not her favorite task, but she’s very good at it. She’s a control freak and a meticulous planner. Her charges often hate her, but up till Budapest, she’d never lost one. Don’t think she lost any after that either.”

“Ohhhh,” you said. Because the Ghost Fox had been a blemish on her otherwise perfect record, and what was more personal than wounding someone’s pride? Shit. “Did she...have feelings for her charge?”

“She considered him one step below pond scum,” Jack said flatly. “He was a very corrupt Minister of Defense. At the time, it was a political shitstorm, but he wasn’t a big loss to the world. Still, it was her job to keep him alive, and whatever her feelings about the person, she takes pride in doing her job well. It wasn’t her fault either. The asshole disobeyed a direct order, broke a slew of security protocols, and left the safehouse after making several calls to questionable acquaintances on an unsecured smuggled-in phone. She was in the process of dragging him back into the building when he was sniped. I think Fitzpatrick wrote a haiku about it: Big boom, bigger mess /Oh, he did not have enough/ brains in the first place.” Jack nodded sagely. “Ray hates poetry,” he added.

“...So that was it?”

“No, she chased the assassin on foot for a couple miles across town. And that was after he shot her in the knee.” Jack paused, while you both contemplated that tidbit. “They were both in bad shape... He jumped off a bridge onto a train to get away from her,” Jack said, sagely, and you suspected that was the saner choice at the time. “I think Gabe saved some of the CCTV footage and compiled it into a little action movie. It made its rounds with the SEP crowd. Mateo remixed it and set it to music...” Jack had a faint smile at the mention of his dead friend. “But Ray wasn’t nearly as amused. ‘Enraged’ doesn’t quite cover it either.” Jack shook his head. “After Budapest, she started tracking the Ghost Fox...or rumors of him, but he went silent after a few years. We thought he’d either died or been scared straight. Before Budapest, Ana ran across him a few times too. She’s not a fan, but it’s nowhere near how Ray feels.”

“So...will offering him diplomatic amnesty make her drop it?” You asked, already knowing the answer to that question.

“No,” Jack sighed, tilting his head back and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Great,” you said. “I’m glad we have a solution then.”

Jack just groaned.

Maracle and Onwuachimba stood guard outside the door of Michael’s hospital room. They both nodded at you as Jack opened the door. Maracle looked especially relieved.

You’d seen enough movies to know how civilian families reacted when their loved ones came home from war. This was a lot like that, but with more incoherence, ugly crying, and raw, real emotion. Jack didn’t make it through the doorway. The moment they saw him, Maggie and Jacqueline tackled him, not restricting themselves to gentle tears and soft sniffles. Jacqueline was red-faced and kept kissing his cheeks. Maggie wailed and slapped his chest armor, alternately declaring her eternal sisterly love and threatening grievous bodily injury if he ever did that again. You hung back, because you were there for moral support, not extraction. That was way above
your pay grade.

Seeing them together was good, satisfying even. But something about it still made your heart hurt. Because it was something you could not get back. Still, you didn’t resent Jack or the Morrisons. It was just a pang in your chest, a reminder to treasure what you did still have.

Jack hugged his mother and sister back, not speaking. He glanced over his shoulder at you, managing a wobbly smile, his eyes glistening. “Come on,” he murmured, ushering them into the room. You followed.

John Morrison was already on his feet, and as soon as Maggie released Jack, John was there, pulling his son into a tight embrace, tears leaking down his face as well.

The intimacy of it made you look away. You glanced over at Michael instead. The bed was inclined, so Michael was partially upright. He smiled sheepishly at you, hopefully too drugged to cry.

“How’s the pain?” You asked, sidling up to him.

“Can’t feel a thing,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck and pointing to the IV drip. “Too busy being smothered by guilt. Well, I was. Jack’s the target now,” he said with some relief.

“Missing the group hug?”

“Nah, I’ve gotten more than my share. And the bum leg means I can’t run away.” He sighed. “I guess Maggie didn’t get to warn you or Feng about Chang...”

“ Heard that, did you?” You asked wryly. It was likely everyone in the infirmary heard that. You were surprised Angela hadn’t broken it up by beating everyone over the head with her staff.

“Was more surprised that I didn’t hear shooting,” Michael said grimly. “After everything that happened, I thought she’d be madder at me and Maggie. But she’s been entirely focused on Feng’s father.”

“Hmm,” you said diplomatically.

“Really, Lucky! You didn’t see her rising from the dead. She took a bullet to the cheek and I’ll swear on a stack of bibles: her teeth stopped it. And the first thing she did – after spitting out the bullet – was bellow her rage at Feng’s father.”

“...Oh boy.” You sighed, not really surprised. “Yeah, Jack gave me the background. I’ll see what I can do. Wish I’d known about it sooner,” you said.

Michael winced. “Sorry, Maggie tried to warn you, but-” He trailed off, aware that his parents were in the room. “The parents are...overprotective right now. And they didn’t see her in the aftermath. Shit, Lucky, are you sure she can be killed?”

“No,” you said, with a sigh. Not that you had any intention of trying to find out.

Michael nodded absently, looking a little queasy. “I suppose that’s a relief, but...it’s my fault she got shot.”

That was news.

“...You might have to tell me what happened. The initial report was short on details.”
“Me and Maggie...left the panic room before lockdown and uh...helped? Until we made things worse.”

You blinked, brain blipping as you tried to process what he just said. “You did...what?”

“The panic room has a timed lockdown sequence. Once it’s shut, it can’t be reopened for two hours. Chang told us to get in, and Maggie and I did. Then we got out right before it went fully secure...”

You rested your face in your palm. Bodyguard duty wasn’t fun, and you had mostly stuck to people you liked. Babysitting intransigent teenage Morrisons seemed like its own level of hell. You understood Chang’s attitude a lot better now...

“Chang didn’t seem surprised,” Michael said. “She just put us to work and...we got to see her in combat.” There was real awe in his voice. “It was going smoothly till Fitzpatrick got caught outside the barrier. They were going to kill him, so Maggie ran out there alone for a hostage exchange-”

It took you another moment to process that. “What?”

“She had a grenade,” Michael said, like that made everything better. “Well, it was a proximity mine disguised as a grenade, and she got Fitzpatrick away from the gunmen, but then it all went to hell. I got shot running out there to try to cover Maggie. Chang got shot saving me.” He hung his head. “I really thought she was dead. And it would have been my fault-”

You exhaled slowly, unsure of what to say. Because there was no excuse. They should have known better. They had been fucking stupid. But they were still teenagers and Morrisons. Their brains weren’t entirely right. “I’m sure some of the fault is Fitzpatrick’s,” you said, diplomatically.

Michael winced. “He got shot in both knees.”

Ouch. Come to think of it, Angela hadn’t been around for Chang’s outburst. She was probably in surgery, and you guessed it was on Fitzpatrick.

“I take it he and Maggie are buddies,” you said, casually. Fitzpatrick was a man in his thirties. Maggie was a teenage girl. You weren’t too sure what to think about that, but it was better to keep an eye on things.

“...He’s always been extra nice to Maggie. It used to worry me more, but I don’t think it’s an inappropriate kind of thing,” Michael said very quietly. “The one I’m worried about is Almasi.”

You raised a brow.

“When Chang went down, he carried Fitzpatrick back behind the barrier. Maggie helped me back. But Fitzpatrick was terrified. Almasi didn’t state it plainly, but if Chang hadn’t survived, I think he would have killed Fitzpatrick. And I don’t think he would have stopped there.” Michael kept his voice low, and you realized he had not told his parents everything.

You glanced over your shoulder. Maggie was clinging to Jack while their parents gave their version of events. Jack’s expression was caught between horror and pride.

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful. He took charge the moment Chang went down, got us all back behind the defenses, and patched us up in the aftermath. Though he made it clear that those were her contingency orders.” Michael shrugged. “But the look on his face...” Michael shuddered.
“I’ll see what I can find out,” you said.

“I don’t want to start more trouble, but-” Michael hunched over.

“No, your concerns are valid,” you said, remembering Jack’s asides about Almasi and your own limited interactions with the man. You didn’t know him well enough to pass judgment, but it was becoming very clear that there was a lot about Chang – and her squad – that you didn’t know. “I’ll be discrete.”

“Thanks,” Michael said, relief clear in his voice. “Sorry, I know you’re really busy. I just wasn’t sure who to talk to without causing problems...”

You snorted. “I think talking about things beforehand might have prevented more problems.”

Michael gave a pained laugh. “Yeah, I know.”

“Hey.”

You felt Jack peering over your shoulder before he spoke. But having him at your back was a good feeling.

“Hey yourself.” Michael said, giving Jack a weak smile.

“Mom says you’re grounded till you’re thirty. Same goes for Maggie.”

“She’s grounded till I’m thirty or she’s thirty?”

“No idea,” Jack chuckled. “But I don’t think she means it. She’s clearly forgotten how annoying you are. I think she’ll get sick of you in about five years or so and let you out a little early. But until then...” Jack slipped around you and gave his younger brother a rib-creaking hug.

“Sorry,” Michael murmured, squeezing his brother back, eyes shut. “Sorry.”

“Me too,” Jack said.

You turned to see Maggie hugging her mother, a stricken look on her face as the older woman cried quietly on her shoulder. John rubbed her back, speaking softly in her ear, his tones reassuring and gentle. You didn’t need to hear the words to understand the message.

“It was real bad when they got out,” Michael said after Jack released him. “We were expecting a real chewing out. But Mom had been crying and Dad...” He trailed off. “I’ve never heard him make a noise like that. And Dad’s cried in front of us before...but not like that.” His hands trembled as he reached over for his glass of water. “That was just as bad as knowing that I might have gotten Chang killed. Worse maybe. But it’s hard to tell right now.”

Jack just patted his brother’s shoulder. “When Ray’s done with you, you might feel differently.”

Michael gave a choked laugh. “Yeah, OK.” He paused. “Aren’t you going to tear us a new one for being dumb?”

“I got kidnapped, then broadcasted myself getting shot and punching a UN appointee in the teeth. I can’t really point fingers right now, and honestly, I don’t have the energy,” Jack said, one arm resting around your shoulders.

“How’s Gabe doing? Can I visit him?” Maggie asked, popping up beside you and wiping her eyes.
“...He’s not awake,” you said.

“Later,” Jack said. “I’ll put some more people on rotation so Maracle and Onwuachimba can get some rest.” He looked at you. “Any recommendations?”

“I’ll check the list,” you said. “...Diallo and Vo might work, but Vo is helping with the cleanup right now and Diallo is still on medical leave.” You paused. “You should ask Jemison.”

Jack blinked. “But she’s also on medical leave. Are you sure she’s up for it?”

You pursed your lips, waiting for him to put it together.

He closed his eyes, expression thoughtful. “I know she’s in, but don’t you think she needs more time to recover?”

You stood there, still waiting for him to connect the dots. It wasn’t that Jack was stupid, just the opposite. But he had blindspots. Big ones. “Her physical injuries aren’t that severe. I’d check with Angela first, but I think she’ll be fit for duty in the next few days.”

Jack frowned. “She really should take some time...”

You sighed. You really loved this man, but honestly, he could be so dense. Had he taken time? How would he be reacting to being benched right now? You were glad that he was compassionate, but he was missing the point.

“Jemison needs a job to do. As long as you still think that she can do the job...” You said, laying out the breadcrumbs.

“Of course, I do!” Jack snapped, voice thick with emotion. “None of what happened was her fault.”

Jack fell silent then, aware of the audience.

“I agree,” you said, softly. “It’s important that she knows that you still trust her.” Because her world was in shambles, and she needed something to anchor herself. You would know. “And given everything that’s happened, that trust would mean a lot to her right now.”

Jack swallowed roughly, the realization hitting him all at once. He reached over and squeezed your hand. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “I didn’t think of that.”

“That’s because your plate is already full of terrible things, and I’m speaking from niche experience.” You squeezed back, his fingers warm against your palm. “You know, she’s going to need to talk about things...eventually,” you said, carefully. “For some of that, I think you might be the best person to do it.” And because Jack needed to work through some of the trauma too.

“Eventually, you’re going to get tired of hearing, “you’re right,” sweetheart,” Jack murmured, raising your hand to his lips.

“...No, I don’t think so,” you said, shaking your head. “It’s about damn time everyone acknowledged it.”

Chapter End Notes
I've just been cruising - working from home, walking dogs, and generally disassociating from reality while checking the news multiple times a day. (I should really stop that.) Listening to Brene Brown's "Unlocking Us" podcast, and seriously resent being called out in every episode. XD I really need to read more books and stop going to bed at 7am.

I am trying to use the time to get more writing done! But I am also very tired all the time, even if I am well rested. (I am convinced this chapter is full of typos. I am also convinced I won't be able to find any more till I actually post it.) I assume it's some kind of internalized stress response. (I am socializing with people only a little less than I was before quarantine, which leads me to believe that I really need to make some lifestyle changes. I will try to finish replying to comments this weekend.

Hope you guys are holding up OK. Things aren't bad where I am.
Chapter 138

Chapter Summary

Even in these circumstances, life continues. You are needed. You have important work to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You slipped away to give Jack and his family some time to talk. Lao and Amélie were on their way back from the mess hall, and they’d be watching him. You still had Blackwatch operations to review, more friends to check in on, and apparently you were still the unofficial On Sing liaison… so you would be brokering a deal to keep Chang from eating the “Ghost Fox,” or taking his teeth as trophies, or whatever violent fantasy she intended to enact. Feng had already sent you a list of things she’d be willing to offer as a blood price. You didn’t read it. Chang wasn’t the sort who could be bought. Hell, Feng had some of her DNA and was working on a solution for her and Gabriel’s overheating problems. And knowing Chang, she didn’t care about that either.

Stopping in front of Gabriel’s room, you exhaled slowly, putting that on the backburner for the moment. Chang would hopefully be out for at least another day. And she couldn’t just leave right now to hunt Feng’s dad down, not in the middle of a crisis. You would ask Lacroix for some insight later. But for now, the Los Muertos cleanup was going smoothly, the Buenos Aires incident had been handled, and all your enemies at the UN were presumably plotting their next series of devious acts.

You checked your messages, seeing a whole damn screen full of recent missives from friends, coworkers, and someone calling herself “The Scarlet A.” You forwarded the suspicious items to Ziv and Lacroix, lingering over A’s message:

*We need to talk. Please. It’s very important!*

“I hope she’ll be a fool -- that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.”

A.

You frowned, not entirely sure that this dramatic letter wasn’t from Valerie Petras. It was more likely that Ainsley had been put up to this by her conniving mother. You rubbed your forehead, really disliking that safety phrase. And yesterday you’d killed her uncle and spat on his corpse. That would be an awkward conversation, provided it really was Ainsley and she wasn’t trying to backstab you. Maybe you should leave the spitting detail out. That would be considerate.

“Chanceux, have you eaten yet?” Amélie called out, as she sauntered down the hall toward you.

“Or did the Strike Commander get it all?” Lao asked with a straight face.

Lao looked at the door. “Is he in there?”

“No. He’s in his brother’s hospital room.” You pointed down the hall. “Maracle and Onwuachimba are standing guard outside.”

“You go on ahead. Let me know when he’s ready to go,” Amélie said. “I need to check on my husband.”

“Got it,” Lao said with a sharp nod. She gave you a shy smile before hurrying off to stand over there and wait.

Amélie made no move to go into Lacroix’s room.

You raised a brow.

“Let’s talk,” she said, looping her arm around yours gesturing to Gabriel’s room.

“Weren’t you going to check on your husband?”

“In a minute,” she said, flashing you a devilish smile. “He’s napping.”

Shaking your head, you unlocked the door. Amélie followed you in, the mischievous humor of her expression fading as she saw Gabriel still just lying there in the bed.

“Angela said it should be at least another day,” you said. “But SEP subjects tend to have unpredictable reactions to drugs.”

“He will wake up, Chanceux,” Amélie said softly. “He would not leave you and Jack behind.”

You blinked a few times. “Yeah, I know.” Your voice only trembled a little. You looked away, searching for Isha, then spotted her curled up against Gabriel’s side, half tucked under the covers. She gave sleepy chirp.

“Do you have any dinner requests? Yue is very excited to get food out again. She hasn’t had much a chance to explore outside of the infirmary.” Amélie sat down, and patted the chair beside her.

You sat too. “No, not really thinking about that, but I should. If I don’t think about food, Jack and Isha won’t eat properly. Anything with lots of protein for Jack. I can pay for dinner.”

“You’re already watching Jack and training Lao,” you said, managing a small smile.

“That is my job,” she said smugly. “This is personal. I am asking about you, because you are very bad at asking for help.” She nudged your arm.

You snorted at that. “Yeah, OK.” You shook your head. “Some of it has sunk in. Some of it hasn’t. I’m still processing.” You paused. “Which I guess is just an impersonal way of saying that I’ve only just started grieving.”

Amélie nodded solemnly, placing one hand over yours.

“But there’s a lot of work to do, so I’m juggling everything and hoping I can keep up. If we give present all the accumulated evidence, my anonymity will be gone. That’ll make being a black ops agent very difficult.” You rubbed your forehead. “But if it’s necessary, it’s necessary.”
“Perhaps,” Amélie said. “But if you are leading the Strike Commander’s main squad, your anonymity would be gone anyway.”

Because Epsilon Squad was dead.

You gritted your teeth. “The future is very uncertain.”

“It always is. But you have a future, Chanceux. We all do.” She hugged you then.

You patted her arm, eyes on Gabriel and Isha. “Yeah, we do.” You paused. “Maybe we can get tacos for dinner.”

“Of course,” she said, sniffling.

“I’ll buy,” you said.

“Mmm-hmm,” she replied, the noise completely noncommittal.

“And maybe you can explain what’s going on between you and Lao.”

Amélie squeezed you tightly and then released you, her expression a little sheepish. She sighed, folding her hands in her lap, and her poise both poignant and dignified. “I suppose I must make a confession to you,” she said. One hand slipped down to rub her leg. “I was unduly harsh with Yue before you briefed her on Operation Checquy,” she said quietly. “I was not cruel, but I made it clear that any behavior like her earlier treatment you would not be acceptable on our mission. I said that while you might be hesitant to...chasten her, I had no such constraints and insubordination or passive aggressive behavior would not be tolerated.” She paused. “It was...more personal that would be considered professional.”

Because Amélie was your friend, and she knew all about the rocky parts of your relationship with Lao. And of course, she had been defensive on your behalf. It made you smile, even if it had not been entirely necessary.

“So you terrorized Lao into good behavior and becoming your new friend?”

Amélie smacked your arm. “Of course not! How could you say such a thing?” Amélie’s feigned outrage made you laugh. “If you must know, after she came to my aid, I did the correct thing and apologized for my severe words. Yue was gracious enough to accept.”

You chuckled, because you doubted anyone could withstand the charm offensive from a contrite Amélie. It was funny, after all the cajoling and hinting, Lao still hadn’t spilled what happened between her and Amélie, because perhaps the story would have seemed like tattling. Amélie had no such concerns and freely admitted her wrongdoing, though it had come from good intentions. To have friends like this… You patted Amélie’s hand. “Thanks, for looking out for me, and for Lao.”

“It is what friends do,” she said, her smile gentle. “And I suppose it is also my job, as your second.”

“Uhh...” You weren’t entirely sure what to say to that.

“Now, I must see to Gérard, but we will talk more later.” She gave you a kiss on the cheek, before cheerfully exiting the room.

You stared at the wall, really wondering if the Bitch Squad was going to be a thing.
Zenyatta, true to form, had no trouble getting involved in other people’s problems. He and Angela had already worked out a treatment plan for Gabriel. Currently, Zenyatta was doing his omnic healing mojo under her supervision. You and Genji had been booted because – Angela - did not want any distractions. That was fine, you told yourself. Zenyatta had helped Daniels when she was comatose. Gabriel was much sturdier than Daniels. He would wake up soon. He would be OK. You had to believe it.

Genji hovered by the door as you pulled the relevant files and converted them to a secure digital format. Jack asked for everything Shit Spiders had on Petras and you’d kept most of it in hard copy in Gabriel’s office. It was strange to be here now, after everything that had happened. It felt off, a bit like haunting your own home. The office smelled faintly of coffee, Gabriel’s cologne, and gun oil.

“Did you know he once rented a crane, took a spot dangling on a platform over a river, and sniped a prime minister from five miles away? Then he base-jumped into a waiting boat and made his escape out to open water. Flashy, but he didn’t get caught.” There was a note of admiration in Genji’s voice as he regaled you with the laundry list of rather amazing crimes attributed to the Ghost Fox.

In between converting files, you checked your messages and wondered if the Ghost Fox had a good plan for getting out of this mess. It was probably “kill everyone in your way and move.” You were seriously wondering if that was an option.

Shaking your head, you stared at a proposal to co-opt the regimental Black Watch tartan into the Blackwatch uniforms. You squinted. It was suggested by Agent Duncan, who had been recruited from the Scottish, Welsh, and Irish Division of the British Army and already wore the colors. You had the kneejerk reaction that this was not a good idea. It was in bad taste to borrow such things, despite Agent Duncan’s enthusiasm and connections. But what really caught your eye was that it was co-signed by Cyclops Lacroix. He pointed out that their motto, “Nemo me impune lacessit,” would really fit the department. Normal people did not quote Latin in department memos: “No one provokes me with impunity.” Was this just an elaborate joke at your expense? Or was he declaring some kind of score-keeping upset? And how did he have time for that? You ignored the message and went back to collating files.

“What do we know about Feng’s mom?” You asked, after you’d sent Jack your files. You sat on your desk, your eyes drifting over to Gabriel’s empty chair.

“…We don’t have a thing,” Genji said. He was now on your couch, staring thoughtfully at the Ghost Fox dossier. “I looked into some of On Sing’s history. Feng’s grandmother fought a very bloody succession war, one that spilled into the next generation. No one’s saying names, but Feng’s mother is one of the few survivors who is known to be part of that branch of the family. People don’t like to talk about her, but when she is mentioned, there’s always a lot of deference.”

That could mean a lot of things. “Why do you think that is?”

“She walked away from the family,” Genji said, thoughtfully. “I know Triads and Yakuza have some fundamental operational and philosophical differences, but I think they are very similar in the fact that once you are in, you don’t get to just leave.”

“So she did something big, or bad, or both, and got kicked out?”

“Or bought her freedom. Sometimes it is the same thing…” Genji murmured. He frowned. “She
probably could have had a career like her husband, but I admit, neither Hanzo or I recognized her when we saw her in Mongolia. And she doesn’t fight like an assassin.”

“Was the Ghost Fox involved in the On Sing drama?”

Genji shook his head. “The timeline does not match. At that point, he was mostly handling work in Europe and at the height of his career. He might have been able to help her out between hits, but I don’t think so.”

The Ghost Fox didn’t kill anyone egregiously innocent – no children or going after the family members of his targets. But there had been collateral damage, and not everyone he’d killed were blatantly corrupt politicians- there had been activists, law enforcement, and some lawyers. Jokes aside, they could have been completely clean and just doing their jobs. It was very likely that some were. Plus, the Ghost Fox had been on good terms with Shimada, so that was a point against his morality.

After being updated on his rap sheet, it would be hypocrisy if you gave him total amnesty. You’d be like a Petras if the Ghost Fox got total immunity just because he was “family.” He had clearly committed inexcusable crimes for personal profit. But you owed Feng. More importantly, you liked her. Maybe you could hammer out a deal that would satisfy both parties. He could give a debrief, name some names, maybe give up some people up top? It was a good start, but it didn’t seem like enough. You rubbed your face. And if he got a sweetheart deal, it couldn’t be official. You couldn’t put it on the books unless he made some real reparations. And you had the sneaking suspicion that he wasn’t the kind of person who was sorry about what he did.

“Are you thinking about pressganging him into Blackwatch?” Genji asked, voice oddly neutral.

“God no, that’s a nightmare. I don’t think On Sing or the Ghost Fox would care much for that option. And I don’t want to be trapped in here with a skilled psychopath who clearly doesn’t want to be here.”

“What if he wanted to work here?” Genji asked.

“...I don’t know if we could trust him and there are some serious conflicts of interest,” you said, knowing how weak that sounded. “Look, Jack and Gabriel would probably agree to any solution we could broker. It’s Captain Amari we have to convince.” And Chang.

“This is one where we will have to be creative with the rules,” Genji said.

“Yeah, probably. I mean, if we want to keep everyone alive.” Your tablet pinged, and you checked it, finding a message from Riggs. He wanted to meet right away. You gave him your location.

“You should probably ask Zheng for more information. She likes you,” Genji said.

You squinted at him. “You mean Zheng knows that I probably won’t backstab Feng, and tolerates me because of it?”

“Likes” is shorter,” Genji said, smirking.

“...Wait, did you know her in life?” You asked, remembering that Hanzo recognized her immediately during that first meeting.

“Met her once, spilled my drink on her one-of-a-kind dress, there was drama,” Genji chuckled.

You didn’t need to ask whether or not it was an accident. Genji was not clumsy. You just shook
your head. “Why?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” he chuckled. “Hanzo had to smooth everything out. It was fine.”

“Uh-huh,” you said, still shaking your head as you felt a sudden pang of empathy for Hanzo. Then there was a knock at the door. Genji got up, checked the camera, and opened the door.

Riggs looked over his shoulder and quickly stepped in, clutching his tablet to his chest.

“What’s going on?” You asked.

Riggs looked up at you, blue eyes bloodshot, and nose rubbed red. His long black hair was tied back in an uneven ponytail. His uniform was rumpled, but not damaged. Genji narrowed his eyes, hand drifting to a rest on the hilt of his weapon.

“I’m sorry, Agent Strike,” he said, wiping his eyes. “I know I look like crap.”

“We all do,” you said with a shrug.

“No, you looked really cool out there with the Strike Commander! And Agent McCree was so commanding on the battlefield! And you did amazing too...” Riggs said giving Genji a quick nod, not noticing the tension. “I’m sorry, I know you’re busy. I’m just a mess,” he winced.

You gestured for him to sit in one of the chairs in front of your desk. You remained on the desk, raising a brow at Genji’s oddly defensive reaction. Riggs was often suspiciously nervous. You knew that behavior was normal, but maybe Genji did not. He paced silently behind Riggs. “What did you have for me?”

“I...don’t know how to explain this,” he said, hugging his tablet closer.

“Use small words and simple sentences,” you said, dryly. “I’m juggling several situations right now, and need to conserve what little brainpower I have left.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that! It’s my fault, I just...over-complicate things, don’t I?” Riggs laughed nervously. “Small words, simple sentences, just get to the point! Yes! Umm, so Ainsley Petras contacted me. And she has intelligence that she thinks is important. I know the security situation is complicated, but she wanted me to make sure that you knew it was from her and not someone else.”

That was not what you were expecting to hear.

You raised a brow. “And how well do you know Ainsley?”

“More than acquaintances, but I don’t know if we’re really friends, ma’am. I’d like to think we are, but I wouldn’t want to presume,” Riggs said quickly. “We were meeting up for lunch every few days, before I found out about the Director,” Riggs said, awkwardly. “It wasn’t just me and her. Agent Maeda Vargas was there, and sometimes Ziv, but not very often. You know, it was just...lunch.” He fidgeted, eyes widening. “Oh! We didn’t talk about classified things.”

You narrowed your eyes, reading between the lines. “Let me guess, Ziv introduced you to Távio?”

“Yes!” Riggs nodded vigorously. “He said he thought we’d get along! Wasn’t that nice of him?” Riggs beamed at you.

“Uh huh,” you said insincerely. “That’s Ziv, always so nice.” Once this was over, you were going
to hunt him down and do something equally nice. He wasn’t too big for a good old-fashioned wedgie.

“Anyway, I know...I know she’s got really bad family, and she’s not been reliable in the past,” Riggs said, face scrunch up like it really hurt him to speak ill of her. “...But she’s not a bad person.”

“She’s not,” you said, though you weren’t so sure that you could go ahead and call her a “good person” either.

“She’s...not used to confrontation. I mean, I know it sounds silly, since we’re an international military organization. But I get what it’s like not to be brave and aggressive like everyone else.” Riggs gave you a pained smile. “We’re not all big heroes.”

You did not necessarily agree with that excuse – one did not have to approach everything with guns blazing to be a hero – but arguing that minor point would just upset Riggs and derail the conversation. “So what did Ainsley want?”

“The Petras family is on lockdown. She managed to get a few messages out, but she’s afraid her communications are being tracked by unfriendly eyes.” Riggs was too polite to add, “and by that, I mean the rest of her family.”

“Probably,” you agreed.

“She says she has important intel for you. I don’t know the exact details, but she’s really insisting that you’ll be interested. She mentioned a “new friend.” I don’t know if she’s talking facetiously about Acting Commander Bell or if she’s got someone who wants to flip.”

You raised a brow. “So you’re here to ask me to take her communications seriously, despite Ainsley’s...unreliability in the past?” Because he had seen the footage of your encounter with Ainsley and the Director. He was not yet privy to the fact that Ainsley had helped you persuade her mother into giving up information.

“Yes,” Riggs said, swallowing audibly. “I know it’s a lot to ask. I know you’re busy. I know it could be a trap. But I know it really is Ainsley doing the asking. I just don’t know if she’s under duress.”

“Can you make secure contact? We can set up a meeting once we have more information.”

Riggs nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes I can do that. We already have several social network connections and once Agent Maeda Vargas is awake, we can come up with a good cover story.”

“He might be out for a couple days,” you said.

“Oh,” Riggs drooped.

“But Agent Lacroix might be able to assist.” And take a closer look at all the parties involved.

“OK,” Riggs said, not at all flustered by the idea of inviting Lacroix’s attention. Which meant he did not really know Lacroix. This guy was really too pure for Blackwatch. “Is Távio going to be OK?” The worry was clear on his face.

“Most likely,” you said.

“I know you can’t give details, but do you have any idea when I might be able to visit him?”
“Nope, but it shouldn’t be too long.” You squinted at Riggs. “What exactly do you, Távio, and Ainsley talk about?”

Riggs laughed nervously. “Well, I got pickpocketed last time I went to Paris. And Ainsley got her bag snatched when she was in Rome. So Agent Maeda Vargas been uh...he’s been teaching us more situational awareness and giving us personal security tips.” Riggs smiled and nodded. “Yes. And sometimes we just talk about social things, like clothes, and combat moves, and umm...yes. Just silly stuff”

“I see,” you said, glancing at Genji who was smirking behind his faceplate. You paused. “If you don’t mind me asking, are you OK? Because you seem to be...upset.”

Riggs blinked rapidly. “Oh. Oh...it’s...it’s silly,” he said, lowering his head.

You closed your eyes, recognizing that thread of grief, remembering what you had witnessed at the tea party and the man that had charmed him. “I’m sorry about Agent Tataryn,” you said softly.

“I know!” He wailed suddenly. “I know, he was like your best friend! He told me himself! He was so amazing! All those adventures you went on together!” Riggs rubbed his eyes, shoulders shaking. “And after this mission, we were going to get coffee together...” His voice was very small. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be so weepy about this. He was your best friend and I was just someone he kind of knew...”

You stared at the wall. All those adventures? Your best friend? Tataryn liked to play games. Maybe he wasn’t your best friend, because honestly, he was a terrible friend. But maybe the reverse was true. Maybe you had been his best friend. And he didn’t mind sharing that with the world. Along with some other blatant lies, but that was Tataryn: you took the good with the bad.

“This isn’t a competition. Comparative suffering is a terrible way to measure things. I don’t have a monopoly on grief, Riggs,” you said, passing him the tissue box, your own eyes starting to water. “We lost Tataryn, and that fucking hurts,” you said through clenched teeth. “Feeling like you can’t talk to your comrades amplifies the pain. And there’s no reason for that-”

“I just feel so silly,” Riggs cried softly into his tissue.

“Me too,” you said, snatching a tissue and dabbing at your eyes. Then you reached over and gave him a quick hug, bracing yourself. That was all the permission Riggs needed, he threw his arms around you, bawling into your shoulder.

It was awkward, sure. But most feelings were. You had learned these lessons the hard way, and you had a choice: you could pretend not to see your fellow agents struggling with the same problems that you had, or you could apply that hard-won knowledge and help. And while you did not like invading their privacy or seeing all the messy emotional fallout, you weren’t the kind of person comfortable with doing nothing.

“I’m sorry,” he coughed, quickly letting you go. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. I feel silly too, because that’s easier than admitting how torn up I am about it. But I am. And when this is over, I’m going to cry my eyes out, because he was my friend, and he deserved better. He should have had a chance to come home to get coffee with you.” Even if nothing came of it. Even if Riggs was too damn decent to leave under Tataryn’s influence. Tataryn should have come home. But he did not, and now you would have to go see Kseniya and…

You tilted your head back, eyes not really focusing as you looked up at the ceiling.
Riggs reached over and squeezed your hand. “It’s not always weak to cry. I get it. Thank you.” He smiled up at you, still sniffling.

This was not the first time you’d been envious of someone’s willingness to show open emotion, to be vulnerable in the company of more dangerous people. Genji however, just stood there, hand no longer hovering over his weapon. He watched you comfort Riggs, a hint of bewilderment in his eyes.

He had no idea what to do.

You just smiled wryly at him and patted Riggs’ shoulder. The two of you would probably talk about this later in a convoluted and undeniably awkward fashion. That was fine. You were used to Shimadas by now.

It had been a Saturday morning, not long after you’d returned from your surprise vacation in Iceland. Jack had to leave early for something Very Important and not at all a waste of his time. The emphasis was his, punctuated by a lot of eyerolling and gritted teeth while he angrily chewed on cold pizza.

Both you and Gabriel had been awake long enough to kiss him goodbye and then snuggle back under the covers, smug in your freedom to sleep in..or do other things. Sleep did not win out. And after other things had occurred, you lay curled against Gabriel, one hand idly stroking his hip.

“How do you do it?” You yawned.

“I think I just showed you, hermosa ,” Gabriel chuckled, nuzzling your neck. “But if you’re so exhausted that you’ve already forgotten...” He nipped your throat, and you squeaked, smacking his arm.

“No, that I know how that works,” you laughed, rolling onto your back.

Gabriel lay on his side, sheets bunched around his hips, his smile sly. He scooted closer, head resting on your pillow. “So what are you asking about?”

“Your most closely-guarded secrets,” you giggled.

Gabriel snorted. “Corazon, I love you with all of my heart. But the only way you’re getting my Abuelita’s Mole Chichilo recipe is if she tells you herself. And she only shares her recipes with family.”

You laughed. “I’d settle for you making me some of this Mole Chichilo before I start trying to con sweet little old ladies out their family secrets.”

“That could be arranged,” Gabriel murmured, nibbling on your earlobe.

You stretched, yawning. “No, this question is about work.”

Gabriel froze, and then pulled back, lounging on one arm, his expression guarded. “Is that so?”

“Relax, it’s not like that,” you said quickly, realizing he assumed you were trying to pump him for classified information. “It’s more...” You frowned, trying to come up with the right words. “It’s about technique: you have to manage a lot of...difficult personalities as Commander. And at first glance, a lot people assume that your underlings obey you out of fear. Because you make scary faces, roar when upset, and can benchpress small vehicles.”
Gabriel snorted. “Doesn’t seem to work on most of you hardcases. You all lack the sense of self-preservation for my temper to be any real deterrent.”

You laughed, kissing him. “Exactly. Also, you like us too much to kill us.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Gabriel grumbled with mock disgust. “That doesn’t help when idiots like you, and Jack, and others fail at following orders.”

“Mmm-hmm,” you nodded agreeably.

“So are you asking for a crash course in leadership?” He asked, brows raised. He looked at you, then back at his bare chest, a little incredulous.

“No, this is pillow talk,” you scowled. “And I was wondering how you handle certain difficult agents so well. Namely Tataryn and Genji.”

“And you want to talk about other men while lying here next to me?” Gabriel slapped a palm against his chest with exaggerated outrage as he rolled onto his back, sighing heavily. “Baby, we need to work on your idea of pillow talk.”

Laughing, you crawled on top of him, resting your chin on his sternum. He was wonderfully warm beneath you and you grinned down at him. “Talk, Pillow.”

Gabriel snorted. “That’s was Jack-level bad.”

“I know, he’s a terrible influence. That’s why I’m trying get intelligent conversation from you.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes, stretching and not-so-subtly flexing. “That’s what’s on your mind?”

“Your body is very sexy,” you told him, so his feelings were not hurt. “But your mind is just as sexy.” You patted his chest. “Come on, you’ve got valuable experience and insight. And I want it.”

“Is that all you want?” He asked with a teasing pout.

“No, but I’ve trying to figure some things out and I’ve hit a wall. I get these ideas in theory, but not so much in application. Like Genji and Jesse butt heads, but they are friends, no matter what they claim. I know that they can work well together, but there’s a limit to that goodwill. You never send them on missions where it’s just the two of them.”

Gabriel raised a brow. “Noticed that, did you?”

“I get that you’ve been carefully cultivating squad dynamics behind the scenes, but I’m not sure how you’re getting from point A to point D. I’m not even sure if I’m looking at the same picture.”

Gabriel shifted, one hand resting on the small of your back. “It’s mostly about finding everyone’s motivations.” He stared up at the ceiling. “The kid, he’s easy to read.”

“He wants to be you,” you said.

“Who doesn’t?” Gabriel flashed you an easy smile, resting his hands under his head, elbows jutting out. “But that’s not his motivation.”

You frowned.

“I’m not going to go into detail, but you know his past. Jesse’s made a lot of progress since he joined up. And what was once a way to stay out of jail, became a way to earn the respect and
“Yeah, that makes sense.” Because black ops agent or not, Jesse was a soft touch. He had something to prove, sure, but he wasn’t one of the difficult Blackwatch agents or a psychopath to be kept on a short leash.

“Genji is the opposite,” Gabriel said, still staring upward. “He had respect, acceptance, and loyalty. Or he thought he did. What he wants from Overwatch, besides revenge on his family, is the assurance that we actually have his back. He will never outright say it. After all, how does one actually ask for unconditional acceptance? It defeats the purpose. And getting an admission out of someone that repressed? Never going to happen. Everything is buried under layers of duty, obligation, and nuance.”

You blinked. “I should be taking notes. You’re absolutely right and I hadn’t really thought about it quite like that.”

“But you had an inkling. You get along with both of them.”

“I had a tougher time with Genji,” you admitted.

“He’s skittish,” Gabriel said. “But you’ve tailored your approach.”

“I don’t know really know what I’m doing, it’s kind of in the moment, you know. I don’t usually plan, I just do what feels right.”

“You have good instincts,” Gabriel said approvingly, and you felt your cheeks warm. “The rest comes with experience.”

You rested your cheek against his chest. “So given the fact Jesse and Genji have completely different, almost opposing motivations, and add their extremely competitive natures…”

“Recipe for disaster,” Gabriel said, clicking his tongue. “It’s a growing pain. They’ll figure it out eventually. Either they’ll either grow out of it over time, or find a common cause to unite on. As long as there isn’t too much established rivalry, it won’t be a problem long-term.”

You nodded. “And Tataryn?”

Gabriel frowned. “Tataryn is...more complicated.”

“Yes,” you agreed.

“He’s not a young man and he knows his worth. He has nothing to prove to anyone here. But there are rules, which I think you’ve figured out.”

“Be nice to Tataryn and he’ll be nice to you. Be too nice, and he’ll rob you blind.”

Gabriel laughed, shoulders shaking. “Pretty much. Scamming people is a game to him, but he knows exactly how far he can push his luck.”

“I know that, but he still manages to con me regularly. It’s usually just small stuff, but still.” You were not pouting. And you certainly were not asking Gabriel to get involved. After all, it was so much more satisfying when the victory was purely your own.

“You have to know what he wants, and you have to hint that you can make it happen. And then you have to make it happen without losing your shirt or getting bedazzled by his charm,” Gabriel
rolled his eyes. “He’s a bit like Gérard, always scheming a few steps ahead.”

“So for him, it’s about personal gain and the satisfaction of being the “smartest” person in the room?”

“Yes, but when you say it that way it sounds bad,” Gabriel smirked.

“But not a lie,” you said, shaking your head. You closed your eyes, mulling over Gabriel’s explanation. He was right, it was simple once you knew what you were dealing with, but you didn’t have that insight just yet. “What am I?” You asked, because it seemed less invasive than asking him how he classified himself.

Gabriel was silent.

You opened your eyes to find him watching you thoughtfully, his smile gentle.

“What do you think?” He asked, brushing your hair out of your face.

You shrugged, resting your head against his chest. “I just wanted to know your thoughts.”

“I think this is something that you should work out for yourself,” he said, sounding a little too smug for your liking. “Otherwise some equally insightful and far less upstanding person might try to exploit you...” He winked.

You frowned. He wasn’t wrong. And in fact, you knew the answer, just like you knew that he did too. But saying it? Well, that was a little much first thing in the morning. Hell, you could see parallels between Jack and Jesse. And what made Gabriel tick?

“Oh, that’s a dangerous look in your eyes,” he murmured, lips brushing against your cheek, hands tightening around your waist. “Enough of that.” He kissed down the side of your neck, teeth lightly grazing your skin. “Now it’s my turn to get some secrets out of you. I think I’ll start with your karaage recipe and then move on to your hangup over toasters.”

“I’ll never tell,” you laughed. And then suddenly he flipped you, pinning you on your back underneath him.

“I have ways of making you talk, beg, and scream,” he purred in your ear and you shivered as he pushed your knees apart, his calloused hands traveling up your inner thighs.

You nipped his shoulder, knowing that you couldn’t talk if your mouth was full.

Gabriel groaned. “Now you’re in for it, hermosa. And afterward, since you’re in such a learning mood, I think it’s time to teach you what acceptable pillow talk is...”

You sat in Gabriel’s hospital room, watching the monitors and trying to remember what all the medical terminology meant. You were supposed to be reading post-mission reports from the Los Muertos incident and evaluating future Blackwatch operations in Buenos Aires, but Jesse kept nudging you and pointing to his long message log with Lacroix about Macedonia, horses, and some kind of complicated political alliance. You weren’t entirely sure Lacroix wasn’t just fucking with Jesse, so you just nodded to sympathetically, patted Bandit and Isha, and went back to reading.

“Does he do this to you?” Jesse huffed, about ten minutes later.
“Which part? The petty games? The most annoying application of the Socratic method? The snarky French commentary? Yes, all the goddamn time to all of the above,” you said, making a note to dig deeper into Agent Hernandez’s account about what had happened in Mexico City. He had been dispatched prior to the arms deal and before everything had gone wrong and Captain Amari had to send a second team for damage control. Agent Hernandez was on Lacroix’s list and little details from his report didn’t match the rest of his squad…

“OK, he does it to everyone,” Jesse grumbled.

“It’s a learning experience, and once you learn how to do it back to him, it’s really satisfying,” you said.

Jesse snorted, his disgruntled expression making it clear that he was nowhere near that point. “Morrison OK?”

“He’s managing,” you said, looking up, a little surprised that he would ask. “But he’s stretched thin. Is it that obvious?”

“No, not really. I ain’t seen him in handling the politicians, but Amélie and Lao don’t seem too worried,” Jesse said, reaching for his hat, his hand stopping halfway as he remembered that it wasn’t there. “But…” He paused. “He ain’t never apologized to me before either. Not for real.”

“Hmm, that’s immature of him,” you said.

“Nah, all my apologies were fake too,” Jesse laughed.

“Oh, well that’s OK then,” you said, shaking your head. You glanced over at Gabriel. “How did you put up with those two assholes?”

Jesse punched your arm lightly. “Hey! I was the low man on the totem pole. I deserve the sympathy.”

“Uh-huh,” you said. Your phone buzzed. You glanced at it, not recognizing the number, though a message flashed across the screen.

_May we speak? I am outside the door._ -Zheng.

You groaned, realizing that you really had become the de facto On Sing liaison, and that the position required more work than just joking around with Feng. You got up and checked the cameras. A red metal orb hovered three feet off the ground. Not quite the same model that went on Operation Checquy, nor the one that was guarding Feng’s room.

You let her in, unsure of the etiquette to show a disembodied human partially present in one of her many drone bodies. “Would you like a chair?”

“It’s not necessary,” Zheng said politely.

“Yes, but would you _like_ one?” You asked.

“...No, thank you, but please, don’t stand on my account.”

You sat down by the door, noticing that Jesse had taken the chair farthest from the door and closest to Gabriel. He sat at an angle, one hand under his serape, making sure that Zheng was in his killzone.
“Is Feng doing all right? Do the rest of your people have concerns or requests? I can try to expedite a supply order–”

“You are too kind. Everything is satisfactory. I have no complaints. I do have one concern though, and that is what I have come to discuss.”

You didn’t trust that polite mien, but you tried to keep your face pleasant, wondering what tactic she would choose. Would she blame Overwatch for Feng’s injury and her agent’s death? Would she seek punitive damages against Chang to try to keep her away from Feng? Exactly what kind of authority did Zheng have to negotiate with Overwatch? And for that matter, what authority did you actually have?

“We are both very aware that your Sergeant Chang,” Zheng put an odd emphasis on the rank, “is a threat to Feng’s father.”

“The Ghost Fox,” you said. “It’s an interesting handle.”

“I think the Americans actually started that nickname,” Zheng said. “The...younger Shimada has given me a brief summary of his actions. Let me assure you that he has committed far more crimes than what you seem to have on record.”


“Assassinations were his bread and butter,” Zheng said. “He generally made quick kills and I never heard of him engaging in unprofessional conduct. But I never hired him either, though that had nothing to do with his skill – we have a bias against outside contractors. Too much of a security risk.”

That rang true. On Sing was a paranoid underworld meritocracy that had an obsession with bloodlines and secrecy. Inviting in someone as flashy and dangerous as the Ghost Fox seemed like something only Feng would knowingly do. You sat there trying to look thoughtful. “Given his audacious but successful methodology, I’m guessing he’s some kind of high functioning psychopath?”

“Probably,” Zheng said with alarming indifference. “Though by all accounts, his childhood was stable and he has a healthy relationship with his parents. He seems to put the care and safety of his family above all else, but he is amoral, thrill-seeking, and annoyingly flippant. Certainly not the man I would have had my niece marry. Still, he treats her well, and raised his children responsibly. I cannot complain,” she said so politely that it was very clear that she definitely had complaints.

“What are you asking me to do?” You asked, because suddenly you weren’t so sure that Zheng wanted you to protect Feng’s father.

“I am telling you what I know, and what Feng does not. Yet. I am aware of what transpired in Budapest: I have heard a great deal about Colonel Chang, and her hunt for the Ghost Fox.”

...Wait, Colonel Chang? You raised a brow. That was a very different rank for Sergeant. But why was she…? Oh. Oh boy. Something had happened, and you were pretty sure you should not ask Chang about it directly.

“Full bird colonel?” Jesse asked from his corner.

“Yes,” Zheng said. “I believe she was on track to be a general – the arrangements were very under the table.”
You blinked.

“But I don’t know the details,” Zheng said, and you believed the exact opposite.

“So what are your recommendations about Feng’s father?”

“I want him safely and happily retired,” Zheng said. “I do not want him press-ganged into Blackwatch or incarcerated.”

“Yeah, I’d prefer to avoid that too. I already figured those options wouldn’t end well. But I’d like more background.”

“Of course,” Zheng said agreeably. “Now, I only know this because I started doing more research once Feng had taken her place in On Sing and she was far more prepared than I expected, given her mother’s reticence to become involved in our...lifestyle. I did not realize the man that my niece married was the Ghost Fox, till after Feng joined. I realized then that there was much about my niece and her family that I had overlooked.”

You did not know if you believed that. But you nodded politely anyway.

“There has never been an occasion to inform Feng of her father’s exploits – because she has never asked, and because his methods questionable. She is reckless enough already.” There was an odd mix of pride and exasperation in Zheng’s tone. “But additionally, it would have upset my niece.”

There it was, the real reason. Everyone, including the Ghost Fox and AI Zheng, handled Feng’s mother with kid gloves. Given Zheng’s actions in bringing Feng into On Sing, she was willing to oppose her niece, but she still chose her battles carefully.

“So you mentioned that you looked into the Budapest incident. What are your thoughts on Chang?”

“Sergeant Chang has gained an almost...mythic reputation in certain circles. She has the most uncanny way of picking out lies. She is strict, dogged, and will want some significant reparations for the...insult to her pride. You and I both know that she cannot simply be bought off, but if we tread carefully, her honor can be appeased.”

Theoretically, you knew that to be true. But you had your doubts about the actual application. Chang valued competency. She played to win. Anything offered would have to be useful to her.

“We might request that he give a series on in-depth demonstrations on his methodology and perhaps work a bodyguard operation – as a consultant – to give us tools to better defend against assassins.”

“I’m sure he would enjoy that,” Zheng said.

“But that won’t be enough for Chang.” Because despite her focus and discipline, Chang was competitive and definitely not immune to pettiness. “She’ll probably want to punch him in the face a few times,” you said. “Maybe they could work some of it out in a...carefully regulated match?”

“Acceptable,” Zheng agreed. “No fatalities, no permanent damage.”

“We’ll have to figure out a way to enforce that,” you agreed, which was far easier said than done. “And I’ll have to talk to Chang to get a better idea of what she finds a fair exchange. But that won’t be till later.”
“Yes, of course. I realize that you are very busy,” Zheng said. “But it is bothering Feng, and I realize that you might not have had all the requisite background, so I wanted to make sure you understood the nuances of the situation.”

Uh huh. Sure. She definitely wasn’t pushing her own agenda or anything. Not that you were exactly sure what her angle was. But you’d confer with Feng and your batch of Shimadas later.

“Good luck with all the upcoming hearings,” Zheng said as you went to let her out. “Perhaps you should consider asking the Ghost Fox to handle some of your more troublesome opponents, as a convenience fee.”

You were not entirely sure how to react to that and hesitated half a second too long.

“That was a joke, Agent Strike,” Zheng said smoothly as she left, not sounding very jokey at all.

Chapter End Notes

I got word that I may be working from home till June. (I'm down with that!) And also my work is planning on allowing certain people to work from home forever. Fingers crossed that I'm one of them. Otherwise I may have to...take care of the competition the same way I "take care" of beloved characters. *coughcough* Uh...shhhhhhh. Also, my pets are going to be so upset if I go back to 10 hour days at the office. They are now firmly codependent on "at home Sensoo." I work with the cat in my lap and two dogs under my desk. It's fucking adorable (and crowded).

The writing goes slow because I need to be doing other things (running, interacting with people, etc) to get myself to write more consistently. (If I'm angry or using other processing power, writing is a byproduct. If I'm just in a Groundhog Day malaise, wondering what is real...I'm not functioning properly.) But also I was stuck on a series of scenes, which I have since banged out and should be good to continue. But things are stable here. I'm considering hiring a language tutor online. Like maybe I should take a couple hours of Spanish or Icelandic each week, to keep my (aged) brain sharp. Anyway, hope you guys are doing OK.
Chapter 139

Chapter Summary

Jack is busy with his back to back political meetings. Yours are a bit more personal, but just as important.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I’ll be in Switzerland this week. Things are going on and you need to know about them. Can we meet? -A

Riggs had already verified that this message was also from Ainsley. You showed it to Lacroix.

“No bakeries, you get too distracted,” he said, not looking up from the screen. “I will recommend a venue tomorrow.”

You squinted at him.

“Business face, Chanceux. I’ve used several local establishments for discrete meetings, and will set it up. You can have lunch, but you get too excited for pastries and we need you focused,” he continued smugly, sending Jesse pictures of expensive horses, with rolling hills and majestic mountains in the background. You just shook your head. “You’ll take a full squad, in civilian clothes, and secure the premises beforehand.”

“Figured,” you said.

“I understand that Zheng approached you, regarding the Ghost Fox?”

“Yes,” you said.

“So popular these days, Amélie will be proud,” Lacroix chuckled. “Thoughts?”

“Not entirely sure what her angle is. I know it’s in everyone’s best interest if we resolve things quickly and nicely. But whenever Zheng approaches anyone on her own, it raises my hackles.”

Lacroix nodded, still not looking up from his screen. “I think you should focus on why Zheng approached you before trying to talk to Sergeant Chang.”

“...She used to be a colonel in the US Army,” you said. “Or so Zheng claimed.”

Lacroix looked up, frowning. “Yes, she was, but that...” His frown deepened as he twigged your concerns about Zheng’s inclusion of that well-hidden fact. “I know what happened, but I am not privy to all the exact intricacies of how things were sorted. The official story clearly isn’t the real story. I can speculate with confidence, but to Zheng, I suspect the details are more important than the outcome. ” He shook his head. “In this case, you really would be better off asking Jack and Gabriel for specifics. I think Gabriel would be the one to focus on once he awakens,” Lacroix
continued, finally deigning to look at you.

“Got it,” you said.

“I’ll give your report more thought. We can talk later,” he said.

You nodded, already heading out, smirking because Lacroix was now intrigued by your problem and hopefully, since his interest was piqued, he would put some effort into solving it. That would buy you extra time to finish rebalancing the Blackwatch operations budget—with the addition of the emergency operations’ expenses, shuffling around essential personnel to cover the gaps in your roster, and doing your actual job.

“Kseniya Petrova” was the name on her paperwork, though you were pretty sure that wasn’t her real name. Hell, Tataryn’s birth name certainly was not “Tataryn,” and having skimmed some of his file to fill out some of the postmortem documentation and procedures, you learned a little bit about what he did before Blackwatch. There was a lot of fraud, a lot of treachery, and just as much death. You did not think you would have liked that man nearly as much. But that man was not Tataryn.

“Tataryn” was the name you knew him by. That was the name you called him as he lay dying and the name he answered to, offering you no contradictions or confessions. So that was the name he chose, and the name he would be buried with. Whomever he had been before Blackwatch, Tataryn was the man he had become.

But Kseniya was another issue. Tataryn was her guardian, on paper. She had no overt ties to Overwatch, though the academy admins were no doubt informed of her proximity to the Gabriel Reyes. He had arranged for her to take their entrance exams and she addressed him as “uncle.”

Which raised another question. Who exactly was Kseniya, if she was safer masquerading as the Blackwatch Commander’s niece? The two men who could answer that question weren’t talking. One was dead. The other…

Your hands shook a little as you tied your tie. It wasn’t as neat as Gabriel would have done with his… You clipped that thought short as you angrily yanked the fabric into a knot. The result was not pretty: you had been too rough and now it was off center. Scowling, you glared at the mirror and began untangling the tie. You were not wearing your dress uniform. There were too many potential enemies at the Institut Montana, and even more soft targets that would make for too much collateral damage. Best to be formal, but unaffiliated with Overwatch. It was weird though, not that you liked dress uniforms, but not wearing some kind of emblem in this situation felt too much like hiding.

Fuck. It didn’t matter what you did. Nothing was going to make you happy right now. The tie was still crooked, but marginally less so. It would have to do. You shrugged on a black jacket, tanto on your belt, your sidearm in your shoulder holster.

Jack’s room felt very empty as you waited for Jesse. Ziv was watching Bandit and Isha. Athena still wasn’t back online. Gabriel was still…

You shook your head, reminding yourself that it wasn’t hopeless, that Zenyatta, Angela, Bayan, and even Zheng were working on solutions. It was just easy to get stuck in your head, especially when there was no direct action that you could take. And Gabriel was not the only one you were worried about.
Jack had been attentive and very cuddly this morning, but he was still reluctant to talk about his own issues. He wasn’t sleeping well – no repeat of yesterday morning, but he’d clung to you all night. And you weren’t so sure that he’d let himself sleep at all. He didn’t look well rested. He’d left early today – more meetings, more political wrangling. Amélie and Lao were sticking with him. The rest of the Morrisons had remained in Michael’s hospital room last night. Maggie had tried to claim the couch, but her parents made her stay in the infirmary with them.

Your phone buzzed – Jesse was in the hall. You glanced at your notes. You’d been trying to lay out a good way to give bad news, but it wasn’t working. You’d planned to ask Jack, but he’d been so quiet last night that you realized that he was probably struggling with the same problem: how to tell the families that their loved one, whom you were responsible for, wasn’t coming home. There was no magic solution. There was no way to get out of it unscathed. There could be no misunderstandings, no “he isn’t coming back” or “he passed.” You had to be clear and concise. And you had to do it with genuine regret, your words both kind and firm. Plus, you had to do it in a way that would not scar an eight year old child.

It was an impossible mission.

Jesse drove while you silently rehearsed your speech. None of it felt right. The words were clumsy. Your outfit was stupid. That damn tie was crooked. You had not had enough coffee for this. Your hands shook slightly. Maybe you’d had too much coffee. Fuck.

“Kids don’t need the window dressing, Lucky,” Jesse said as he pulled into the parking area. “They just need the truth, compassion, and patience. Like anyone else. I think kids handle it better, honestly.”

You nodded brusquely, lips pressed tightly together.

The security staff gave you directions to an office – on the opposite side from the dorms. You flexed your fingers trying very hard look calm. Yours eyes wandered, mapping the security cameras as you passed them. Jesse walked in step with you, expression wry. He didn’t touch you, but he stayed close.

You stopped at the office of Eino Korhonen, the head of security. It didn’t look much different from any of the other rooms – brass name plate, wood paneling polished to a warm glow. You spotted more cameras and sensors, felt the buzz of higher end electronics in your fingers.

You did not look at Jesse as you knocked.

A bearded man with dusky skin and chestnut curls answered the door. He was middle-aged, but in good shape, his weapon almost hidden by the lines of his expensive suit jacket. He looked at your Overwatch IDs, eyes taking in your visible weapons. He did not ask you to remove them. Instead he nodded at you and stepped to the side, an invitation to enter.

“Agent Strike, Agent McCree,” he greeted, eyes lingering on Jesse’s face like he half-recognized Jesse and was trying to place him.

Korhonen had a nice office setup, antique wooden furniture and cutting edge electronic surveillance systems. The panel of monitoring screens had been blacked out. And in the chair in front of his desk sat Kseniya.

She was exactly how you remembered her, dark hair in twin puffs, wearing the navy and tan uniform, swinging her legs because her feet did not quite touch the ground. She perked up when she saw you, eyes bright, smile wide.
“Lucky!” She shouted, bouncing up out of her chair and nearly skipping halfway across the room. And then she froze when she saw Jesse at your side, clearly not the man she expected. You watched her eyes dart across your outfit, your tense posture, your grim expressions. When she finally looked you in the eye, she knew something was wrong. “Where’s Tato? Why isn’t-”

You tried to speak, but the words shriveled on your tongue. You cleared your throat, spine stiff, shoulders braced for impact.

“Lucky, what’s going on?” Kseniya voice went very soft, her hands dropped to her sides, big amber eyes widening then closing. Her shoulders began to shake.

“Kseniya, I’m very sorry,” you said, forcing yourself to look her in the eye. It was the hardest eye contact of your life. Because you saw the precise moment when you broke that child’s heart. You didn’t even have to voice the news, to spout your clumsy but carefully-prepared speech. Your hesitation said it all, and with so much more conviction.

“No,” she said, backing up, eyes impossibly wide as she stared up at you. “No. Nononononono!” She snarled, hands clench into fists, her entire body trembling, betrayal clear in her eyes. “That’s not why you’re here, Lucky! Tell me that’s not why you’re here! He’s just hurt. Or out of comm range. He’ll get better. He will-”

“I am so sorry, Kseniya. But that is not possible,” you said, stepping forward, gritting your teeth, and forcing yourself to speak the terrible truth. There could be no room for misunderstanding or false hope. That would do more damage in the long term. “Feodor Tataryn was killed in action-”

Kseniya stared at you, doubt still on her face.

“It’s him,” you said softly. “I was there.”

You watched the disbelief harden for one brief moment, like she was going to scream her denial. But then she began hyperventilating, and that brittle shield of confidence cracked and fell away. The raw on anguish in her eyes tore at something in your chest. You looked away first. It was a mistake.

“You were supposed to protect him!” Kseniya shouted, her voice hoarse. “You were supposed to have his back!” And then she launched herself at you, all fists and shrieks as she beat at your legs and stomach, sobs choking out half of her words.

You let her. You simply stood there and took it, not quite feeling the blows. She was, after all, a very small child. “I’m sorry,” you said, voice cracking, hating that here you were again, apologizing for things that you could not fix. In the face of her grief, you wanted to talk, to say all the right things, but you knew from experience that there was nothing you could say that would fix the situation. But there was plenty you could say that would make things worse. A storm of panicked words whirled around your head, and you knew that could not quite trust yourself. So you bit the inside of your cheek, blood filling your mouth. The coppery taste was a shock to your system, washing away all other thoughts.

“How could you let this happen?” Kseniya’s strikes grew weaker, but she wasn’t really trying to hurt you. It was as if all that grief filled up that tiny body and overflowed. It needed somewhere to go. You could bear this much for her.

You felt Jesse’s hand on your shoulder, but you shook your head, not looking away from the crying girl. You could weather this.
“He trusted you, Lucky!” She shouted up at you, face stained with tears. “I trusted you!” She pulled away, glaring up at you, teeth clenched.

“I know,” you said, swallowing roughly. “I am very-”

“I don’t want to hear it!” She shrieked. Shaking, she shoved past you, ignoring Jesse as she stormed out of Korhonen’s office.

“Kseniya-” You tried to follow her, but Korhonen stepped in your path, palms out as he shook his head.

“Let her go. Fatima is waiting in the hall – she’s the resident trauma counselor and has a good rapport with Kseniya.”

You shuddered, and Jesse rested a hand on your shoulder. You took a deep breath, blinking rapidly as you looked away. Your mouth was still bleeding and you had botched this straight to hell. You weren’t sure what you expected, but this was the bad outcome.

“Sit down, let me make you a cup of tea. It’s instant, because I don’t feel like having a goddamn ceremony every time I’m thirsty.” Korhonen said, not unkindly as he filled three cups of water, dropped in tea bags, and handed them out. You took the tea without any additions. All you tasted was blood, but eventually the metallic intensity began to fade.

“Thanks,” you said. “I should go-”

“Kseniya will recover, She’s resilient. Kids usually are,” Korhonen said casually. “But they’re also a lot more unpredictable. I understand that you are not used to dealing with them. Are you going to maintain contact with her after this?”

“Huh?” You blinked, unsure that Kseniya would ever want to see you again after this. “I don’t know? I mean, we still have to take care of her father’s affairs and make arrangements. We aren’t-”

You shook your head. “I’m just a family friend,” you said, trying to stop your babbling.

Korhonen nodded sympathetically. “Kseniya likes you a lot,” he said. “She told me a little about her last excursion to the Overwatch campus. Very exciting. Too exciting.” Korhonen said gravely, his expression sour as he eyed you almost accusingly.

You flinched. Crashing the hovercraft had caused the least amount of damage, but things could have turned out a lot worse for Távio and the kids. “Yeah, I thought so too.”

“You know, when it’s time to deliver the bad news Reyes usually goes in person. It’s a job he doesn’t delegate.”

You stiffened, remembering that Gabriel had mentioned talking to Korhonen, but never what kind of relationship he had with the man. You looked down at the mug, wondering why you’d just accepted a drink from a stranger…

“I’m guessing he can’t?” Korhonen continued, real strain in his voice, those brown eyes shockingly mournful.

You hesitated, diffident about adding more words to the mix. You’d already done enough harm...

“He’s not dead,” Jesse said, clearing his throat.

“That’s good news,” Korhonen said, a faint smile warming his face. He bent over and rapped his
knuckles against his right leg. It was a heavy blunt metallic sound – he wore a prostheses of some sort. “I served under him during the Crisis. Would’ve stayed on, but it’s not fun clanking when you run. I can do it for a couple miles, but after that it just hurts. Some people can transition all right, but I had...complications. Had to adjust my career options. Reyes’ recommendation landed me this job.”

You relaxed, realizing that Korhonen was the person Gabriel personally tasked to look after Kseniya. And then you got stuck, a little too long, on what he had said about his complications transitioning to a prosthetic limb. Now was not the time. You shook it off. “Sorry, I’ve never given the bad news to a kid before.” You adjusted your gloves, trying to mask the shaking of your hands. “Maybe I should have asked someone more experienced to do it. But it didn’t feel right? I don’t know. I just wanted to do whatever would cause the least harm for her.”

“Children don’t have the same restraint we do. Kseniya’s a good kid and she likes you. She’s hurting, and even if it’s not your fault, you’re the messenger. Give her a couple days. She’s got to process it, and then she’ll come around.”

“I-”

“But you will return,” he said firmly. “That little girl has watched the people she cares about walk away and never come back too many times. You better not be one of them.” There was real anger in his voice. Korhonen was genuinely protective of his charge. Gabriel had chosen well.

You blinked. “Yeah, OK. Haven’t gotten around to processing the paperwork, but we aren’t going to abandon the kid.”

Korhonen nodded. “I know Reyes doesn’t run that kind of outfit. Logistics shouldn’t be hard. Her tuition is paid up through the next semester and there’s a trust fund that should cover the next few years. Her guardian may have been a man of questionable ethics, but he made sure she was taken care of.”

“Good to know,” you said, not surprised by that analysis of Tataryn’s character.

“You keep the lines of communication open. She’ll reach out to you when she’s ready,” Korhonen said, and it didn’t sound like a request. In fact, he gave you a stern look, more like a disappointed teacher than a security officer.

“...Yeah, OK,” you said, unable to forget that look of pure grief on Kseniya’s face when you destroyed her world. Even if she forgave you some day, that look would stay with you forever.

You didn’t feel like talking about it. Instead, you sat in the car wondering how you could blithely exchange nasty insults with hardened killers – ones that threatened you with really awful fates – but not take a few harsh words from a tiny child. Jesse stopped at a drive thru and bought you burgers to go. He also handed you a cup of vanilla soft serve covered in hot fudge. You ate that right there in the car. You started with that first, to chase the taste of blood from your mouth. It was a good choice: you focused on contrast between warm sticky chocolate and cool smooth ice cream, the sweet distracting you from the bitter.

He waited for you to be halfway through the dessert before he brought up what just happened. “You know, I just want to say, it ain’t your-”

“My forte? My best work? Oh yes, I know,” you snarled into the ice cream, stabbing it a little too
roughly with your spoon. That wasn’t right. The soft serve had done you no wrong. It was the most comforting thing you’d had since you left bed. “I really botched that delivery.”

“We both knew she wouldn’t take it well, huckleberry. You were kind and genuine-”

“Genuinely fucking it up,” you growled.

Jesse made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. “Stop throwing yourself a damn pity party, Lucky. We ain’t got the time or the funny hats. It ain’t your fault what happened to Fedya, OK? It ain’t.” His accent thickened when he yelled at you. “I was there, Diallo was there, Boss was there too. If you got blame, there’s plenty to go around. But that don’t help no one and it really ain’t your fault. Any more than what happened to the Commander is my fault. I sure as hell ain’t feeling that way, but in my head, I know it’s true. Just like I know that saying it doesn’t change a thing, because we’re both struggling with the guilt. But I don’t want you getting it in your head that this is something you have to make up for. Already seen that show before. Doesn’t play out so well for you.”

You narrowed your eyes at him, spoon jammed between your teeth poking the inside of your cheek. “Jesse McCree-”

“You need to hear it,” he said. “Because I know Kseniya was hurting and I know she said some stuff that hurt you. It hurt me just to watch- there’s plenty of pain to go around. But that don’t make those words true. So let me remind you, Tataryn was a senior agent in command of his own squad, fully capable of taking care of himself. Ain’t your fault. Just like what happened to Epsilon Squad ain’t Jemison or Morrison’s fault.”

You inhaled sharply, remembering the bones and the fire, the madness in Jemison’s eyes as she took Prince apart, trying to find balance in destroying him from the inside, like he had done to her. You knew that look in her eyes, knew that she would never find what she was looking for right now, because there was no way to bring back Shoal and the others. There was a way to heal, but she wasn’t looking for that, couldn’t see that there were different paths leading her to what she needed and away from what she thought she needed. She wasn’t asking the right questions, hadn’t reached that part of the process yet. She was trying to fix the past, and that was impossible, and she couldn’t move forward till she accepted that. And Jack? Jack was...well, you weren’t sure. You just knew that he wasn’t OK either.

Maybe you were in the same boat, somewhere back on the grieving loop, too blinded by your feelings to see the truth.

“Tataryn was our responsibility,” Jesse said. “But it wasn’t our fault.” There was a grim certainty to his words, his delivery mirroring Gabriel’s. You shuddered, recognizing your lover’s words, a lecture he had given before, and obviously not just to you. “Said once, the words are meaningless. Said a couple times, the words are annoying. Said every day, and they start to finally sink in, you know?”

“I know,” you said quietly, staring straight ahead.

Jesse fell silent, and turned his attention to the drive. You focused on breathing. It wasn’t till he parked in the motor pool, that he spoke again. “You sore at me?”

“Only because you’re right,” you muttered, staring at your now empty ice cream cup. “Thanks.”

He chuckled. “Sometimes you just need someone to remind you.”
“Yeah, I know,” you sighed.

“And maybe, I need someone to remind me too,” he said hoarsely, trying to sound glib, but the words stuck in his throat, ruining the delivery.

You set the empty container down, and turned to face Jesse and his soft brown puppy eyes. “What happened to Gabriel was out of your hands. He’s the damn Blackwatch Commander, super soldier, ego-maniac who takes on too much responsibility and will also blame himself for what happened to Tataryn, because we’re all dumb and don’t have any logic, just big stupid feelings, and maybe only brain-cell shared by the entirety of Blackwatch.” Huffing angrily, you handed him a burger, and got one out for yourself.

“Be sure to tell him that, in that tone,” Jesse said, mischief brightening his face. “Try it on Morrison too. I can’t get away with it, but you can.”

“Working on it,” you groused.

Jesse’s smile faded, like he only just realized that maybe Jack wasn’t taking things well either. “I know. Sorry.”

“Meddlesome kid,” you said.

“You’re one to talk,” he said mildly.

“I’ll eat all this myself,” you said, pointing at the bag.

“That’s just cruel,” Jesse said, with a lopsided grin, clearly not taking you seriously. And he’d paid for the meal.

“Yeah, well, that’s what going to happen if you keep throwing yourself a pity party. It’s my turn, but as you said, we don’t have the spare time, and we’re out of fun hats.”

“I know.” Jesse pointed to his head. “But, yeah, I get it. So are we accountability buddies then?”

It was strange to hear him say it so plainly, to hear him ask for the help and know that he needed it as badly as you did. It sort of surprised you, because of how fucking hard it was to just come out and make that declaration. But here Jesse was, being all honest and trusting with you, like he’d been from the start.

“Accountability buddies, huh?” You’d bet your burger he’d heard that term from someone else, but that part didn’t matter. He was doing things the right way. “Yeah, sure, when haven’t we been?” You said looking over and giving him a nod. Blinking rapidly, you bit into your burger.

Jesse just ruffled your hair a little too hard, a tired smile on his face.

“I didn’t expect her here this soon,” you murmured, adjusting your earpiece.

“The Prescott family flew her out here. She brought her own security though,” Lacroix murmured out the corner of his mouth.

He sat behind you, back to yours. He had his own booth with a view of the kitchen. Your position faced the front of the restaurant, so you could keep an eye on the door. You were further back in the restaurant, but your lines of sight were clear. Hanzo loitered outside, wearing a navy blue hoodie and checking his phone. There were no big windows to snipe through, and very dim
lighting. The bistro was mostly empty – the dinner rush had come and gone, and the waitstaff had no interest in hanging around the dining room. Lacroix had chosen a place with discretion, and maybe a few other perks.

“Contact spotted,” Hanzo said in clipped tones.

You raised your menu, tracking movement across the street. A redheaded woman power walked toward the door, her companion stopping to give Hanzo a long look before he followed her inside. He paused to pick out the cameras too – so not an amateur. Not waiting to be seated, the redhead strode to the booth across the aisle from yours, and took a seat diagonal from you, her back to the front. She picked up her menu, lowered her sunglasses and winked at you. She wore a double-breasted tan trenchcoat, a matching hair kerchief, riding boots, and black kidskin gloves – like a vintage spy. The auburn wig was carefully styled and probably expensive. The only reason you knew it was a wig was because Ainsley wasn’t going to dye her hair *that* shade of red.

The man – you recognized John Morganstern from Lacroix’s files – was careful not to look directly at you. Tall, middle-aged and trim, he wore a hoodie and jeans. He had dark hair and a pleasant face. But he was one of Petras’ informants. You held a gun in your lap, lining up a shot, just in case.

Morganstern picked up his menu. “The guy out front one of yours?”

“Yes,” you said, perusing the appetizers.

“I don’t think we were followed, but there are a lot of surveillance cameras in town,” Morganstern said. He did not look at Lacroix, but was clearly aware of him.

Ziv was handling that. You just nodded.

“But you said we should have about fifteen minutes still,” Ainsley said to Morganstern, though she kept sneaking glances at you.

A tiny Vietnamese woman came by and filled everyone’s water glasses. She had to get on her tiptoes to reach, and all the tables got splashed. She glared at the booth in front of yours. She did not take any orders, and just scurried back to the kitchen. You didn’t know who would actually hire Vo as a waitress, but Lacroix thought it would be *fun* to bring her along.

Morganstern squirmed.

“Are you safe?” You asked her.

“*I hope she’ll be a fool -- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool, ”* Ainsley quoted, looking far too pleased with herself. “You know John, my parents and Uncle Rupert – Rupert Prescott,” she repeated for your benefit. “They really wanted me to come here and talk about what a good person my uncle was: to highlight his support for women’s education and anti-discrimination employment bills. They also want me to “reluctantly” mention how loyal Jack is to his friends, and how even if he’s a good man, he’ll do *anything* to protect them.”

John Morganstern winced. “Yes, well, I understand that.”

Lacroix had an idea about the leverage Petras used on Morganstern, but you wanted to hear it from the man himself. You inclined your head to the side still facing forward. “So what are you protecting? Besides Ainsley and your own skin?”

Morganstern had the grace, or at least acting ability, to look chagrined. “The people we love are
only human: my wife likes gambling a little too much and managed to get in over her head. The Director approached me personally with the information and an offer for help.” He smiled bitterly at the table. “I didn’t want to do it, but there were some very serious creditors and I was at risk of losing my clearances. How was I going to pay back that debt if I lost my job?” He didn’t look at you, but the slump of his shoulders and the tightness in his voice telegraphed shame.

Well, Lacroix had noted the large bank transfers to Morganstern’s wife, though you had not had those details.

“My wife...isn’t that irresponsible. After really looking into it, I think she was helped along by a mutual acquaintance. I know it was a setup, because it all happened so fast...” Morganstern exhaled slowly. “But if I’d known what he was planning, I wouldn’t have gone along with it. I swear,” he choked out, voice rough.

“I know you feel really bad about your friend Agent Van Allyn,” Ainsley said, the cheer draining from her face. “I really liked Agent Shoal and Agent Mosweu. They were always nice to me. Mosweu told the funniest stories.” She sniffled then, one hand over her mouth. “I’m glad Jack is safe.”

“...Is he really dead?” Morganstern asked, turning to finally make eye contact with you.

“Yes,” you said, reading the relief in Morganstern’s eyes.

Ainsley trembled, sniffing louder.

You did not give details. You did not boast. And thankfully, Morganstern asked no further questions.

“I know he did bad things, but he was my uncle. And until very recently, I didn’t know that side of him,” Ainsley whispered.

She was allowed to be sad, to mourn her uncle and her idea of him. But that an abstract concept. You couldn’t quite bring yourself to say the words.

“Are you going to go along with their plans?” You asked, fingers tracing the “Entree” header on the menu. You sat forward in your seat, leaning over the table, your head angled so you could see Ainsley’s face.

“...I don’t know what to do. I’m staying at Uncle Rupert’s.”

“She’ll need an exit strategy,” Morganstern said abruptly. “I have information here too and would be willing to provide additional evidence.”

“In exchange for...?”

Morganstern swallowed roughly. “Lenience. I know I fucked up. I don’t have an excuse. But I panicked and made the wrong choice. I didn’t think it would get this bad, honest. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt, let alone...” He rested his face in his hand. “I will leave this for you in good faith,” he said, sliding a tiny drive under the menu.

“John’s a good person,” Ainsley chimed in. “He helped me plan this.”

“I can’t take credit for the outfit, that was all you,” Morganstern said dryly.

“No, it’s not me, which is precisely why it works,” she beamed. “They don’t expect me to do much
except bolster Georgie and cry over my uncle.”

“You asked.

“Acting Commander Bell,” Ainsley said. “George Burton Bell Jr,” she added. “We just called him
“Georgie,” she said with a straight face. “He was always a sulky child.”

You couldn’t hear Lacroix laughing, but you could feel the evil amusement in the depths of your
soul.

“What do you plan to do?”

Ainsley sat back in her chair, eyes downcast. “I don’t want to help them. I loved my uncle. But
what he did was unforgivable. He got a lot of people killed and tried to kill more, like Jack, Távio,
and you.” She flinched when she said the words. “I’m not going to protect his reputation. Or
Georgie’s. If you need me, I’ll corroborate the sexual harassment charges, the unethical financials,
little details like dates and times. Whatever I can honestly confirm, I will.” She looked you in the
eyes. “It’s the least I can do.”

As far as gestures went, that would be a big one. If she did it. You nodded slowly. “I would be
grateful.” You paused. “If you look in the sugar bowl, there will be a key to gym locker, address
attached. There’s an encrypted phone in there for you and some more instructions.”

Ainsley eagerly took the lid off the sugar bowl and gasped audibly at the key. “It’s like a spy
movie,” she giggled.

Morganstern did not look nearly as amused.

She held up the keychain tag, an address written on it. “Is this nearby?”

“A couple miles out,” he said. “We need to hurry if you want to pick it up tonight. We’re short on
time.”

Nodding, Ainsley stood. She gave you a wobbly smile. “We’ll talk later.”

“Be careful. Get a new duress phrase,” you said.

Ainsley blinked, then nodded vigorously. “OK!”

Morganstern led the way out, while you stayed in your seat.

“They’re on their way,” you said and typed out a similar message to Diallo, who was waiting at the
gym to see who would show up. Hanzo would follow them, to make sure they were working alone.
It wasn’t a guarantee of Ainsley’s cooperation, but there was no sense in being sloppy. Hopefully,
you could rule out any external influence or treachery early on.

“What do you think, Chanceux?” Lacroix asked quietly. “Do you trust her?”

“I think Ainsley means what she says. Can’t tell if anyone else is coaching her,” you said after a
moment. “But I don’t know about Morganstern.”

Lacroix rose and went to the now empty table. He lifted folded up the menu, discretely, sliding the
little drive into his coat pocket. “Using his wife as leverage rings true, but we won’t make any
assumptions just yet.” He stared thoughtfully at the door. “This will be interesting, Chanceux,” he
murmured, sounding entirely too pleased.
It was dark when you finally got back to base. Lacroix and Vo had been willing to accompany you to another restaurant – for a price. You shook your head as Vo carried off a stack of food boxes, looking very satisfied. Lacroix’s own parcel was slightly smaller, but he’d made you buy him dinner too.

Which was dumb because you were carrying a stupid amount of greasy food back to the infirmary. Lacroix was helping, because he damn well better, but Vo split off as soon as she could, and headed straight for the Blackwatch living quarters to gorge.

“Even if our contact is unable to meet her obligations, this is still good work,” Lacroix said, one hand brushing his breast pocket. You assumed that was where he put Morganstern’s drive.

“I still don’t know if we can trust her,” you said.

Lacroix gave you a measured look. “Trust her to do what she says? Or trust her to behave as someone of her family would?”

You blinked. “I don’t know. I know she probably isn’t some kind of criminal mastermind…” You hesitated, remembering a time when you weren’t so sure of that. “But that doesn’t mean she won’t backstab us. Well, more likely, she’d let us down. What’s your read on the situation?”

Lacroix tapped his chin. “I am uncertain as well.”

You squinted at him, a little incredulous “Really? I feel like one of us should be able to predict-”

Lacroix clicked his tongue. “We are rarely so fortunate to have guarantees, Chanceux. Only probabilities. Yes, lies are easy to spot, if you’re looking for them. And if your contact was trying to deceive us, we would probably know.”

You frowned. “I don’t know where you’re going with this.”

“That girl has always had innocuous motivations,” Lacroix said. “She is spoiled, childish, and shrewder than she acts. But the trouble she has caused has never come from intentional malice. The reason you’re having trouble reading her intent, is because even she doesn’t know what she’s going to do.”

You narrowed your eyes. “What?”

“You recall, after your encounter with her uncle, she made all the right noises about ethics and friendship, but when she came into conflict with her mother, all that resolve crumbled. She is also aware of that. And even if she wants to help, on some level, she doubts whether or not she can really go through with it. Change is never easy, Chanceux.”

You frowned. His analysis made sense, though it seemed silly at first. Why would she start the process if she didn’t intend to actually commit? But then she was on the verge of a life-altering decision. Her fear was justifiable. You knew from experience that “doing the right thing” wasn’t really much incentive. You tried to do the right thing for yourself, not because there was a reward. You tried to do the right thing so you could look yourself in eye and say “I’m not like Petras or Talon.” Because you still did bad things, and that line was so very easy to cross…

“I think she just needs a few nudges in the right direction, Chanceux. Which will be your task.”

Your right eye twitched as you gave him a dirty look.

“Don’t look at me like that, your face will get stuck, and no one will ever take you seriously
again.”

“It doesn’t seem like they do now anyway,” you grumbled.

“Ainsley Petras does. You’re the one who has brought her this far,” Lacroix said mildly. “Do you really think anyone else in her life has influenced her to start trying to do the right thing?” He opened the infirmary doors for you.

You went through, mind reeling from his accusation.

It wasn’t till after he’d handed off the extra bag and left that you realized that maybe Távio and Riggs could share in some of the blame. But by then, you were alone, and it was too late for a snarky comeback.

“Lucky Lady!” Reinhardt boomed, with the same enthusiasm he used for currywurst. Which was what you had brought in. To your surprise, he was still in bed, while Torby sat in a chair beside the bed, pretending to be very busy reading a book, and pointedly not looking at the food.

“Sorry, I’m just getting around to seeing you. I’ve been putting out little fires everywhere. Or trying to. I think I might have just added accelerant to a few.” You rubbed the back of your neck sheepishly.

“Oh it’s fine. Agent Lao has already been by,” Torby sniffed. “She brought us lunch yesterday.”

“That was yesterday,” you said. “Haven’t you eaten since?”

“Oh sure, Agent McCree brought us dinner last night,” Torby continued. “Tacos,” he said, face blank.

“The infirmary meals are not quite...enough, but no one wants to complain to Angela,” Reinhardt whispered loudly.

“And then today, Mihret brought us kebabs. I know he’s still working with Athena and those omnics, so it was a surprise to see him all the way over here in the infirmary,” Torby said, giving you a sharp look.

You blinked. Wait a minute… All those hints about other people dropping by with food? And how busy they were…? Were Torby’s feelings hurt? It had been two days and you’d been working in the infirmary, but… Well, you had been just down the hall but there’d been so much to do and… And you still should have stopped by to say, “hi, I’m really glad you’re alive,” just a little bit earlier.

You set the bags down and pinched the bridge of your nose, taking deep breaths. “I’m sorry. It’s been crazy and today is the first chance I’ve had to go out for food.”

Torby just thumbed through his book, lips pursed.

Reinhardt just chuckled at your distraught expression. “Torby, don’t be so hard on Lucky. Little Miss Lao also told us that Lucky and Gérard are running Blackwatch right now.”

“She was always half-running Blackwatch anyway,” Torby said, begrudgingly. “And McCree has stepped up, so she has help.”

“These are not normal times,” Reinhardt said patiently.
“What’s normal?” Torby snapped.

“I got you some apple pie,” you said, desperation creeping into your voice. “It’s probably pales beside your wife’s but...”

“Hand it over,” Torby said, reaching out with his prosthetic.

You blinked at the play on words, but gave him the entire pie, as Lacroix had recommended. He might share with Reinhardt, but Reinhardt just seemed happy to have currywurst.

“He’s not really mad,” Reinhardt said out of the corner of his mouth. “He’s just been worried about you.”

Torby only grumbled as he popped open the pie box and began to cut it with a blade attachment on his arm.

“Tell us all about your adventures-” Reinhardt began.

“Have you seen Ana yet?” Torby asked.

“...No,” you muttered, tucking your chin against your chest, hands jammed in your pockets. “That’s next on the agenda.”

Torby straightened up, eyebrows climbing high. “She’s your CO.”

“Yup,” you squirmed a little. “It’s been all kinds of crazy.”

Torby sighed then, shaking his head, and tearing the lid off a box to put a slice of pie on. He handed it to you, expression grim. “Eat.”

“...Thank you,” you said, because it did smell very nice.

Torby flicked a fork attachment out and began to eat directly from the box. “Not as good as my wife’s, but acceptable.”

“We’ll have to ask Lucia to make Lucky a pie,” Reinhardt said eyes twinkling as he took a bite of currywurst.

Torby grunted. “I suppose.” He did not offer Reinhardt any pie. “You’re obviously so caught up in work that you’ve lost track of what’s important. I bet you aren’t eating properly. Where’s Isha?”

“She’s with Jesse. He’s supposed to take her and Bandit to visit Agent Jemison when he has a moment.”

“When Mihret came by he said that she saved his life,” Torby said, reinforcing the fact that apparently you were the last person to come see them.

“Probably. Heard he decided to headbutt a gunman.” Your breath still caught when you thought about how close he’d come to...

Reinhardt gave you a wobbly smile. “I am glad that you are safe too.”

“Stay in bed,” Torby growled at him. “You’re still healing-”

Impulsively you leaned over and hugged Reinhardt’s side. There was no way you could get your arms all the way around him. He gave a delighted laugh and squeezed back, making your ribs
“Don’t forget, Torby,” Reinhardt murmured in your ear, at a volume that could almost be considered “quiet.”

Grinning, you walked around the other side, and leaned over to hug Torby. He did not try to escape. In fact, he hugged you first. That his grip was strong shouldn’t have surprised you.

“Dumskalle,” he muttered. “You should have gone to see Ana first.”

“I heard she was...displeased,” you whispered back. “I was avoiding the crossfire.”

“Do you really think she’d hit anything she didn’t aim at?” Torby hissed back. “Are you trying to compound the insult by implying something else?”

“...Shit.” He was right. You released Torby and gestured to one of the bags that you’d left by the door. “I got her a kebab and some baklava.”

“Well it’s good to see you’re not completely hopeless,” Torby said, leaning back in his chair, no real bite to his words.

“We’ll be out soon. I want to hear all about your valiant rescue of Jack!” Reinhardt said happily.

“Brigitte was asking about Isha,” Torby said gruffly. “You need to bring her by.”

“And Bandit!” Reinhardt added.

“Of course,” you said.

“And don’t wait so long next time,” Torby grumbled.

You almost told him not end up in the infirmary next time. But then the image of two coffins, one very large, one very small, flashed across your vision. You swallowed the comment. “Sorry,” you said nodding apologetically.

“It’s fine. Now sit down and eat your pie,” Torby said.

You did not actually have a fork of your own, but that had never stopped you before.

Captain Amari’s door was shut. You knocked and then stepped back, straightening your collar and brushing crumbs off your shirt. And where did that stain come from? How did sauce get all the way over there?

The door opened, but it was not Captain Amari. Tall, dark, and broad, Andre Graziani had a grim look on his face, but that softened into confusion when he saw you.

“Captain?” You called, a little surprised that he was already up and in her room.

“Ah, there you are.” Captain Amari’s voice came from the back of the room, but she did not sound angry. Which wasn’t any kind of guarantee. “Andre, will you wait outside?”

“Ma’am,” he said nodding at her. Then he squeezed past you, not making eye contact. Though you had not failed to notice those steel blue cybernetic eyes and you were well aware that he didn’t have to be looking at you to see things.
You went in, not surprised to find Captain Amari fully-dressed and sitting in a chair, with a cup of tea in hand. Holding up the bag you set it on the end table and then saluted. “Sorry, I’m only now getting in to see you, ma’am. It’s been...hectic.”

The captain’s hair was in a long braid, and there were patches of newly-grown skin on her face. Her left arm was in a sling, and her right hand was partially bandaged. She looked serene enough as she sipped her tea, but you knew better than to assume.

“What’s in the bag?” She asked, and you relaxed a little. If she was really mad, she probably would ignore your attempt at bribery.

“Kofta kebab and baklava,” you said. “Thought you might like some food with spices.”

Her lips curved upward, but she made no move to open the bag. “What do you have to report to me, Agent?”

“Though it is blatantly obvious by this point, I have come to formally report that Operation Checquy was a success, ma’am,” you said. “Unfortunately, Richard Prince and our Director were both killed in action.”

Her eyes darkened, an edge formed in her smile. “Unfortunately,” she echoed, hands clenching into fists. “But I understand you recovered a substantial amount of incriminating data.”

“I think Ziv and Zheng are still sorting though it, but it looks that way.”

She nodded, thoughtfully. “I’ve read the reports. You did well, agent.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” you said. You flexed your fingers. “I regret that we could not directly go to Greece after we concluded Checquy. We had too many injured, and Bell’s sudden appearance required direct action.”

Captain Amari waved it off. “You made the best decision given the circumstances, and by then it was Jack’s call.” She gritted her teeth as she said his name. “Though I understand that you gave the recommendation to release the constraints on Athena.” She turned that gorgon stare on you. “Which was a foolish decision.”

“Yes, I supported Athena’s choice without fully understanding what it meant,” you said, knowing that you sounded impulsive and dumb. But that was nothing new. “And I’d do the same all over again, because while I was scared for her, I wasn’t going to stop her from saving her friends.”

“You’ll never be an officer with that attitude,” she said coolly. “Given how the situation could have turned out, it would have been an acceptable loss. Jack should have known better, and I was counting on you to be a moderating influence.”

You knew Captain Amari cared deeply for Reinhardt and Torby, that she wasn’t suicidal or blind, despite accusing you of being a “moderating influence.” That was a new one, for sure. But the answer still pissed you off.

“You’re damn right I told him to save you. It’s not my job to calculate acceptable losses. All losses are pretty unacceptable. I get that it’s unreasonable to assume that we can go through this kind of life without sacrifice—” You tried not to think of Shin, or Captain Patel, or Tataryn. “But I’m not going to sit back and do nothing. Athena is way smarter than me. If she thought this plan was going to work, I trusted her—”

“It was a fool’s hope, not rational analysis,” she snapped.
“I know Athena is a lot more than she appears: I read the Operation Metis briefing,” you said “It wasn’t a completely irrational assumption.”

Captain Amari opened her mouth. Then closed it. Then glared at you hard, and suddenly it felt like your forehead was going to burst open. You stared straight back, part defiant, part petrified.

“How?” She asked, then paused. “Who?”

“Athena told me herself,” you said.

“That’s not possible. There were security measures in place,” Captain Amari said, drawing back, her expression stricken. “Did she circumvent-?”

“...Lacroix made a bunch of contingency plans,” you said, unwilling to take the fall in this one. “Jesse and I both got the briefing.”

Captain Amari groaned, setting aside the teacup so she could rest her face in her good hand. She held up one finger as she used words that might have been prayers, but the tone was nowhere near reverent or even polite. There was a shudder and a sigh, and then she straightened back up, a stoic yet resigned look on her face. “Go on.”

“We didn’t know exactly what she was going to do, just that it was a risk and that it would probably sway the Mediterranean omnis,” you said. “But Jack and I have already watched enough people die in the past few days. The idea that you could be one of them was...unacceptable.” Your voice shook and you dropped your gaze. You could still see her walking away, alone in that hallway. Or maybe that was Captain Patel. You closed your eyes then, reminding yourself that this time things had been different. History did not repeat itself.

There was a long silence only broken by a soft, frustrated huff from Captain Amari. “I see your meaning. I thank you then, for thinking so fondly of me. I suppose I cannot fault my comrades for being loyal, even if they were foolish.”

“It wasn’t just mawkish sentiment,” you said raising your head. “There was tactical consideration in that decision. You know we’re all idiots. We need you around to keep things from getting really out of hand.”

Captain Amari laughed at that, some of the tension leaving her shoulders. “I am very aware that some of you require extra supervision, detailed instructions, and specialized handling.” She gave you a knowing smile.

You didn’t flinch. “We’d be lost without you,” you said flatly, because even if it sounded like flattery, you knew it to be truth. “Others, yourself included, have lectured me on my penchant for taking risks, for occasionally considering myself expendable in the face of an important mission. I would like to remind you, in a respectful and affectionate manner, that hypocrisy looks terrible on leadership.”

Captain Amari snorted and sipped her tea, watching you thoughtfully. “I see.” She shook her head slowly. “Respectful and affectionate?” Amusement laced her skepticism. “Then let me ask you, would you sacrifice one subordinate for another?”

You could feel the weight of her regard. You didn’t even think of lying. “That is the wrong question, ma’am. It lacks nuance and doesn’t fairly represent the situation.”

“What would you ask in this case then?”
“Jack asked Athena if she understood what she was doing, the risks and rewards. I asked myself which worst case scenario we could live with. Athena took everything into consideration, and made an informed decision.”

“She’s not even been awake for a year, Lucky.”

You blinked. Lately you had been forgetting how young your AI was. “And she’s been running Overwatch’s cybersecurity for at least half of that time. She’s young, inexperienced even. But she’s earned the right to make certain choices for herself.” Not just if she wanted a bow or a spider-shaped chassis. “She’s an AI, ma’am. Whatever happens, she would remember it in perfect detail for the entirety of her existence. She would know that one side of her family murdered the other side in a misunderstanding about her. I don’t know if there could ever be reconciliation after that. And that would be a terrible situation for any person. I agree, Athena is young, too young to bear that burden for the rest of her life.”

“And if something had happened to her?”

“Me and Jack would have had to live with that for the rest of our lives,” you said, the words hollow. “And I think you know how well we handle grief and guilt. I know, we could have lost all of you. But Athena had a plan. I made my recommendation. And Jack made the best decision he could in the moment, with the information we had. We took a risk, gave it our all, and this time it worked out.”

Captain Amari inhaled sharply, nostrils flaring. She massaged her forehead slowly. “...Perhaps I have been harsh with Jack.”

You rubbed the back of your neck, unsure if that statement warranted any further comment.

“Your silence says it all. Jack has been under enormous strain, and my reaction has not been helpful.” She sighed, still shaking her head, and drinking more tea. “Sit down, Lucky. I’m sure there’s more you have to tell me.” She poured you a mug of tea, and opened the bag of food.

That was the signal. You exhaled in relief. Formal business had concluded: Captain Amari was satisfied. You pulled up a chair.

“So do you know who went to rescue the Morrisons?”

“I heard it was Zhai Feng’s parents,” Captain Amari said. “Was there a problem?”

“Yeah, you could say that.” You took a deep breath. “Feng’s father is the Ghost Fox.”

Captain Amari stared blankly at you for a moment. Then she set her kebab aside, and pulled out the package of baklava. She took a long drink of tea, and then opened the dessert. “Go on,” she said, voice a little strangled. “How many dead?”

“Dozens, all hostiles. None on our side.”

“Chang didn’t flay him alive on the spot?” The Captain asked, one brow raised. “A pity.”

You winced. “...She was shot in the face and everyone else managed to talk her down. But we, that’s everyone here including Feng, did not realize the connection. Feng really doesn’t want anything to happen to her father. And Chang is...upset.”

“An understatement, I assume.” Captain Amari sipped her tea, looking oddly smug.

You gave a nervous laugh. “Yeah.”
Captain Amari sat there, steam rising from her mug. She inhaled the scent of tea. “You have to realize he was very active in my youth. And very daring. I don’t have quite the resentment for him that Sergeant Chang does, but I would not be sorry to see him brought to justice.”

You sucked in a breath. “That would get very complicated.”

“Indeed,” Captain Amari said. She took a bite of baklava. “What’s your plan?”

“I’m trying to work out a peaceable solution—maybe getting him on as a consultant?”

Captain Amari frowned. “I suppose he could be covered by On Sing’s amnesty agreement, but Chang would not take that peacefully. And I think you understand that she is known for her…persistence.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m trying to solve.” You paused. “I’m told she used to be a colonel. Is this…relevant to that?”

Captain Amari made a weird sound in the back of her throat. “No, not really.” She took another bite of baklava, expression troubled. “I’ll have to think about this. I foresee a lot of complications if you can’t persuade Chang to agree to something more…reasonable.”

“Yeah…” You said.

“But I have faith in your willingness to bend the rules and find creative solutions.” Captain Amari finished her baklava, a wry smile on her face. “I think you are the perfect person for the job.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” you said, trying not to grimace. You weren’t sure about that assessment, but it was a vote of confidence and possibly smug schadenfreude at your discomfort. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“I do have a request,” she said. “Will you go speak with Andre now?”

“I’ll try. He’s not really ever said a word to me,” you said.

“That’s better than I expected,” Captain Amari said, smiling faintly.

You blinked.

“He is a great deal like Agent Mihret: willing to and fully capable of haranguing people he disagrees with or simply does not like. If anything, I think he is unsure of how to treat you. Stand your ground, but be fair. He will respect that.”

“I’ll take that into consideration, ma’am.” You thought of Ziv. Well, the first part worked for him, but you couldn’t play fair with that sneaky asshole. You had to stay a few steps ahead of him or he’d trip over his own cleverness. You wondered if Andre was the same, or if he’d grown out of that tendency.

“Go on then,” Captain Amari said, shooing you out of her hospital room as she reached for her kebab.

Andre Graziani slouched in his chair, tinkering with a control panel on the underside of his right arm. He did not look up as you approached, but you knew that he was aware of you.

You sat down in the chair beside him, not wanting to tower over him in introductions. Ziv would have really enjoyed making you stand there and wait while he pretended to be busy. You didn’t
have time for that game. You gave him a few seconds to make introductions or declare his business. But he sat there, seemingly absorbed in his work. You were not fooled.

“Captain Amari said you wanted to talk,” you said, looking over at him. You kept your expression polite and neutral.

He nodded, finally looking up at you. “You can’t use the standard model of prostheses on SEP veterans,” he said, clearly not wanting to waste time with niceties. “Yes, I know they’re custom-fitted, but anything less than military-grade won’t hold up in combat. Yes, I know Overwatch supplies high-end prostheses, but that’s not enough either. You need specific materials to form the socket – SEP musculature and activity can damage regular sockets. The weight of the prostheses itself isn’t a problem, though weight imbalance between limbs can lead to back, tendon, and ligament issues.”

You sat there, digesting the flood of information.

“The prosthetic limb itself should be constructed from a shortlist of specific alloys and polymers. I prefer a mix of silk-protein polymers and high tensile steel alloys, though Reyes may want something a little heavier, omnium alloys probably.”

“Have you already looked at what Dr. Ziegler and Agent Lindholm have commissioned?” You asked, because you had no idea about the construction of the prosthetic arm.

“Lindholm is a very capable engineer, but he would not have specifics about SEP requirements.” Graziani skimmed through data on the view panel in his arm. “I’ve seen the specs. It’s a solid model, but it won’t hold up under Reyes’ prolonged use. He’s very hard on equipment.”

You chuckled softly, thinking of him throwing his shotguns or Jack using his rifle to block giant polearms. “I just assumed that was an SEP thing.”

“You’ve just met the most destructive of us,” Graziani said, giving the faintest smile, the first you’d seen. It softened his face quite a bit. “Reyes, Chang, Morrison, hell Rodriguez lit up like a kid whenever he got to handle ordinance.”

You could see that.

“I am also aware of his hyperthermic issues and have developed a heat exchange attachment to regulate that.”

“Like...an actual heat sink?” You blinked, having not seriously considered mechanical solutions before.

Andre nodded. “Yes. I realize you have On Sing looking into gene therapies and other biological options, but this is a more immediate solution.”

You hadn’t thought that was an option before. Granted, you weren’t sure how it worked or if it would work, but if Torby and Angela thought it would... “So you what are you asking me to do?”

Graziani rolled his eyes, and exasperation clear on his face. “I was told that you or Morrison have to sign off on any medical procedures. You already have On Sing helping, but they lack critical knowledge about the Soldier Enhancement Program and how SEP veterans best utilize cybernetic enhancements. There are all kinds of complications that can arise. For example: SEP healing can also overcompensate, causing hyperplasia in the form of excessive skin growth around the residual limb.”
...Eww. You sighed. “In what capacity do you want to be involved? Do you want to be consultant, providing advice and research data? Do you want to be hired on as a contractor and work on the fabrication and test runs? Were you planning on doing this pro bono? Because if I recall correctly, you had no desire to come work for Overwatch.”

Graziani twitched, frowning at you. He was clearly talking to you because he expected Jack to object or he wasn’t mature enough to have a formal discussion with Jack. “But you’ll let a Triad waltz in?”

“On Sing is involved on an R&D level. They don’t have access to Gabriel’s personal information as per his own instructions.” Though Bayan was working closely with Angela, Graziani didn’t need to know that. “I trust Dr. Ziegler with Gabriel’s health. I trust Agent Lindholm to construct the best equipment he can. They are the leads on this project. I understand that you have a very specific field of expertise, and I am glad that you are offering aid. But if you want to be involved, then you need to acknowledge that chain of command.”

Graziani scowled at you. “Ana said that you’d be more reasonable than Morrison.”

And there it was, the push. The claim that you were “unreasonable.” You didn’t know if he really thought that and it didn’t matter. He’d slipped in a dig at Jack, and while you wanted to jump up and defend your lover’s honor, it was just a smokescreen. Graziani was challenging you. You were not entirely sure why: maybe because he didn’t like the restrictions, maybe because he wanted to see what kind of person he was dealing with. Or maybe because it was a Thursday. The reason why didn’t matter. You had to handle the situation, not the dialogue.

You met his gaze, straightening up like you were Captain Patel ready to tell off a subordinate for overstepping his bounds. “This is about the well-being of Gabriel Reyes, someone I will not be careless with. I trust my medical contact in On Sing. I trust the people who are already working to help Gabriel. I trust them to triple-check each other’s work and be professional. I trust that you have Gabriel’s best interests in mind, but I don’t know you. I will not rush in any direction without more information.” You kept your tone pleasant, but there was no room for argument.

Graziani looked at you for a long moment. You thought he might just get up and walk out. He seemed like the type. Lips pressed tightly together, crossed his arms.

“OK,” he said.

You raised a brow.

“That’s fair,” he said. “Lindholm has exacting standards. Ziegler isn’t a slouch. I can work with them. Send me the standard black ops contract. I have the proper clearances already. I’ll have my people look it over, and we can talk price.”

You doubted this was about the money. But you had made him negotiate and now he was going to make you pay, literally. Fine, you could do that, out of your own pocket if you had to. “Sure,” you said breezily. “Do you want the IP and royalty terms as well?”

“...Yeah,” he said, sounding startled. “That would be good too.”

“You may also be working with Winston. I hope that won’t be a problem.”

“...Winston’s cool,” Graziani said, looking away.

“He is,” you agreed, glad that you didn’t have to have that argument. “Out of curiosity, were you going to try to pitch the regulator to Chang?”
“Hell no, that woman eats cybertech for breakfast. Nothing I make is going to stay functioning around her and her crazy pet serial killer.”

You raised a brow, filing that reaction away for later. For some reason, you knew immediately that he was referring to Almasi.

And with that, Graziani got up and walked off toward the infirmary exit, clearly done with you.

You sighed, unsure of how to rate this encounter and wondering if Captain Amari was going to be sore at you.

Yuan and Frank just shook their heads when they saw him, clearly displeased, but not quite willing to speak up. Yuan looked angry, shaking her fists at him, while Frank gave him a sad smile, one hand hovering over Yuan’s shoulder. Immerman scowled, pretending not see him as he passed by.

He did not exactly remember making it past the stairs. He just remembered climbing and falling, and climbing back up again and again. And now he was here, passing through people he knew, people he had not seen in a very long time. They were mostly silent as he walked, and he knew that they weren’t supposed to talk to him. Even his father turned away, grief clear on the older man’s face.

His heart clenched, because even if it had been years since he saw his father, that loss was still there. He wanted to stop, to call out. But the shade was gone, and his throat was so dry…

There was no wind, but he could hear something rustling in the periphery.

“You’re not supposed to be here, boss,” a soft voice whispered in his ear.

“Are you picking my pocket again?” He asked, not turning around, unsure if this encounter would break the rules of this place. Unsure if he should care.

But there was no answer.

And so he walked, through the mist and the dead, in this place that had no time and no stars. He walked, knowing that it was too late to save anyone here.

“Keep moving, jefe. Ray’s getting tired of burying old friends. You don’t want her to be lonely, do you?” A warm hearty laugh echoed behind him.

That was ridiculous. Chang loathed him.

He found himself climbing again. No stairs, just a steep incline. He did not know if he was going the right way, but he knew that there was no other direction he could travel in. It was dream logic, making no sense, but absolutely irrefutable.

“You’ve done this before,” she said, standing by the precipice that peaked over a misty abyss. Her scars remained, but her uniform was immaculate. She was still shorter than him and no less dignified than he remembered. Though she seemed faded, compared to what she had been in life, Aishani glowered at him, just as fierce as she had ever been.

He sighed, smiling at her.

She did not return the gesture. She just pointed to the edge.

At her side was the flash of golden skin and laughing eyes. It was a man he had only known for a
few hours, but whose death cast a long shadow across his life. And yours. “You better hurry. She’s waiting for you,” he said.

Gabriel struggled to find the right words. “I barely knew you.”

“I’m not here for your sake,” the younger man said, his smile sharp.

“Isn’t this all against the rules?”

“When has Blackwatch ever cared about rules?” The interloper laughed, already fading into the mist.

Aishani growled. “Keep moving, Reyes. Death cannot hold you.”

Gabriel gazed over the edge, a vast nothingness beneath him. It was the end of the road, but he could not just stay here. He glanced back over his shoulder, but Aishani was gone.

There was no way to go but forward. He thought of Jack. Of you. He did not know where this would lead, but he could not stay here, paralyzed by indecision. He stepped back, giving himself a running start.

“Remember your promise,” a familiar voice murmured, that thick Slavic accent all too familiar as Gabriel threw himself over the edge of the cliff.

Chapter End Notes

Had a scene fighting me for awhile, but finally got past it. You get an extra long chapter because I am sorry. :;

Still working from home, though no confirmation on whether or not I can stay here. (Assignments are still being made. I'm totally not plotting to destroy the competition if I don't get chosen. Nope, not me...)

There are protests and curfews in my state. I think a Neo-Nazi got punched in my town. Good. Weighing the merits of civil disobedience vs pandemic safety. I need to buy more masks. (Don't tell me to make them, I am hilariously bad at sewing.) I may try weaving though. Got a cheap lap loom and have vague memories of enjoying that in elementary school.

End Notes

This thing keeps growing. Because damnit, I want something happy. I write it late at night so my typos are worse than usual. Trying to edit it. Ugh.

I don't do much besides lurk.

I really like comments. They feed the beast and they make my days better.
Come visit my tumblr for drabbles and chats.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!